Journeys and Places: A Study of the Poetry of Edwin Muir

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JOURNEYS AND PLACES

A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF EDWIN MUIR

by

J. Brooks Bouson

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Recognized during his lifetime as a critic and translator, the Scottish poet, Edwin Muir (1887-1959) is only now achieving proper recognition as a poet of major significance. Self-educated from the age of fourteen, he spent eighteen years of his life—from 1901 to 1919—in meaningless clerical jobs. It wasn't until he was thirty-two that he began to make a living through his literary and social criticism. A late-comer to poetry, he began writing serious verse in 1922 at the age of thirty-five after he had a series of waking visions which projected, in unearthly scenes, the myths of creation and human destiny. Convinced that he was in contact with the fundamental mysteries of life but unable to translate his experiences into prose, he turned to poetry "simply because," as he writes in his autobiography, what he wanted to say "could not have gone properly into prose."\(^1\) Untrained in the technical aspects of poetry and "too old," as he puts it, to submit himself to "contemporary influences,"\(^2\) he chose to use traditional verse forms and a simple language to convey his vision of life.

Unlike the mainstream poets of his age who explored the sordid materialism of a modern world devoid of traditional values, Muir was a poet who sought to tell the complete story of mankind's journey

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 205.
through time and place as it is seen against the backdrop of eternity. Heard against the innovative voices of the poets of the teens and twenties, he spoke in modest, conventional terms. His was a lonely voice for he remained aloof from poetic fashions and dogma. He was a poet, as Stephen Spender puts it, who cared more for "truth than for the expression of his own personality and the advertisement of his own power over words." When it was fashionable to be irreverent and condescending, Muir was serious and self-effacing, finding poetry in which "personal superiority is asserted" to be "false." When artists sought to mirror life's incoherency and abstractness, he attempted to illumine its pattern and to tell the "fable" of human life, the fable of Innocence, the Fall, and the Promise. When it was conventional for poetry to be obscure and difficult, he espoused simplicity and clarity in art by writing a poetry that, as Helen Gardner describes it, "eludes our methods of analysis," a poetry lacking close verbal texture, hidden allusions, or ironies and ambiguities that require careful elucidation. When, in the 1930s, the purely historical view of life held sway and poets became spokesmen for Socialist and Communist ideologies, the cornerstone of Muir's philosophy was a belief in immortality. As


a poet Muir attempted to penetrate the three mysteries of life—"where we came from, where we are going, and, since we are not alone, but members of a countless family, how we should live with one another"—and although, as Kathleen Raine points out, he never followed poetic fashion, his poetry gives "more permanent expression to his world" than that of "other poets who deliberately set out to be the mouthpieces of their generation." For Muir, as Thomas Merton states, is a poet who gives evidence of a "profound metaphysical concern," a concern for the "roots of being": he belongs among the ranks of the great visionary poets, poets like Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Rilke.

But because Muir utilized traditional verse forms and did not rely, as John Holloway states, on a "voguish manipulation of language," his poetry was all but neglected throughout most of his career by both anthologists and critics. His poetry was not included, for example, in the first edition of the Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936) because its editor, Michael Roberts, felt that Muir had

6An Autobiography, p. 56.


not "been compelled to make any notable development of poetic tech-
nique." And although his poetry was regularly reviewed through the
years, it was ignored by the critics who apparently found his poetry
to be irrelevant and technically uninteresting. But with the publi-
cation, in 1952, of the first edition of the Collected Poems, 1921-
1951, in 1956 of One Foot In Eden, and in 1960, The Collected Poems,
1921-1958, Muir suddenly emerged as a poet of major stature, a poet
who had something vitally important to say. As Muir's poetry
suddenly became attractive to critics, it also became attractive to
anthologists, appearing, since the fifties, in numerous anthologies,
including: The Faber Book of Modern Verse (ed. Michael Roberts, 1951);
The Faber Book of English Verse (ed. John Hayward, 1958); Modern
British Poetry (ed. Louis Untermeyer, 1962); Chief Modern Poets of
England and America (eds. Gerald P. Sanders, John H. Nelson, and
M. L. Rosenthal, 1962); The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse (eds. John
MacQueen and Tom Scott, 1966); Poetry of the 1940s: An Anthology (ed.
Howard Sergeant, 1970); and The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century

Besides the numerous reviews and appreciations of Muir's poetry,
fourty-six important articles, three full-length studies, and twelve

11See J. C. Hall's Edwin Muir, British Council Writers and Their

12See A Checklist of Writings About Edwin Muir, compiled by
Peter C. Hoy and Elgin W. Mellown (Troy, New York: The Whiston
dissertations have appeared since the fifties, most after 1959. Although one finds, among the articles, an occasional treatment of some specific aspect of Muir's work, such as his use of the myth of Innocence and the Fall, his conception of the Story and the Fable, his attitude towards evil, or his treatment of time, most are general discussions of Muir's work by authors—notably Kathleen Raine, John Holloway, Ralph Mills, Jr., and R. P. Blackmur—who want to introduce Muir to the public and account for his unwarranted neglect over the years. And because, as T. S. Eliot states, there is an intimate connection between Muir's life and his poetry—as Eliot puts it, the "work and the man are one"—there also have been numerous discussions of the relationship between Muir's autobiography and his poetry including those by J. C. Hall, Helen Gardner, Gabriel Marcel, and a full-length critical biography by P. H. Butter, Edwin Muir:


The other major approach to Muir's work has been to study the poetry chronologically. The most important of these analyses are found in P. H. Butter's brief survey, Edwin Muir, Elizabeth Huberman's The Poetry of Edwin Muir: The Field of Good and Ill, which traces, volume by volume, the major themes in the poetry and analyzes the development of Muir's poetic technique through a series of close critical readings of significant poems, and Allie C. Hixson's Edwin Muir: A Critical Study, which relies heavily on biographical material as it traces the broader development of Muir's poetic vision. Among the dissertations, there have been numerous chronological treatments of the poetry and general discussions of Muir's critical and poetic output, as well as a Jungian reading of the poetry, an analysis of Muir's lyric and narrative poetry, a study of his link to the pastoral tradition, and a brief discussion of his concept of time.


18 Michael Joseph Phillips, e.g., in "Edwin Muir, Poet, Critic, and Translator" (Indiana University, 1972) offers a general discussion of Muir; Leo B. Selden, Jr., "The Use of Myth, Legend and Dream Imagery in the Poetry of Edwin Muir" (Tulane University, 1963) provides a chronological survey of the poetry; Joan Morse Sellery, "The Poetry of Edwin Muir: 'True Legendary Sound'" (University of California, Riverside, 1970) provides a Jungian reading of Muir; Helen Rosalind Sherk, "The Method of Edwin Muir: Neo-Romanticist" (Columbia University, 1969) studies the use of lyric and narrative in Muir's
Although it can be said that all of Muir's poems deal, to some extent, with "journeys and places," and although even the most casual observer is likely to note Muir's obsession with these concepts in his poetry, there has been, to date, no full-length study of his poetic use of these motifs. My purpose in this dissertation is to examine Muir's obsessive grappling with the concepts of journey and place in his art and to trace his unique search for life's meaning through memory, dreams and nightmares, mythological visions, and art. After an introductory discussion, in Chapter I, of Muir's belief in the artistic necessity for a teleological vision of human life, and a tracing, in Chapter II of Muir's life journey as chronicled in his autobiography, the subsequent sections of this study will follow the winding road of Muir's poetic journey in quest of a time and space in which man can live an authentic life.

It is a poetic journey which finds its starting place in the vital radiance of recollected childhood. Chapter III shows that as Muir explores memories of his Orcadian childhood in his early, subjective poetry, he gradually evolves the mythic world of his mature verse and transforms the remembered landscape of Orkney into a symbolic, universal stage on which the drama of human life is enacted.

Poetry; Lillian Rae Klein, "Paradise Reconceived: A Pastoral Reading of Muir's Collected Poems" (University of California, Irvine, 1976); and Philip Nathan Gilbertson, "Time and the Timeless in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and Edwin Muir" (University of Kentucky, 1971) offers a brief (thirty pages) analysis of Muir's concept of time.
The numinous world of childhood becomes part of man's fable: it becomes the organic Eden in which bird, beast, and child co-exist in primal harmony. Lodged in memory and seen in visionary glimpses and in those luminous dreams which flash out in the darkness of sleep-walled night, the sufficient place of childhood Eden remains a remote, inaccessible, and yet potent icon of man's sacred center.

Although the innocent realm of first childhood provides one key to the first mystery of man—"where we came from"—there is yet another. Chapter IV examines the strange dislocations of our daily perception of time and space which occur as Muir attempts to track animals into their strange and unaccountable world in hopes of shedding light on the first dark mystery of life. As he follows the path of his archaizing imagination, threading his way into the fabulous, post-Fall world of "organic heraldry," the world of heraldic men and legendary beasts, he finds those remote beginnings. And in the "unhistorical" world, the "small, sensual momentary world of the beast" encountered in terrifying glimpses in daily life, Muir finds disturbing reminders of the animal traits which lurk beneath the human form.

The second mystery of man—"where we are going"—is examined in some detail in Chapters V and VI. Chapter V analyzes Muir's search to find, in the darkness and disunity of time, the timeless pattern of human life. As Muir explores, in the poetry of the 1930s and early 1940s, the metaphysical and psychological boundaries encountered
on the quest for wholeness, he envisions man as a prisoner of both
time and self. Although pilgrim man's ongoing road lies under the
shadow of eternity, he must take his sad, stationary journey through
the barren wastes of time and space. As Muir, in the poetry of the
mid-1940s, approaches a new, affirmative vision of life and dis-
covers the pattern amidst life's patternlessness, the urge to escape
time gives way to the desire to discover how to live a meaningful
life within the confines of time.

The governing drive behind the journey and place poems found
in Muir's final volumes of poetry, as Chapter VI shows, centers
not on the desire to escape time, but the desire to find an inspired
sense of direction, to find the "way" through life's contradictions
and confusions. As Muir comes to a new and ever-deepening love for
the "lawless" world of time, with its "knotted landscape" and its
"thickets running wild," he learns how to shape experience and find
the significance of what time gives him. And near the end of his
road, he finds an approach to the home so tirelessly sought: he
finds an approach to the visionary world of the center, the lost
world of Eden. "One foot in Eden," he stands and looks across the
"other land" we must all traverse: the land of good and evil.

Chapter VII analyzes Muir's vision of Western man's journey
"through time and war and history" as the image of pilgrim man is
broadened out, in the poetry of the 1940s and 1950s, to encompass
the countless "homeless/Nationless and nameless" refugees of World
War II and others who are victims of our "new impersonal age." Sensitive to a modern fear, the terror of history, Muir eschews the reductionist view of man implicit in modern historicism and points to an alternate vision of life: one which conceives of a transcendent reality and recognizes man's relationship to it. He seeks to discover "how we should live with one another" and love one another so that life has dignity, purpose, and human meaning. For the "difficult land" of time and history, he realizes, is also "our home."

Ultimately, as Chapter VIII shows, man's redemption from time and history can occur in those brief yet eternal flashes of perception concentrated in art. As the artist creates an imaginative world of "space and order magistral," he creates a new structure of existence—a new time and place—in the midst of our everyday reality. Poetry offers a way of knowing, a way of apprehending the timeless mysteries of life. Although the poet must "stop at the colon:/And set a silence after to speak the word" he seeks and cannot find, yet that silence communicates all of life's meaning. Poetry, as it brings us to the threshold of silent immortality, reveals to us the deep mystery and hidden significance of the human adventure.

Chapter IX, the concluding chapter, presents a summing up and provides an assessment of Muir's achievement as a poet.
The author, J. Brooks Bouson, is the daughter of Edward I. Brooks and Elizabeth (Magnone) Brooks. She was born September 26, 1946, in Washington, Pennsylvania.

Her elementary education was obtained in the public schools of Washington, Pennsylvania, and secondary education at Washington High School, Washington, Pennsylvania, where she was graduated in 1964.

She attended Waynesburg College, Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, from September, 1964 to December, 1965, and the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, from September, 1967 to June, 1969, where she was designated as an Edmund J. James Scholar. She was elected to the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society in 1969 and was graduated, with honors, in June of 1969, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts with a major in English.

She began graduate work as a teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, in September, 1971, and in December, 1972, she was awarded her Master of Arts in English. Her graduate work toward the doctorate in English began in September, 1974, at Loyola University of Chicago. She was granted a teaching assistantship from September, 1974 through June, 1977, and was awarded a University Fellowship for work on her dissertation for the academic year, 1977-78. In 1978 she was elected to Alpha Sigma Nu,
the National Jesuit Honor Society.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

... it seems to me that the fears of poets for the future of poetry are merely a part of the general fear, known so well to all of us, for the future of the world.

-Muir, *The Estate of Poetry*

... the habits of the human heart remain what they have always been, and imagination deals with them as no other faculty can. It is more urgently needed in our time than ever before.

-Muir, "The Poetic Imagination"

A gentle, soft-spoken Scotsman, Edwin Muir is a quester, a wayfarer, one who seeks to illuminate the maze-like path of modern man in a broken, contradictory world. In the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955-1956, several years before his death, and published posthumously in 1962 as *The Estate of Poetry*, Muir voices his life-long concern for the future of man. We are "enclosed," he states, in the "cage" of the contemporary world "without any outlet except into a future very like but worse than the present. The cage exists and we live in it."¹ Muir's greatest fear is that we are about to lose touch with that inner force which pro-

vides dynamic coherence to our lives: the imagination. Caught in the web of scientific constructions, we are destroying the web of imaginative beliefs. We are encaged by an empirical world view which has been progressively constructed around us by the scientific intellect. That world has become so indigenous, that cage has become so accepted as a part of our environment, that we scarcely can see our danger, except, perhaps, in the nightmarish Utopias imagined by an Orwell or a Huxley.

Surely, we do benefit from the fruits of science, Muir admits, and poetry "has no quarrel with pure science, with the disinterested inquiry into the nature of things." What Muir does fear is the "lopsided" development of science, the loss of balance between the poetic imagination and the scientific intellect. "Perhaps the greatest intensity of imagination during the last hundred years, as well as the most intense intellectual passions," he writes, "has gone into pure science." What troubles us "is the sense that science has run on far ahead of us, and that we are without the wisdom to use for our good the enormous power which it drops in passing into our hands." And further, we are "daunted" by the "world" built around us by "applied science and centralized organizations," and we are "alarmed by the thought of a future in which these powers will become irresistible and inescapable." We have nightmares warning us "that the ordinary

2Ibid., p. 83.
3Ibid., p. 82.
4Ibid., p. 85.
human being may not be able to survive, together with the traditional beliefs and customs and feelings which have fostered him and made him what he is."\(^5\)

In the world of applied science, it becomes increasingly difficult for the human imagination to function, to pierce through the "thickening maze of abstractions"\(^6\) deposited over it by the rationalist superstructure. Once positive science has blunted our ability to respond to the lore alive in our myths, religious narratives, and literature, our lives lose depth and fullness. For through the imagination we "apprehend living beings and living creatures in their individuality, as they live and move, and not as ideas or categories"; through the imagination we are taken into the feelings and thoughts of legendary or fictional characters and made to feel "the full weight and the uniqueness of their lives"; through the imagination we come to "understand human life vividly and intimately in ourselves because we have felt it in others."\(^7\) Imaginative literature gives us equipment for living not provided by the analytic intellect. The exact knowledge of the scientist, Muir argues, is only "a fragment of the knowledge we need in order to live":

We cannot ask science to tell us whether our lives have a meaning, or why we should pursue good and avoid evil, or how we should live with our neighbors. Imagination

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 86.


\(^7\)The Estate of Poetry, p. 81.
Muir's abiding concern is with what happens when man severs the link with his imagination and with his mytho-religious core. If we live in a world in which God is dead and myths and poetry are irrelevant, will we not soon discover, as Gabriel Marcel suggests, that "man is in his death-throes"? Can man survive in a world which is de-mythologized and desacralized? In a world in which the individual struggles against vast, shadowy forces which threaten to obliter ate him: the theory that man is but a biological creature determined by genetics and social forces; and the theory that the individual is inconsequential, is the mere subject-matter of history and the toy of unscrupulous leaders who know how to motivate and manipulate him?

The modern world view, as Muir analyzes it, denies man because it denies the spiritual significance of life. In the radical transformation of values which has occurred during the last hundred years, as the transcendent framework of life has been replaced with a biological and historical one, there has been a "reduction of the image of man" who has become "more temporal" and "more insignifi-

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8Ibid., pp. 81-82.

For the "religious" and "mythic" conception of man as a being involved in an on-going "moral" struggle to uncover his true "spiritual" self and so become "integrated into his true image" and "conscious of his unique place in the world and in time" has receded into irrelevancy. With the "disappearance of man as religion and humanism conceived him," there has emerged a "new species of the natural man dovetailed into a biological sequence and a social structure," a man who is conceived to have developed "within an environment in a calculable way, without any effective inward struggle, or any permanent conception of a desirable life, or any personal striving to realise it."

Although in its early stages this theory envisioned the "indefinite improvement" of man "on the natural plane" as a result of the perfecting of his political and social systems, the "reduction of the image of man in contemporary politics"—the politics of totalitarianism—has led to a new and frightening "contempt for human freedom and for human life." For the conception of the natural man has been logically extended into the theory that human development can be controlled, that human beings can be "conditioned to a great

11 Ibid., p. 151.
12 Ibid., p. 150.
13 Ibid., p. 154.
14 Ibid., p. 150.
15 Ibid., pp. 154-55.
extent, given the power and the equipment," that man is a "subject
who responds in a more or less calculable way" to manipulative tech-
niques such as propaganda, suggestion, and intimidation. 16 When man
is viewed as "a creature within a natural development, entirely con-
tained in his environment," Muir argues, "all that is needed is to
decide the terms within which he shall develop. Once these are
settled by a sufficiently powerful group, men can be used with cal-
culable accuracy." 17 The principle upon which men like Mussolini,
Hitler, and Stalin operated in the 1940s and 1950s was a simple one:
"Control things"--such things as the "power of the state, tanks,
shells, concentration camps"--and "you control mankind." 18 Men and
women have come to be treated "quite impersonally, as the subject-
matter of history" 19--a history made by a small but powerful group of
men.

Aware of the tenuousness of our purchase-hold on our humanity
in face of the massively organized, technically perfected cruelties
practiced on man by totalitarian governments, Muir speaks with great
urgency about the poet's responsibility to make contact with the
imagination, to reach into the essential core of life, to apprehend
the eternal verities which vivify man and invest life with meaning

16 Ibid., pp. 153-54.
17 Ibid., p. 154.
18 Ibid.
and significance and to communicate this living truth. That such a core of life exists and that it is accessible to man through the imagination is not a theory to Muir but a natural and mysterious fact. For it was his vital contact with this world that determined him to become a poet: when he began writing poetry in 1922, at the age of thirty-five, he did so out of necessity. For in 1920, beset by inner conflicts and vague fears, he began a course of psychoanalysis, and although it was of short duration, it proved a seminal force in his life. Through his analysis, he discovered himself to be a sleep-walker, one driven by unconscious desires and frustrations and memories—and this realization made him determined to re-examine his life in order to find where he had gone astray in his life journey. As his imagination awakened, he began to dwell in that strange borderland world of time: memory. And then something mysterious occurred: he began to have waking visions through which, he felt convinced, he apprehended the supernatural underpinnings of life.

Within several years Muir began to write poetry, and he found that art served him in two important ways. One value the creation of poetry had for him, as he explained in a letter in 1925, was that it provided a "way of growing," a way of becoming himself "more purely."20 Through the artistic process he found a way to integrate his fragmented self. But more importantly, he found the poetic imagination a doorway to the positive forces of the unconscious mind with its

20 Selected Letters of Edwin Muir, p. 54.
vast, creative energies and its fabulous magic—that same world he had entered and explored during his waking visions. He found poetry the only mode of communication open to him that could convey, in some way, his numinous experience. A kind of map-maker, he began charting his spiritual journey to the interior showing the contours of the landscape and pointing out the road with its crossroads and waystations. His experience had wrenched him out of an empirical framework and connected him to his imaginative, poetic, religious centre.

Now, as he began to contemplate his own life, he found its pattern and meaning. In his life "story"—i.e., the particulars of his individual history—he found a recapitulation of the universal "fable" of life, the legendary drama of mankind's journey through time as recorded in the lore of early cultures, including the Judeo-Christian tradition. His innocent childhood in the primitive, agrarian culture of Orkney was equivalent to man's primal blessedness in Paradise; his initiation into guilt and sin at the age of six counterparted the Fall of man; his unhappy life in the maze of Glasgow, beginning at the age of fourteen, and his apprenticeship in the modern, industrial world was his experience of hell; and his marriage, his psychoanalysis, his waking visions, and the awakening of his poetic imagination marked the beginnings of his salvation. It was from this imaginative interpretation of his life that Muir derived his poetic vision of life as a journey. The root of his poetic fable tracing the life of man in time was engendered both by his need to relive his life and see it whole and by his reaching through to the archetypal, mythic centre of self.

"Why," Muir asks, "seen from a distance, do the casual journeys
of men and women, perhaps going on some trivial errand, take on the appearance of a pilgrimage?" Because there is "some deep archetypal image in our minds of which we become conscious only at the rare moments when we realize that our own life is a journey."21 For Muir the inherited wisdom found in simple, narrative poetry is life-motivating and directing. "The old story," he states, "is quite simple" for it follows "some figure—Odysseus or Ruth or King David—through time; and it remains the most pure image that we have of temporal life, tracing the journey we shall take."22 It is the "old story" that has resonance for Muir, perhaps, in part, because of his upbringing in Orkney where story-telling, folk tales, and the ballads were indigenous, where folk wisdom—simple but life-sustaining—gave equipment for living. In Orkney, as Muir puts it, poetry dwelt in its "natural estate": there poetry was "not acquired but inherited"; it was not something "thought about" but something accepted as "strange and natural"—as "an exercise of the heart and imagination."23

Just as poetry in its original estate is "strange and natural," so, Muir posits, there are certain beliefs "natural" to man. The "norm" of human existence, he feels, relies on a belief in eternity which is not only "native to man" but "necessary" for a fully imaginative apprehension of life. For when the belief in eternity "partially fails," he argues, "imagination suffers an eclipse" and art becomes

22The Estate of Poetry, p. 29.
23Ibid., pp. 10-11.
"a problem instead of a function." 24 Whereas a "comprehensive and widely accepted conception of human life produces good imaginative art," a "tentative and partially accepted conception of life" results in "unsatisfactory imaginative art." The conception of life "complete and in a high sense normal to mankind," he feels, is that which postulates a "transcendent reality" and recognizes "man's relation to it": human life "must always stop short of meaning if we seek its meaning merely in itself." 25 "Seen against eternity, the life of man is a complete story," Muir believes, but viewed against time "it is an unfinished one, a part of endless change, a fleeting picture on an unstable substance." 26

Muir feels that the artist in the modern world has a great responsibility to communicate the complete story of man, that viewed against the backdrop of eternity. Muir has little use for obliquity or obscurity in modern verse for he feels that poetry should not belong to the specialist and critic 27 nor should it further add to the thickening maze of abstractions spread over the imagination by the analytic intellect. Poetry should free us from the "cage" which the contemporary world has constructed around us; poetry should make us more fully and profoundly human; poetry should derive its source from

25 Ibid., p. 147.
26 Ibid., p. 148.
the deep well of the imagination, that power by which we keep "intact the bond which unites us with the past of mankind, so that we can still understand Odysseus and Penelope and the people of the Old Testament." The poetic imagination should pierce through the shadows which are progressively overpowering modern man and reducing his image by theorizing that he is purely thisworldly, purely a creature formed by biology, social forces, and human history. The poetic imagination should recover, in the ancestral image of man, the ancient, simple, yet profound truth of human existence:

Every human being begins at the beginning, as his fathers did, with the same difficulties and pleasures, the same temptations, the same problem of good and evil, the same inward conflict, the same need to learn how to live, the same need to ask what life means. Conspicuous virtue, when he encounters it, may move him, or a new and saving faith; since the desire for goodness and truth is also in his nature. He will pass through the ancestral pattern, from birth to childhood and youth and manhood and age and death. He will feel hope and fear and love and hate and perhaps forgiveness. All this may seem dull and monotonous to the detached thinker, but it enchants the imagination for it is the image of all human life.

As Muir seeks to "retrieve the shape of man/Lost and anonymous" from those forces which threaten to annihilate him, he seeks to demonstrate that human life is not something that can be compressed into a formula. "Seen deeply enough the life of the most ordinary human creature," he

28 The Estate of Poetry, pp. 86-87.
29 Ibid., pp. 87-88.
feels, is "portentous past all theorising." For human life is ultimately a sacred and mysterious quest in which the individual seeks to uncover his true "spiritual" centre and so become "integrated into his true image." The individual's journey through time and place—which is the central theme of Muir's poetry—is a journey in search of wholeness, completeness.

Concerned that man in his wholeness may not survive in the modern world, Muir seeks, in his art, to act as a pathfinder illuminating modern man's journey back to his essential, natural, imaginative centre. He seeks to resurrect the imagination, to restore spiritual values to life, and to re-invest human life with dignity. Eschewing elliptical, allusive art which replicates a fragmented vision of life, Muir conveys, through his traditional poetic voice, the fundamental unity of mankind's spiritual journey through time and place. He tells the complete story of human life. And such a story needs to be told more today than ever before. For, as one writer recently put it, contemporary man has discovered that he lives "willy-nilly within a story, but a story which offers precious little life support."

31 Selected Letters of Edwin Muir, P. 47.
CHAPTER II

THE PILGRIM TRAVELLER: MUIR AS AUTOBIOGRAPHER

The more I know of myself, the more I recognize that nothing is foreign to me. In the depths of each man's biography lies the story of all men.
-Sam Keen, To a Dancing God

The autobiographer, as Brian Wicker states, "is one who is trying to make sense of himself in relation to the world by recollecting his past in a narrative. For he knows that it is only in the retelling of his own story that he can put his life into order. . . ."1 There is "no getting away from the need to tell stories," Wicker posits, "in order to explain ourselves as well as to describe the world."2 Throughout the pages of Muir's autobiography, one feels the poet's need to put his life in order by retelling his life story: through the process he seeks to uncover the ultimate meaning and significance of human life as it is illustrated in his individual history. Despite the vicissitudes of individual life, the limitations of personality, and the particular circumstances into which one is born, Muir feels that


2Ibid., pp. 46-47.
one can gain insight into the "fable" of life, the "complete story" of mankind's journey through time as it is "seen against eternity," by a penetrating examination into the mystery of the individual. "The life of every man," he believes, "is an endlessly repeated performance of the life of man." 

Muir's journey began in an appropriately humble place: the primitive, agrarian community of the Orkney Islands located off the northern tip of Scotland. Born here in 1887, he spent his first fourteen years in Orkney. The small (approximately two square miles), arrow-shaped, flat island of Wyre where he was raised in the 1890s became his symbolic Eden, the starting place of his life journey. In the bare outlines of the treeless Orcadian landscape, Muir sensed man's ultimate connection to "first things":

The landscape is not spectacular except as a spectacle of the first things: land and sea and sky. There is nothing but an odd tree here. and there to hide the shape of the land from you: you become aware of the land as an extraordinarily solid reality, and shape itself takes on a naked significance. You see man and woman and children walking on the bare earth against the sky, and houses rising on an ultimate hill with nothing but space and light beyond them. And presented so barely to you, you feel that house and man and woman and child have a universal human meaning . . . . I have never had the same feeling in any other place.


5 From the radio script "Revisiting Orkney" prepared for the BBC in the summer of 1956 but never broadcast. Manuscript drafts of this script are deposited in the National Library of Scotland, MS.Acc.4316.
Wyre provided the "symbolic stage" on which the "drama of human life" was played out for Muir: "The little island was not too big for a child to see in it an image of life; land and sea and sky, good and evil, happiness and grief, life and death discovered themselves to me there; and the landscape was so simple that it made these things simple too."6

In his earliest years, Muir experienced a sense of harmony, unity, and order as he lived in the "timeless" realm of "first childhood" (25). Once he entered the world of time and division, he looked back to this world with longing, and when he took the journey back to childhood in First Poems, he attempted to re-create this early sense of timelessness. In later life, he had glimpses of this world only in his dreams, memories, or visions for this realm of existence remained remote and inaccessible from the quotidian world of human time. His earliest memory--that of watching motes of dust dance in a bright beam of light--captures this early sense of timelessness: he recalls the "quiet murmuring, the slow, unending dance of the motes, the sense of deep and solid peace" which have come back to him since "only in dreams" (18). His early perception of his parents conveys similar intimations of immortality: "To me they were allegorical figures in a timeless landscape. Their allegorical changelessness made them more, not less, solid, as if they were condensed into something more real than humanity; as if the image 'mother' meant more

6An Autobiography, p. 206. In this chapter page references to subsequent quotations from the autobiography will appear in parenthesis within the text rather than as footnotes.
than 'woman,' and the image 'father' more than 'man' (24-25). As the youngest child in a rather large household which included three brothers and two sisters (Jimmie, Willie, Johnnie, Elizabeth, and Clara) as well as his Aunt Maggie and cousin Sutherland, Muir inhabited a "perfectly solid world," one not undermined by time:

Where all was stationary my mother came first; she certainly had always been with me in a region which could never be known again. My father came next, more recognizably in my own time, yet rising out of changelessness like a rock out of the sea. My brothers and sisters were new creatures like myself, not in time (for time still sat on the wrist each day with its wings folded), but in a vast boundless calm. I could not have put all this into words then, but this is what I felt and what we all feel before we become conscious that time moves and that all things change. (25)

Life was hard on Wyre and all the members of the household shared in the task of working the Bu, the ninety-five acre farm rented by Muir's father, James Muir. Plagued by poor health, Muir's father was unsuccessful as a farmer and faced continual difficulties in meeting the exactions of the landlord. Eventually, the family moved to a less prosperous farm on Wyre, Helziegartha, and from there they moved to the even poorer farm of Garth near Kirkwall on the Mainland (the main island of the Orkneys). But though the Muirs were financially strapped, they were secure in their simple values and rich in the co-operative spirit. All shared in the sowing and harvesting of the crops and the spring ritual of freeing the cattle from the byre; all felt special joy in the birth of a new lamb; all took special delight in the "motionless blue summer" in which "nothing happened" (32). Life in the Orkneys followed the ancient seasonal pattern: time, as it was experienced, encompassed the changeless, ever-
changing cycles of nature. Despite Muir's later sophisticated knowledge of European culture and literature, his early experiences in Orkney taught him a simple truth about human life, one which he never relinquished: that at the "heart of civilization" we find "the byre, the barn, and the midden" (36).

Though life in the Orkneys was hard, it was also a good life, a simple and natural human life. The pleasures of hearth and home were important to the Muirs. There were the family meals of herring and potatoes or porridge and the traditional Orkney invitation when there was a visitor eating with the family: "Put in thee hand"; there were the yearly visits to the Lammas Market in Kirkwall on the Mainland where the family delighted at the antics of hucksters and side-show performers; there were the Sunday visits (weather permitting) to the Presbyterian Church on the neighboring island of Rousay where Mr. Pirie would read his sermons despite the disapproval of most of the members of his congregation who held that sermons should derive from spontaneous inspiration; there were the pleasures found in human companionship through the long, grey winter as the family members sat around the black iron stove in the kitchen listening to Muir's father tell stories or his mother sing ballads or his brothers play the fiddle. "The winter," Muir recalls, "gathered us into one room as it gathered the cattle into the stable and the byre; the sky came closer; the lamps were lit at three or four in the afternoon, and then the great evening lay before us like a world; an evening filled with talk, stories, games, music, and lamplight" (30-31). On Sunday evenings Muir recalls feeling a special sense of "security and union" as the family gathered
to read from the Bible and pray. And as his father prayed, Muir always waited to hear him say "an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (26), words which he came to comprehend fully only in later years as he sought to escape from the labyrinth of time and self and find the path leading towards a final resting place.

The sense of security and union felt within the folds of the family was reinforced in the larger family of the Orcadian community. From his early experiences with family and community, Muir evolved his conception of the ideal society, one in which man, animal, and earth are harmoniously interconnected, where life is an order, not a chaos, where the flux of life is seen against the unchanging backdrop of tradition and culture. When a bull was brought to service a cow it was a "ritual act" of thousands of years of tradition "possessing the obviousness of a long dream from which there is no awakening" (36); when a neighbor came to slaughter the pig" he did it as a thing that had always been done, and done in a certain way" (36). The farmers were free of the "petty torments of ambition": "they helped one another with their work when help was required, following the old usage; they had a culture made up of legend, folksong, 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" (63).

To the Orcadians, prehistory merged with the contemporary giving "vivid evidences of a past but strange life."7 Scattered in farmers'
fields were grass-covered burial mounds from the stone age culture, henge monuments from the megalithic period, earth houses and brochs from the iron age, remains of Norse churches and castles built between 900 and 1200, and remnants of Stewart castles built in the late sixteenth century. As a child Muir sat by hours watching ships go by on a grass-covered mound called the "Castle" which later excavations revealed to be the twelfth-century stronghold of Viking warrior, Kolbein Hruga (Cobbie Row); and between the "Castle" and the Bu were the moss-covered ruins of the twelfth-century St. Mary's Chapel. Looking from Wyre onto the neighboring island of Egilsay, Muir could see the ruins of St. Magnus Church, the church in which Earl Magnus, Orkney's local saint, spent a long night in prayer before he was ritually murdered in 1116. The church, as Muir says, "was the most beautiful thing within sight, and it rose every day against the sky until it seemed to become a sign in the fable of our lives" (16).

Not only were prehistory and the recorded history of the Viking Golden Age in Orkney as relayed in the Orkneyinga Saga accepted as strange and natural facts to the Orcadians, but the fabulous was equally natural to these simple folk who had a rich store of tales about giants, trows, witches, fairies, magical ships, sea-monsters,
and seal folk. The Muirs knew a farmer who once went to sea to talk to a mermaid and came back claiming success, and they had neighbors who, on occasion, encountered fairies dancing in the moonlight. Muir's father told tales about the supernatural—he was especially fond of stories about witches and the Book of Black Arts—and he claimed to know the "horseman's word," a magical word which gave one absolute power over the behavior of horses. In Orkney, as Muir comments, "there was no great distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous; the lives of living men turned into legend" (14).

As a child, Muir found another kind of magical world in the dynamic realm of nature: "I can see the rough grey stones spotted with lichen on the top of the Castle, and a bedraggled gooseberry bush in a corner of the garden whose branches I lovingly fingered for hours; but I cannot bring back the feelings which I had for them, the sense of being magically close to them, as if they were magnets drawing me with a palpable power" (20). Insects, grass, and flowers, too, had power to delight and even "possess" the imagination. Horses held a special fascination for the young poet. As he looked at their "stationary hulks and the tossing heads, which in the winter dusk were lost in the sky," he felt "terror" infused with a "longing" to touch them—a "combination of emotions which added up to worship in the Old Testament sense":

Everything about them, the steam rising from their soft, leathery nostrils, the sweat staining their hides, their ponderous, irresistible motion, the

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distant rolling of their eyes, which was like the revolution of rock-crystal suns, the waterfall sweep of their manes, the ruthless flick of their cropped tails, the plunge of their iron-shod hoofs striking fire from the flagstones, filled me with a stationary terror and delight for which I could get no relief. (22)

These early experiences with animals helped engender Muir's conception of the "fabulous" age of "organic heraldry," the "age when animal and man and god lived densely together in the same world" (47).

It was in the Orkney of his "first childhood," the starting-place of his life journey, that Muir experienced the timeless world of the fable. There he first enjoyed the "spectacle of the first things: land and sea and sky"; there he divined that "house and man and woman and child have a universal meaning"; there he intuited a state of life in which "the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life of every human being are related to the sky overarching them, as if the sky fitted the earth and the earth the sky" (33); there he could conceive of an organic Eden in which child, bird, and beast lived harmoniously together. For in the world of "first childhood" he experienced "a completer harmony of all things with each other" (33) than he ever knew again. For inevitably, there came a "moment" when the image was "broken" and "contradiction" entered life (33).

Long before directly facing life's tragedy, Muir felt, the child "at moments" has a "divination of a hidden tragedy taking place around him, that tragedy being the life which he will not live for some years still, though it is there, invisible to him, already" (33). At the age of seven, the first break in the image was sustained and a divination of tragedy was felt as Muir entered an unsettling zone of childhood.
The ingress to this new world began with his "pugnacious phase" as he fought with another boy over a knife: "the memory is dim, and the figures in it huge and shadowy... It must have been autumn, for a sad light hangs over it. The other boy, whose name was Freddie, was standing with me at a place where two narrow roads crossed... Dusk was falling; the wet clouds hung just over our heads, shutting us in and making a small circular stage for combat" (32). Following a bout with influenza, Muir became "timid and frightened" (33), and he had his first feelings of oppression in his tiny, island universe: "In an island everything is near, for compressed within it are all the things which are spread out over a nation or a continent, and there is no getting away from them" (33). In his dark, later years, Muir would experience many nightmares which stemmed from his "apprehension of the mere bulk of life, the feeling that the world is so tightly crammed with solid, bulging objects that there is not enough room for all of them" (59).

Oppression gave way to fear and guilt as Muir entered his next zone of childhood. Upon hearing of the death of a neighboring farmer who had been kind to him, Muir experienced "terror" and this terror intensified as he entered his "phase of acute childish guilt." In this childhood zone, Muir was initiated to a new and frightening "place," one he would explore in his life and art in later years: the oppressive realm of the enchanted knight, the world haunted by the Interceptor and the demon, Indifference. Curiously enough, the ostensible cause of Muir's childish guilt appears trivial: he imagined that he might have broken his father's command not to touch a poisonous
sack of sheep-dip lying in a field near the house. Afraid that death would result if he even touched the sack, he "went about in terror," and once the sack was destroyed, his fear intensified as he had his first experience of dissociation. He feared that his hands "might have touched the sack." "How," he reasoned, "could I know, now that the sack was gone and I had no control over the boy who might have touched it or might not have touched it, being quite unable to stay his hand in that other time and that other place?" (34).

Obsessed with guilt, he suddenly entered a new "place"—the vast cell of self: "My fear went about with me, never leaving me: I would turn corners to get away from it, or shut myself in a little closet with one window, where there seemed to be no room except for myself; but the closet was big enough to hold my fear too." Alienated from the "ordinary world," he "had actually gone away into a world where every object was touched with fear, yet a world of the same size as the ordinary world and corresponding to it in every detail: a sort of parallel world divided by an endless, unbreakable sheet of glass from the actual world" (34). Bewildered, he was plagued by the "sense" that he was in a "blind place" (35). Although he slowly recovered and gropingly found his way back to the "actual world," yet "the world my eyes saw was a different world from my first childish one, which never returned again" (35). The image was totally broken and with it his feeling of union with his family. For the first time he felt estranged from his parents perhaps because, as Muir hints, the "root" cause of his guilt was "the obsession which all young children have with sex, their brooding curiosity, natural in itself but coloured with guilt by the thoughts of their elders" (35). Inter-
Interestingly, there is a similar analysis of guilt in Muir's semi-autobiographical novel, *Poor Tom*. Here, too, obsessive guilt associated with the simple act of touching a bag of sheep dip is traced to a repressed memory of a childhood sexual experience.  

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10 In *Poor Tom* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1932), pp. 110-114, Muir provides a fuller explanation for the root cause of his guilt over touching the bag of sheep dip as he describes young Mansie's memories of early sexual play and its accompanying guilt:

> It was a quite vague memory, and concerned an affair that he had had, and should not have had, with a little girl from a neighboring farm when he was six. He had had no consciousness of guilt, or only a sense of it as purely fanciful as the comedy he was playing; indeed, seeing that sex was still unawakened in him, and he was only acting, he was probably as innocent of any actual or even possible offence as a character playing an enigmatic part in a story. Yet he had felt environed by guilt, and this had made him carry out his games in secrecy. At certain stages children seem to live in two separate worlds, both of which are real. In one world, the world which included his parents and all other grown people and himself, a place perfectly familiar to them but full of perplexities for him, Mansie knew that what he did was, in spite of its simplicity, a sin of awful dimensions; but in the other country where he lived with his playmate there was no evil, or a purely fictitious evil which he could summon before his mind only by make-believe. So accompanying the clear knowledge that he was disobeying his father and mother, was the feeling that he was committing a fabulous sin, a sin which was not a sin to him, but to some shadowy figure—it might be God—in a world only visible to his elders.

In his memory, and more especially during the years of adolescence, this episode seemed to him, grotesquely enough, the most shameful in all his life. He could no longer remember the feelings that had accompanied his acts, and he seemed to himself simply to have been a very nasty and unnatural little boy. Unnatural, for now he could only see those games, played in a world where the powers of sex were still unawakened, and so non-existent, through the eyes of a youth whose thoughts were penetrated with sex and his awareness of it. . . .

He and his playmate had already turned to other games when his father took a farm on the mainland. And then, without warning, the guilt, which had been hanging, a small and distant cloud in the sky, and should with the discontinuance of the offence have dissolved and vanished, fell upon him.
Although he had momentarily escaped the prison of his irrational guilt and fear, his world was irrevocably changed and new traumas awaited the hypersensitive child. When he first attended school on Wyre at the age of seven, time became an oppressive presence: "Time moved by minute degrees there; I would sit for a long time invisibly pushing the hands of the clock on with my will and waken to realize that they had scarcely moved" (41). Now, he entered a new prison for in school he felt as if he were "shut in some narrow, clean, wooden place" with no hope of "escape." And there was also no hope of escape from dreariness and discouragement when the family moved from their farm on Wyre to Garth, a hundred-acre farm on the Mainland in Orkney. Here "everything went wrong" for the family. Plagued by poor land, a damp house, and ill health, the Muirs came to "hate the dreary place, in a clap. It was after the time of the sheep dipping. His father had warned them all against touching the sack in which the sheep dip was kept. The sack was laid out in a field at some distance from the house; the sheep were dipped, and the empty sack was burned; but for a long time afterwards Mansie could not rid himself of the obsession that the poison had got on to his hands. He washed them in terror many times a day until they had a wasted and transparent look. At first it was the poison that he tried to cleanse from them; but as time went on he washed them in a panic, as though he were purifying them of something that he had long since forgotten . . . .Every day was filled with alarms and trepidations which invisibly lay in ambush and did not leave him even when he slipped suddenly round a corner to avoid them, or locked himself in the dark cupboard where he hoped they would not enter. He did not know from what source they came or what brought them on him; for by now he had completely forgotten the little girl, and when he thought of that time a comforting blank, which yet disturbed him as if it concealed some treachery, was all that his memory gave back. He could not tell his father and mother of his fears, and so they enclosed him in a silent world whose invisible terrors he had to face by himself.
which gave a spiteful return for the hard work flung into it" (66).
Muir's sense of the gloominess of Garth coloured his perception of the
landscape which appeared "rough and desolate, the landscape of a
second-rate saga" (68).

By now Muir has adjusted somewhat to school and so he did not
feel as imprisoned in the Kirkwall school as he had in Wyre: he no
longer tried to move the hands of the clock with his will. Yet, there
were days when the journey to school, taken in stages, filled him with
dread. All seemed "fatal"—the preparation for his journey, the first
few steps, the steady walk along the road leading to school. Although
he often wanted to run away when he heard the school bell ringing, he
knew that there was "only that one road, which grew harder the nearer
I approached its end" (70). At times, Muir enjoyed school, yet he had
lost his "first delight in things" for "life had a purpose and had
grown drier; mere learning gave me a bookish enjoyment" (71). Now
his childish games became rehearsals for the serious business of
life" (72). At the age of nine, reading became an "obsession" yet, of
all his early reading only one memory survives, an image which may
have fed into his later terrifying experiences of the double self:
"The image of the murderer in the sack, a murderer carried on a man's
back and dumped to do his work, oppressed my mind and entered my
dreams, where I was pursued over fields and ditches by a maniacal sack
tumbling head over heels, rolling, leaping, climbing, sliding, a deaf
and dumb and bound and yet deadly shape" (73).

Slowly, the family drifted apart—his brothers and sister
Elizabeth moving to Kirkwall and later Edinburgh and Glasgow, his Aunt
Maggie moving in with a sister, and his cousin Sutherland joining cousins in Leith—until only Edwin, his parents, and his sister Clara remained in the household. During his last year in Orkney, Muir became even more alienated from his family as he formed some "rough friendships" as a "hidden gesture of rebellion" (83) towards the authority of his parents. Seeking relief from his feelings of separation, he, at the age of fourteen, felt impelled towards a religious conversion. For his parents and sister had been "saved" during a revivalist movement which had swept the islands, and he felt "outside, separated from them by an invisible wall" (85). Although Muir momentarily returned to his childhood sense of union and security at the time of his conversion, this feeling was short-lived. As he later realized, he experienced "more a natural than a spiritual cleansing, and more a communal than a personal experience" (87). Such a process of purgation gave no true return to his childhood vision of harmony nor did it provide a permanent sense of security and union. His path lay ahead through the bewildering maze of time and self.

Although he had lost his primal vision of the world and had been initiated to the hidden tragedy of human life in Orkney, nothing could have prepared him for the "violence of the change" which occurred as the family moved to Glasgow in the winter of 1901-1902, when Muir was fourteen. Leaving the co-operative, pastoral community of Orkney to enter into the competitive, industrial world of Glasgow, the family was, as Muir put it, "plunged out of order into chaos" (63). Following the two day journey into Glasgow, the very fabric of life, as Muir knew it, was altered beyond description: irretrievably lost were the
seasonal round with the spring rituals of sowing and lambing; the time-
less summer days; the autumn harvesting; and the long grey winter of
rest and pleasures of the hearth. In place of the co-operative,
agrarian community and its traditions and simple virtues was the night-
marish wasteland of Glasgow where there would be a "meaningless waste
of inherited virtues" (93). And although the family maintained a
respectable income, they were always half-conscious of the threat of
the slums, the "abyss" into which they might plunge if they failed to
succeed in their new world. As Muir comments, "the old sense of
security was gone" (93).

Plagued by poor health, Muir found his niche in the modern,
industrial world in a series of meaningless jobs--he worked as a
clerk in a law firm, an office boy with a publishing house, a
chauffeur's assistant, and a bookkeeper in a beer-bottling factory--
during these critical Glasgow years, from 1902 to 1907. In his daily
walks to and from work, he passed through the slums of industrial
Glasgow, and his memory of these walks haunted him for many years:
"These journeys filled me with a sense of degradation: the crumbling
houses, the twisted faces, the obscene words casually heard in passing,
the ancient, haunting stench of pollution and decay, the arrogant
women, the mean men, the terrible children, daunted me, and at last
filled me with an immense, blind dejection" (91-92). In these
terrifying journeys through the maze of the Glasgow slums, Muir became
fully acquainted with a fellow traveller, a companion on the life-road
who would dog his footsteps for years to come. For his demon, Indif-
ference, soon accompanied him on his daily journeys as he systematical-
ly "taught" himself "not to see" and to grow accustomed to the hardship and suffering and meanness around him. But when he was tired or ill, vague fears of entrapment would haunt him as he found ingress into the "narrow place" of self which he would later re-create in his verse: "I often had the feeling. ...that I was dangerously close to the ground, deep down in a place from which I might never be able to climb up again, while far above my head, inaccessible, ran a fine, clean highroad. ...The slums seemed to me to be everywhere around me, a great spreading swamp into which I might sink for good" (92).

One "measure" of the "violence of the change" from Orkney to Glasgow, Muir always felt, was the successive deaths of four members of the family within five years of their arrival in Glasgow. His father, who had a difficult time adjusting to his new home, died of a heart attack within a year of their arrival. A scant year later, when Muir was sixteen, his brother Willie contracted and died of tuberculosis. Muir recalls his bleak "curative" trip with Willie to a coastal resort "both of us thinking of that invisible, deadly, and yet peaceable enemy quietly working beyond our reach" (94). Even more agonizing was Muir's helplessness in sight of the suffering of his elder brother, Johnnie, who experienced excruciating pain while he slowly died of a brain tumor. Daily, Muir prayed for a miracle to restore his brother and to stop his pain, but "as the pain increased and he became a mere substance upon which it worked like a conscientious artisan, there seemed to be no sense in praying, and if there was a God I told myself that he was deaf and indifferent" (103). If Johnnie had recovered and become a new man, purged by his suffering,
there might have been some meaning in his agony. "But if he had to die in any case, what point could there be, I asked myself night after night, in that impersonal, systematic torture...? I could find no answer to that question, except that life was ruled by an iron law" (103). And when, shortly after Johnnie's death, Muir's mother fell ill and died, he prayed again but "without belief: my words were mere words" (104).

Five years had passed, five years of pain and despair: "All that time seemed to give no return, nothing but loss; it was like a heap of dismal rubbish in the middle of which, without rhyme or reason, were scattered four deaths" (104). The family appeared to have been "swept by a gale" (104), and the remaining four members, following the laws of the industrial world, went their separate ways. Soon, Muir became ill, suffering from "a perpetual faint nausea and dizziness which infected everything—my work, my walks, my reading, spreading itself like a dirty film over them all" (104). He was nineteen, and his life journey seemed at a dead-end. He found his way back towards life but at a great cost: he defensively repressed his memories and deliberately "turned away from death and all thought of serious things" (110): "I climbed out of these years, but for a long time I did not dare to look back into them" (110).

Lost was the life of inherited virtue he had known in Orkney; lost was any remaining sense of life's simplicity and goodness and natural dignity. For in the mindless violence and "flaunted depravity" (107) he observed in the Glasgow slums he found evidence not of the natural dignity of man but of his damnation; here he found
evidence for Calvin's vision of man as a totally depraved and
naturally vicious creature, one tainted and corrupted by original
sin. The slums seemed a depository, not of the "elect," those, in
Calvin's view predestined to be saved, but of the "reprobate," those
eternally damned. Finding the "horror" of his past and present life
"too great" to contemplate, he, instead, "discovered a future in which
everything, including myself, was transfigured" (113). He became a
convert to Socialism and so purged himself of the "poisonous stuff"
which had gathered in him during those bleak years. Having discovered
a glorified future age, Muir could now see in the common man the
"shoots of glory which they would possess when all men and women were
free and equal" (113). "In spite of its simplicity," Muir comments,
"this was a genuine imaginative vision of life. It was a pure, earthly
vision, for I had now flung away, along with my memories of my squalid
youth, everything connected with it, including religion. It was false
in being earthly and nothing more; indeed, that alone was what made
it false" (113).

Now he began to read "nothing but books pointing towards the
future: Shaw, Ibsen, Whitman, Edward Carpenter" (116). He became
infatuated by Heine's "wit and irreverence" since behind these atti-
tudes he "was aware of a lyrical faith in the future such as I had
never thought possible before" (116). Heine also showed him a way to
deal with pain and suffering for from Heine he borrowed an ironic
perspective on life and the "art of feeling and laughing at my
feelings" (120-21). Reading the gentleman's magazine, The New Age,
Muir found further support for his sagging ego. Here he acquired not
only new ideas but a taste for condemnation as he learned to imitate
the "crushingly superior and exclusive tone" (123) of the magazine.

But though he could adopt a certain perspective or tone, he
found it difficult to sustain his "illusive" intellectual world, and
so he boldly sought advice from A.R. Orage, the editor of The New Age.
Upon Orage's recommendation that he devote himself to the study of a
great thinker--Orage "tentatively" suggested Plato or The Mahabharata
as fit subject matter for such an undertaking,--Muir, already in-
terested in Nietzsche's vision of life which found no room for pity
or suffering, "took refuge in the fantasy of the Superman" (127).
His study of Nietzsche gave him "a last desperate foothold" on his
"dying dream of the future" (126), and he "clung" to a philosophy
which was peculiarly ill-suited to a clerk in a beer-bottling factory.
Yet without Nietzsche, he would have found it difficult to face life
at all. For illusions about the "master class" and a "transvaluation
of values" offered an escape from the alarming future which awaited
him. In those rare moments when he took an honest appraisal of his
prospects, he saw himself growing into a middle-aged, round-backed,
greying clerk and joining the ranks of the faceless mass of clerks who
crowded the tramcars every morning and evening. Muir had adopted a
mask and he refused to see the incompatibility between his socialism
which sought the redemption of the exploited classes and his
Nietzscheanism which advocated the further oppression of the "bungled
and botched" (126). It was not until many years had passed and he had
left his Nietzschean stage far behind him that he could admit to his
intellectual dishonesty in the adoption of such a creed.
But his refuge in a willed vision of the future failed to sustain him when he entered into a "new period of squalor" (129) in a town thirty miles from Glasgow which he ironically referred to as "Fairport." Leaving his job in the beer-bottling factory to take an office job in a bone factory, he entered a nightmarish world, one which haunted his dreams with grotesque images for years to come. At the Fairport factory, bones, gathered from all over Scotland and "decorated with festoons of slowing writhing, fat yellow maggots" (130), were reduced to charcoal to be used in the refinement of sugar. The smell of the bones as they were shovelled into the furnaces permeated the factory and parts of the town: "It was a gentle, clinging, sweet stench, suggesting dissolution and hospitals and slaughter houses, the odour of drains, and the rancid stink of bad, roasting meat" (131). In the lives of the workers, "those who had spent their lives among the bones" (131), Muir found a sordid image of fate as Calvin had conceived it and a grotesque image of industrialism, as the socialists had envisioned it.

Muir was no longer on the road to hell. He was in it. "Fairport" proved to be not only a physical hell, but also a mental and moral hell. Soon, his latent feelings of guilt and shame were activated by his job which demanded that he whitewash the daily blunders made by the poorly managed "Fairport" factory in his reports to the "clean and methodical" head office in Glasgow. "We lived in Fairport in a state of chronic reprobation, always in the wrong, among the filth and the stench, grinding out the profits. The errors were not made by me, but I had to find an excuse for them and drearily
lie them away every day, year in, year out. I ended by acquiring a habitual bad conscience, a constant expectation of being accused" (133). Slowly, Muir came to feel that "a sort of objective shame" had settled within him "like a grimy deposit" (133). He became "dingily absent-minded, morose, and solitary"; his physical ailments returned; his dreams became replete with "images of stagnation and decay": "I dreamt of black, worm-eaten jetties, and of jumping into boats which crumbled and gave way at a touch, plunging me into soft, black, muddy water. But worst of all were my dreams about the maggots with their blindly writhing heads melting in the furnace into a soft, rich, yellow mass" (136). Now into his fantasy of the Superman "came the disquieting picture of a gigantic naked race rolling exuberantly among a hill of dead bones" (140).

Again, Muir experienced a vague, anxious dread as feelings of entrapment slowly paralyzed him. He felt powerless, a pawn of fate. He feared that he would become a greying, round-backed clerk yet he lacked the energy or will to alter his life, to free himself from the quagmire into which he had sunk. He became plagued by feelings of incipient dissociation. He could see himself "as from a distance, a pallid, ill-nourished, vulnerable young man in a world bursting with dangerous energy" (145). As he became increasingly isolated from the life around him, he found himself "gazing at things, hillsides, woods, ships, houses, trifling objects in shop-windows, with a dry yearning" (145). While walking with a friend along the Clyde River one night, he "casually," almost disinterestedly, indicated the depths of his despair by saying: "If I don't get out of this place I expect I'll
jump in there some night" (134). Startled by these desperate words, his friend, who knew the public Muir—the socialist activist and outspoken "intellectual"—soon found him a job in an office near Glasgow.

Muir was liberated from the filth and stench of the bone factory, but he was not liberated from his inner hell. He was on the borderline between sanity and insanity. His state worsened. His feelings of separation and yearning intensified. Dogged by his intercepter, he had crossed the bridge of dread and entered the enemy's land. He dwelt in a "crystalline globe or bubble" (149), cut off from the life surrounding him. He felt as if he were simultaneously close to and distant from things. He stared at the landscape or at objects as if he might lose himself in them, and hence find security; simultaneously, he felt walled in by dread for there was a "hidden menace" in the objects he yearned for—the "simplest object was dangerous" and capable of destroying him (150). He was lost in a strange land, a "submarine world of glassy lights and distorted shapes" (151). As terrifying as such bouts with dissociation were, it is conceivable that these experiences fed directly into Muir's later poetic obsession with time and space.

Even as a vital part of him became submerged in a quagmire of dread and misery, there was another "plane" of self, a "clean, dry plane" (146), which remained functional and provided the necessary basis for his ultimate re-integration. Although he was all but paralyzed by inward conflict, his friends saw him as merely "absent-minded" (148); the more isolated he felt, the more socially active he became. And he vigorously pursued his intellectual interests being
"resolved to obtain culture 'by hook or by crook'" (152). He befriended a number of like-minded Socialists in the National Guilds Movement and read widely in the field of political theory and thought. He taught himself French and began reading Moliere and Stendhal. He met the composers Francis George Scott and Denis Saurat and entered the world of music and intuitive speculation. He began to write for The New Age, publishing, at the age of twenty-six, some "lonely, ironic, slightly corpse-like poems" (146) imitative of Heine's graveyard poetry. And from the depths of his "submarine world," he produced a series of Nietzschean epigrams which appeared in a weekly column in The New Age under the banner "We Moderns," and which were published in book form in 1918 under the pseudonym, Edward Moore. Although We Moderns was generated from his "inward excitement," the creation of these aphorisms, as he later admitted, "was merely another escape, a lyrical refusal to come down to earth" (151).

As Muir later realized, his willed identification with the Nietzschean master race and his willed belief in a glorified Socialist future were forms of "compensation" (127) for the hopelessness of his life. Behind his aggressive intellectualism and escapism lurked the fear that he would remain a clerk for the rest of his life and that the clerkly round of existence would ultimately destroy his intellectual powers. His dual perception of himself as an intellectual/working-man led to his peculiar Nietzschean/Socialist stance. One instinct was to glorify the workingman with whom the office-clerk side of him identified, while another instinct was to damn the "bungled and botched" part of him, that part which seemed doomed to remain a clerk. De-
spite his Socialist belief in the potentiality of the workingman which would be realized in some future glorified age, the reality he perceived gave back a sordid image of fate as Calvin envisioned it: there seemed to be an inexorable logic underlying the industrial system which operated beyond the individual's control and determined his fate. He read books on Socialism because they provided him an "escape" from the real world of work which he knew "with such painful precision" (113). His socialist vision was theoretical; his Calvinist vision was lived. He was trapped, powerless, and so he found refuge in the fantasy of the Superman. Edwin Muir, the socialist shipping-clerk became transformed into Edward Moore, the Nietzschean writer of epigrams. Without Nietzsche, as Muir later admitted, he would "have found it hard to face life at all" (127). For although Edwin Muir could scarcely face the daily round of existence, Edward Moore, his alter ego, generalized in "excited ignorance" on the distinctions between creative love and pity, humility and pride; and he was eager to accept superficial paradoxes as "final truth" (151). Although Muir later apologized for the "lamentable bad taste" and immaturity of We Moderns, the "perpetration of the book" did aid in his development: "after being unhappy for a long time without realizing it, I was now genuinely unhappy; and though I did not know it, there was a possibility of amendment for me" (151).

By a curious twist of fate, this book of "lamentable bad taste" set in motion a series of "unlikely" events which provided the key to

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11 Edwin Muir, Selected Letters, p. 35.
his future happiness. Because of the book, Muir became a kind of local celebrity and the Glasgow intelligentsia, curious to meet the cost-accounting clerk who was reputed to have written his books on slips of paper hidden among his ledgers, invited him to some of their gatherings. One person attending such a gathering was Willa Anderson, a gifted linguist and a brilliant young lecturer in classics at a London college. In her memoirs, Belonging, Willa recalls her first impression of We Moderns: she was annoyed by Edward Moore's "extreme admiration" for Nietzsche, his over-use of the word "creative," and his shallow discussion of the unconscious. Although she sensed "a yearning for love, innocence, poetry, and mystery" in some passages of the book, she felt, all in all, ill-disposed towards the unknown Moore and prepared to stick "derogatory labels on him such as 'Nietzschean.'" Yet, when she met the gentle, shy author, "the labels fell off at once."12 Rather than indulging in literary chit-chat, she and Muir spent a delightful evening talking about Orkney and Shetland—for Willa was a Shetlander. Their meeting in the fall of 1918 was, as Willa describes it, "unlikely" and "still more unlikely" was their marriage less than a year later, in the spring of 1919, and "most unlikely of all" was the fact that their marriage would last. Such a course of events was "unlikely," as Willa puts it, "on the face of things."13 For Willa was university educated, Muir was self-

13Ibid., p. 11.
taught from the age of fourteen; Willa had a responsible teaching position at a London college, Muir was a shipping clerk; Willa was aggressively sure of herself, Muir was unsure of himself, uncertain about his prospects as a writer. Although "unlikely" on the face of things, they met, fell in love, and established a lasting, harmonious relationship in marriage. For as Willa puts it, they "belonged" together. Muir found a secure refuge in Willa. Her stability, her loyalty, her lively wit, and her faith in his talents as a writer were exactly what he needed to help him find a path back towards a whole personality. When Muir next faced his inner fears, Willa would be there to help.

Muir was thirty-two. For the last eighteen years of his life he had worked at clerical jobs and he was virtually self-taught from the age of fourteen. Though he had been free, through the years, to read academic reviews and the great books of English and world literature in slum libraries, to study political theory in his free time, and to teach himself French and read Moliere and Stendhal on the tram rides to and from work, still, from 9 to 6 he was a clerk, the Edward Moore who surreptitiously wrote and then hid his aphorisms among his ledgers. Yet, within one month of his marriage, he declared in a letter to H. L. Mencken: "I am certainly going to make an attempt to dispense with my clerical work, for it is, from my point of view, a sheer waste of time if I can make a living by writing." Two months later, after some hesitation, Muir quit his job at the ship-building
firm. Jobless, nearly penniless, and with prospects over which their "sensible" friends "shook their heads" (154), the couple went to London sustained, as Willa describes it, by a "naive trust" in each other and in their fate. His marriage was, as Muir put it, "the most fortunate event in my life" (154). Without Willa's encouragement, as Muir admitted, "it is unlikely that I should have taken the plunge myself: I was still paralysed by my inward conflict" (154). But Muir had taken the plunge. He was ready to try his hand at a new career: writing.

At first Muir felt somewhat daunted by the London literary scene. He was aware, as Willa describes it, that "looked at with a cold eye" he might appear as an "unknown provincial clerk with literary leanings, quite outside the ambience of current literary fashions or movements..." But Muir did have one connection with the literary world of London. Since Orage had already published his poems and aphorisms, Muir made occasional visits to the office of The New Age and soon was hired to work three days a week as Orage's assistant. Before long, he found additional work as drama critic for The Scotsman and, at Orage's prodding, he called on Middleton Murray and was hired to do occasional book reviewing for The Athenaeum. Two months after his arrival in London, Muir had found ingress to the publishing world, and for the first time in his life he felt that he was working at something which interested him. He was free from

15Belonging, p. 41.

16Ibid., p. 42.
Glasgow, free from the 9 to 6 world of clerking. But he was not free from his inner conflicts.

Although he found his London home on Guilford Street a "warm refuge," as Willa tells us in Belonging, he often "shivered with apprehensions" when he left the security of home. At times he feared that buildings would crash down upon him as he walked down the street; at other times, he "cowered beneath the conviction" that he scarcely existed. As Muir recalls this period of his life in his autobiography: "my mingled dread and longing now turned upon itself and reversed its direction, so that as I gazed at an object or a face--it did not matter which for the choice was not mine--I was no longer trying to establish a connection with it, but hoping that it ... would establish a connection with me and prove to me that I existed" (155).

It was Willa's hope that sustained him through this difficult period, and although his fears began to abate as he found his way into the literary circles of London, Orage soon became aware of Muir's disturbed state and sought a way to aid his new assistant.

Through the promptings of Orage, Maurice Nicoll, a Jungian psychoanalyst, invited Muir to call upon him one evening. Unsuspecting of any "plot" for his good, Muir consented to be psychoanalyzed when Nicoll proposed the "experiment" for the "mere interest of the thing and without asking for any payment" (157). Muir readily agreed for he had a professed interest in psychoanalysis and had read numerous articles on the subject in The New Age where "Freud's and Jung's

17Ibid., p. 36.
theories were discussed from every angle, philosophical, religious, and literary, as well as scientific" (157). It was the novelty of the "experiment" and the chance to satisfy his intellectual curiosity about the newly discovered realm of the unconscious that attracted him to Nicoll's proposal. Despite the fears which had plagued him over the years, he was not ready to admit that he was "a neurotic needing the help" offered him (157).

In his book, Dream Psychology, published a few years before his treatment of Muir, Nicoll explained the rationale behind his use of dream analysis in the investigation of the unconscious. It was his belief that the dreams and fantasies of the patient reveal not only root problems but the key to their solution.18 The patient must recognize, Nicoll posited, that his unhappiness is caused by inner, not external forces: such an admission is a necessary step in obtaining a cure. And "no one," Nicoll believed, "must expect to live in contact with the unconscious without being constantly humiliated."19

Muir found his contact with the unconscious quite painful and humiliating, especially at first. As his self-knowledge grew, it had to break through the resistance of his conscious mind which worked to "preserve intact my old flattering image of myself" (158). Although he had not recalled any dreams for a number of years, now his dreams began "to come in crowds": the "inventive windings" of his psyche seemed endless (158). Although at first he refused to believe the


19Ibid., p. 187.
"disreputable meanings" of his dreams as interpreted by Nicoll, soon he became "shaken with disgust and dread" of himself. Gradually, he came to a new insight, to "a conviction of sin, but even more a realisation of Original Sin." He saw that everyone, himself included, "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" (158). His lot, he realized, was the human lot: "when I faced my own unvarnished likeness I was one among all men and women, all of whom had the same desires and thoughts, the same failures and frustrations, the same unacknowledged hatred of themselves and others, the same hidden shames and griefs."

By confronting this reality, Muir discovered, one could "win a certain liberation" (158). But his analysis also taught him that "nothing is harder than to look at yourself" (158).

Now as Muir took a hard look at himself, his "whole world of ideas invisibly changed" (158). The Nietzschean Superman "took himself off without a word" (158) after a dream in which Muir envisioned Nietzsche being crucified in Christ's place: "He stared round him with an air of defiant possession... he was like a man who had violently seized a position which belonged to some one else" (128).

As a disciple of Nietzsche, Muir's unconscious was telling him, he had replaced Christ with the Superman, and the simple Christian virtues which were lived values in Orkney with a self-assertive will to power philosophy. Gradually, Muir came to recognize that "Nietzsche's life had been a curious kind of self-crucifixion, out of pride, not out of
love" (128). Muir was ready for a re-orientation of his value system. As his analysis progressed, Muir came more and more into touch with the latent powers of the unconscious. Although Nicoll felt that the unconscious forces unleashed through analysis could be used creatively by the patient in the re-integration of the personality, he became alarmed at the unusual ability Muir had to communicate with his unconscious. Several weeks into his analysis, Muir "fell into a curious state": he had trances and waking visions as his unconscious mind "seemed to have become transparent, so that myths and legends entered it without resistance" (159). His first waking dream, which formed the basis of the poem "Ballad of the Soul," was a particularly important psychic event. In the vivid, rapid-fire sequence of images projected from the unconscious, replete with fabulous monsters, robed figures, and formations of angels, Muir discerned "the pattern of man's evolution and ultimate destiny" (166). The vision, he felt, encompassed the ultimate journey of the soul from the beginnings of time as the "animal soul" swam without fear among the headless, eyeless sea-creatures to the end of time envisioned in the battle between the wheeling suns and the release of the spirit into eternity (165-66). Despite his analyst’s sexual interpretation of the vision, Muir felt that his waking dream was "unearthly," that it came from outside his consciousness: "it was not 'I' who dreamt it, but something else which the psychologists call the racial unconscious, and for which there are

20 Ibid., pp. 177-18.

other names" (184). Although, as Willa tells us, Nicoll "ridiculed transcendental explanations for these visions,"22 Muir felt, with one part of his mind, that his visions provided a "revelation" of spiritual truth. Since he had already begun to "tentatively" believe in immortality at the time of his visions, these experiences served to "strengthen" his belief (167).

But Nicoll, who interpreted the meaning and the source of Muir's waking dreams differently, feared that his patient was close to the borderline between sanity and insanity. On the advice of Nicoll, Muir stopped his waking visions. Years later, as he wrote his autobiography, he expressed his doubt as to the wisdom of this advice. But he had gained much from his exploration of the unconscious, and although he never completed his psychoanalysis (Nicoll soon left for the continent and Muir was unable to adjust to a new analyst), he did free himself from the false personality he had constructed during his Glasgow years. His visions reinforced his new ideas about the personality, ideas which had slowly developed through his long conversations with his friend, John Holms, who not only showed Muir "the irreducible second-rateness of a man of personality" (181) but helped to re-kindled Muir's belief in immortality. Muir now came to view the personality as something "made" through "a collaboration between its owner and time." "If," as his visions had revealed, "the soul is immortal and the personality is not, obviously our real task is not to cultivate but to get rid of personality" (181). Now, as Willa tells

22 Belonging, p. 46.
us, he totally repudiated Edward Moore, the self-assertive Nietzschean: he no longer desired to "make an impact on people" or to "deride and attack and ram home debating points with exclamation points." Rather, he sought to discover the true self which lay behind the mask of the personality. He was on the road toward self-integration and on the threshold of a new imaginative vision of life. For it was directly as a result of his waking visions, as Willa tells us, that he determined "what was to be his life-long task, exploring within himself the extraordinary dramas that his London visions had made him aware of, because he believed that they came ultimately from a trans­cendental source and had a meaning for everyone."24

Within two years, Muir's life course had entirely altered. He had changed his occupation, his philosophy, and his personality. What he needed now was a space of time in which to sort out these changes and take stock of himself. And just such an opportunity arose when Van Wyck Brooks, literary editor of The Freeman, an American review, offered Muir a regular income for submitting one or two articles per month. Feeling that they were, as Willa puts it, "drowning in a flood of people" in London, they decided, in the summer of 1921, to "drop everything" and go abroad. Besides, as Willa comments, they were already in their thirties and neither of them had even been outside Britain so they felt it was "high time" that they "see a bit of the world," especially Europe which seemed "an imaginary region, a never-

23 Ibid., p. 48.
24 Ibid., p. 69.
never land."\(^{25}\) So on the advice of their Czech friend, Janko Lavrin, who had fed their imaginations with tales of European adventure, they began their sojourn in Prague which, as Lavrin pointed out, was not only "in the very middle of Europe; it had the best ham in Europe and the best beer."\(^{26}\)

What started out as an almost light-hearted jaunt into the never-never land of Europe proved decisive in Muir's development as a poet. For the next four years the Muirs lived in Europe—first in Prague, then Dresden and nearby Hellerau, then Italy, and finally Austria. For the first time in his life since he was fourteen, Muir had leisure time, "time for thinking and daydreaming" (189). Enchanted by the "foreign" quality of Prague, he "began to learn the visible world all over again." Whereas the ugliness of Glasgow had turned him in upon himself until he "no longer saw things, but was merely aware of them in a vague way," in Prague "everything seemed to be asking" him to notice it: he spent weeks "in an orgy of looking" (189). And soon he realized that his vague fears were disappearing.

But it was during the "hot, idle summer" of 1922, spent in Dresden, that Muir finally recovered from the "long illness" which had "seized" him when he moved to Glasgow. Now he came to a new determination: "I realized that I must live over again the years which I had lived wrongly, and that every one should live his life twice, for the first attempt is always blind" (192). As he "struck up a first ac-

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 54.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.
quaintance" with himself, he discovered that his life was not only
unique but universal, that "the life of every man is an endlessly
repeated performance of the life of man" (49). Now as he recovered
his past by looking "against the direction" of time, he "won a new kind
of experience." For now that he "no longer marched in step with time,"
he could "see life timelessly, and with that in terms of the imagina-
tion" (193).

In the autumn of 1922, Willa joined the staff of A. S. Neill's
International School in Hellerau, and it was here that Muir's imagina-
tion began to fully awaken. Immersed in the school's atmosphere of
freedom and simplicity, he began to toy with ideas of paradise re-
gained for the "atmosphere" in which the Hellerau community lived
"had indeed in it something which faintly evoked the image of Eden and
the prophecy of the time when the lion would lie down with the lamb"
(201). For the past two years, since the time of his waking visions,
Muir had attempted to communicate his imaginative vision of life in
prose. Now, at the age of thirty-five, he found the appropriate
vehicle to convey his experiences. He began to write poetry.

But though he felt compelled to express his insights, he was
handicapped by his lack of poetic training. In his autobiography, he
recalls some of his handicaps:

I had no training; I was too old to submit to con-
temporary influences; and I had acquired in Scotland
a deference towards ideas which made my entrance into
poetry difficult. Though my imagination had begun to
work I had no technique by which I could give expression
to it. There were the rhythms of English poetry on the
one hand, the images in my mind on the other. All I
could do at the start was to force the one, creaking
and complaining, into the mould of the other. (205)
But although he had difficulty solving the technical problems of poetry, he found a rich storehouse of subject matter as he recollected his first seven years on Wyre. Now as he relived his life, he distilled its essence into the poetry which eventually came to be published in *First Poems* (1925), a poetry which evokes childhood memories and a visionary apprehension of life.

Muir's concern as he and Willa trekked through Europe in the early twenties was to fulfill the "task of the poet which is to make his imaginative world clear to himself" (208). These were, all in all, happy, carefree years, years of inner development and strengthening, years of imaginative blossoming. But even as Muir retreated to his inner world, to his memories of Wyre and to the symbolic world of dreams and visions, political and social forces were acting on post-war Europe and preparing for a new drama of human life, one whose "pattern," if such it had, portended an unimaginable end: the reduction of order into chaos, the rise of Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin. As Willa queries, "Had we been granted a vision of what was to come, how could we have believed it?" For, as Willa comments, though the central Europe they knew in the twenties was "steeped in memories of violence and hatred," they were, at least at first, all but oblivious to it. In writing about these years in his autobiography some thirty years later, Muir expressed "doubt" about his memory of the Europe he saw in the twenties for his memory, by then,
had become overlaid with images of World War II: with "one half" of
his mind he recalled this period "historically," i.e. within the con-
text of later events, while the "other half" still remembered it as he
experienced it then, "wrapped in its own illusions" (199).

The Prague Muir recalls had an "improvised air" and a sense
of "extraordinary vigour" (187): he was "struck by the independence
of the people" (189). In Dresden, the Muirs lived "in an agreeable,
silent vacuum" (197), ignorant of the many families who had been
ruined by the war and post-war inflation. And in the Hellerau
community of the International School, they lived in a world of
intellectual excitement remote from the political and economic
realities of central Europe: "While the inflation was spreading
around us like a dry rot, we thought only of a potentiality which
would, almost without lifting a finger, painlessly realize itself
and deposit us in a new existence" (200). When, in 1923, they did
experience the effects of inflation first-hand in Hellerau, they
journeyed to Italy for the inflation made life "intolerable" and "the
guilt of appearing responsible for it, however indirectly, was more
than we could face" (205). After spending a few months in Italy,
they travelled to Salzburg and then Vienna.

It was in the "lovely, provincial town" (214) of Salzburg that
they first ran against evidence of the irrational hatred that would
lead to the extermination of five million Jews. In a local paper in
Salzberg, Der Eiserne Besen (The Iron Broom), they read "with astonish-
ment of ritual murders still happening, and of curious Jewish per-
versions, described in detail, of which we had never heard" (214).
And in Vienna, where public misery was more in evidence than it had been in Dresden and Hellerau, they stumbled across their first Jewish ghetto, "a palpable embodiment of Anti-semitism" (218), and they found themselves baffled by the "childish" arguments advanced for Antisemitism by intelligent, good people and distressed by the "distaste of the well-bred whenever a Jew was mentioned" (218). But though they saw things which disturbed them, their awareness of the direction in which the world was moving came only "belatedly" (197). As Willa puts it, "How could we have believed the unimaginable?" 29

The Muirs returned to England in 1925 and began a new period of their life together. Now they began what Muir would later disparagingly refer to as a "translation factory" (222) as they translated German into English to make a living. Between 1925 and 1948, the Muirs would jointly translate thirty-five books from the German by such authors as Gerhart Hauptmann, Lion Feuchtwanger, Hermann Broch, Shalom Asch, and Franz Kafka. 30 While the world was darkening around them, Muir busied himself writing. Between 1926 and 1937, he wrote numerous articles of literary and social criticism, countless reviews, a biography of John Knox, three novels, and four books of verse: Chorus of the Newly Dead (1926), Six Poems (1932), Variations on a Time Theme (1934), and Journeys and Places (1937). While the war poets of the thirties were moving in one direction, Muir pursued a
different path. He sought to illuminate in his verse the mysteries of
time and immortality and to trace the archetypal journey of immortal
man through the maze of time. Although he had been an ardent Socialist
in his young adult years and so understood the impulse behind the
political poetry of the 1930s, he found that he could "not quite be-
lieve in Auden's limestone country and deserted factories," and he felt
that the "political interpretation of life which seemed so new at the
time and so applicable, was only one of several that might have been
made... it did not give any deep insight into 'the life of things'
but stopped at the reality of categories" (233). He was repelled by
the Communist theory of life for the view that history reveals "the
unending anger of class against class seemed an empty idea which, like
a curious mechanism, explained nothing but itself" (233). And the
"new poetry," he felt, "had left the immemorial hopes behind it; in
no imaginable future would the lion and the lamb lie down together;
they belonged to a mythology which Marx had exploded; and all that was
left for the lamb now was to arm itself with the latest equipment
and liquidate the lion" (235). Despite the overshadowing of life by
politics, Muir could discover a different kind of "truth"; that "the
impulses of the heart come of themselves and that our most precious
experience takes place, happily for us, in a universal unchanging
underground" (236).

Yet it was not always easy for Muir to maintain contact with the
"universal unchanging underground" of the imaginative self as his
"war diary," kept between 1937 and 1939 gives testimony to. Though he
had travelled far in his psychic journey, he felt "profoundly dis-
satisfied" with himself. He felt "guilt-stricken" because he had not lived up to his potential; he was distressed by the "contrast" between the "powers" within him and the utter "triteness" of the daily round of life. Although he realized that he could only see men and women as "human" if he envisioned them as "immortal souls," yet he, at times, perceived animal traits "flitting across human features" (245-6). He was again travelling on a sad, stationary, journey towards a sealed horizon.

Then, suddenly, he came to a turning point as one night he found himself reciting the Lord's Prayer "in a loud, emphatic voice" and "with deep urgency and profound disturbed emotion." As he said the prayer over and over, "meaning after meaning sprang from it," and he was filled with "joyful surprise" for he recognized that "this simple petition was always universal and always inexhaustible, and day by day sanctified human life" (246). This experience led to a renewal of faith:

I had believed for many years in God and the immortality of the soul; I had clung to the belief even when, in horrifying glimpses, I saw animals peeping through human eyes. My belief receded then, it is true, to an unimaginable distance, but it still stood there, not in any territory of mind, it seemed, but in a place of its own. Now I realized that, quite without knowing it, I was a Christian, no matter how bad a one . . . (246-7).

But his faith gave him no simple solutions to the problems which tormented him: the questions of time and evil. And though, as he wrote in a letter in 1940, he felt "something like a sense of the presence of God,"31 yet he found himself, at the age of fifty-five,

31 Selected Letters, p. 118.
devoid of a "philosophy" or rational explanation for the human predicament: "I have no explanation, none whatever, of Time except as an unofficial part of Eternity--no historical explanation of human life, for the problem of evil seems insoluble to me: I can only accept it as a mystery, and what a mystery is I do not know." Even after professing himself a Christian, his faith remained tentative. He still sought "meaning" in life, he still felt the need "to see life timelessly: the only way in which it can be seen as a whole." And though a "Christian," he steered away from dogmatic faith for he was unable to accept the "religious explanations" offered to solve the problems of human life:

I would rather have the problems themselves, for from an awareness of them and their vastness I get some sort of living experience, some sense even of communion, of being in the whole in some way, whereas from the explanation I should get comfort and reassurance and a sense of safety which I know is not genuine.

Although Muir strove to see life "timelessly," to see it "whole," he could not blind himself to the reality of human evil manifested in war-torn Europe. In 1942, he was hired by the British Council to arrange a series of lectures and concerts in Edinburgh for soldiers and refugees from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and France, and these years proved to be happy and productive, especially poetically. The poems written between 1937 and 1942 were collected in *The Narrow Place* and

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32 Ibid., p. 112.
33 Ibid., p. 116.
34 Ibid., p. 137.
published in 1943, and those written during the Edinburgh years were
published in 1946 in The Voyage. In 1945, Muir accepted a post with
the British Council in Prague, and though this continued to be a
productive period of life—in 1949 Muir published The Labyrinth, his
best volume of verse up to that time—he years in Prague took a
serious toll on the aging, sensitive poet, casting dark shadows into
the poetry he wrote at this time. When he first arrived in Prague in
1945, he was struck by the ravages of the war and felt heartsick when
he saw homeless families wandering the roads "on a pilgrimage from
nowhere to nowhere" (251). And as he heard first-hand accounts of the
atrocities committed by the Gestapo during the war, it was forcibly
brought home to him that evil is an active force in human history, one
that "works itself out from generation to generation" (263).

But Muir had a job to do and he was determined to do it well.
Although the Czechoslovakians were at first wary and distrustful of
the British Council's activities—despite their own "friendliness
and personal popularity" the Muirs felt, as Willa puts it, an "alien
inscrutability in the atmosphere of Prague"35—the Institute soon
became popular throughout Prague. But even as Muir lectured on the
"humanizing force" of English literature36 to his enthusiastic
students, the Communist take-over was in the making. It was during the
putsch in 1948 that Muir saw, first-hand, the terrifying forces of
historical process, the workings of "impersonal power, the fearful

35Belonging, p. 219.
210.
shape of our modern humanity" (271). For he saw men and women treated not as human beings, but as the mere" subject-matter of history" (196). Soon his old fears returned, touched off by his revulsion to the impersonal machinery of Communism. He withdrew into what Willa described as "Muir-family remoteness." He again was plagued by his old demon, Indifference. Willa recalls feeling somewhat anxious when Muir wrote about his "indifference" in the poem, "The Intercepter":

Asleep, awake, at work or play,
Whatever I do, wherever I go,
The Intercepter bars my way
And to my 'Yes' says 'No.'

Yet, she reasoned, "he was in no danger from the Intercepter's negations since he was able to shape a poem about them." But she was wrong.

After their return to England, Muir, as he describes it, "fell plumb into a dead pocket of life" which he "had never guessed at before" (274). Though, during his breakdown, memories of Prague "now and then shivered the surface" of his mind, they "never sank deep into it" (274). He defended himself from feelings of fear and dread which his experiences in Prague had activated by a closing off, a retreat from the real world. Although he slowly returned to reality as things "began to become real, pleasurable, and painful again" (274), his real recovery, as Willa states, came in Rome where he was released

37*Belonging*, p. 248.
39*Belonging*, p. 248.
from his inner dread "by his warm, new love for Jesus" (250). Although
he spent only eighteen months in Rome as the Director of the British
Council Institute, it was there that he found what he had sought
during his long spiritual journey.

After his experience in Prague, Muir keenly felt that modern
fear—the terror of history—and he came to realize the necessity for
modern man to free himself from a belief in the inevitability of
history. "This feeling of inevitability, if we were to submit to it," he argued, "would make our life perfectly empty: we should become
conscious ciphers in a historical process whose intentions are not ours
but its own; and our thoughts and affections, our most intimate life,

40In Mircea Eliade's The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos
and History, trans. from the French by Willard R. Trask (Princeton,
N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954) the "terror of history" is
discussed on pages 141-162. Eliade traces this feeling to modern
man's "doubt" that he can "make history." The more "modern" man
becomes, i.e. "without defenses against the terror of history," the
"less chance he has of himself making history. For history either
makes itself (as the result of the seed sown by acts that occurred in
the past, several centuries or even several millennia ago. . . .)
or it tends to be made by an increasingly smaller number of men who
not only prohibit the mass of their contemporaries from directly or
indirectly intervening in the history they are making (or which the
small group is making), but in addition have at their disposal
means sufficient to force each individual to endure, for his own part,
the consequences of this history, that is, to live immediately and
continuously in dread of history. Modern man's boasted freedom
to make history is illusory for nearly the whole of the human race.
At most, man is left free to choose between two positions: (1) to
oppose the history that is being made by the very small minority
(and, in this case, he is free to choose between suicide and depor-
tation); (2) to take refuge in a subhuman existence or in flight.
The "freedom" that historical existence implies was possible—and
even then within certain limits—at the beginning of the modern period,
but it tends to become inaccessible as the period becomes more
historical, by which we mean more alien from any trans-historical
model" (pp. 156-157).
would be mere illusions to amuse or distract us" (195). But in Rome he had a new perception of history and a new hope for modern man. For though the history of Rome, like contemporary history, was "drenched in blood and blackened with crime," all that remained "was the peace of memory": the blood-stained ghosts "had quite gone, bleached by centuries into a luminous transparency, or evaporated into the bright still air" (277). And in Roman society Muir found a naturalness and a simplicity which he had known only in Orkney. Here he could imagine "gods and men still in friendly talk" (277). And, more importantly, here he found "evidences of another Incarnation": that of Christ.

His experiences in Rome altered his conception of religion. In his childhood, he had been "aware of religion chiefly as the sacred Word, and the church itself, severe and decent, with its touching bareness and austerity, seemed to cut off religion from the rest of life and from all the week-day world... It did not tell me by any outward sign that the Word had been made flesh" (278). But in Rome the image of the Incarnation was found everywhere—in churches, on walls of houses, on signs found at cross-roads, in parks, and in private rooms. And to Muir it suddenly seemed "natural and right" that these images should appear everywhere. "This open declaration was to me the very mark of Christianity, distinguishing it from the older religions. For although the pagan gods had visited the earth and conversed with men, they did not assume the burden of our flesh, live our life and die our death" (278). His insight into the meaning of the Incarnation fed his imagination and gave him a new serenity
which entered the poetry found in his last volume of verse, *One Foot in Eden* (1955), which includes both the poetry written in Rome and that written during his tenure as Warden of Newbattle Abbey from 1950-1955. Now he was able to reconcile time and evil into his larger vision of life:

Yet still from Eden springs the root
As clean as on the starting day.
Time takes the foliage and the fruit
And burns the archetypal leaf
To shapes of terror and of grief
Scattered along the winter way.
But famished field and blackened tree
Bear flowers in Eden never known.
Blossoms of grief and charity
Bloom in these darkened fields alone. 41

Yet, as the poems found among Muir's papers after his death give testimony to, Muir remained, to the end, profoundly disturbed about the problem of human evil.

Throughout his life, and especially in the last two decades of his life, Muir was disturbed by the modern tendency to reduce man to a purely thisworldly creature, one living in a vast and impersonal world and one prey to the inevitable machinery of human history. Muir was upset not only by modern man's isolation from the world of nature but his isolation from traditional beliefs and customs. He was distressed to find that civilized man's concern had "ceased to be the community or country" in which he lived and had become "the single, disunited world: a vast abstraction." He feared the "humble anonymity" of modern man, the "terrible impersonality" of government,

and the seeming helplessness of man in face of historical process. Such a world, he felt, was the world of the false imagination.

But there was, Muir believed, an alternative route, that of the "true imagination," and the "supreme expression of the imagination" was found in poetry, as Muir stated in the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures delivered at Harvard in 1956, several years before his death. For the "true imagination" is "that power by which we apprehend living beings and living creatures in their individuality, as they live and move and not as ideas and categories."42 The true imagination "sees the life of everyone as the endless repetition of a single pattern" which is the simple pattern of human life "from birth to childhood and youth and manhood and age and death."43 Every man must begin "at the beginning, as his fathers did, with the same difficulties and pleasures, the same temptations, the same problem of good and evil, the same inward conflict, the same need to learn how to live, the same need to ask what life means."44

In his verse, Muir recorded his lifelong quest to find a time and place in which he could live an authentic life. To Muir, the true image of life was an ancient one, that of a journey through the maze of human time and the maze of self to eternity. As Muir took that journey, he did so in both doubt and faith. But as he reviewed his life in his autobiography, filled as it was with both suffering and

42The Estate of Poetry, p. 81.
43Ibid., p. 87.
44Ibid.
joy, he expressed his thankfulness for this thing called life. "As I look back on the part of the mystery which is my own life, my own fable," he stated, "what I am most aware of is that we receive more than we can ever give; we receive it from the past, on which we draw with every breath, but also—and this is a point of faith—from the Source of the mystery itself, by the means which religious people call Grace" (281).
CHAPTER III

THE STARTING PLACE AND DAY OF THE POETIC JOURNEY

REMEMBERED CHILDHOOD

But remember, remember; we begin to die when we stop remembering.
-Muir, "Dreams and Diary Items"

Dreams, waking dreams, the images of nostalgias...are so many forces that may project the historically-conditioned human being into a spiritual world that is infinitely richer than the closed world of his own "historic moment."
-Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols

In the brief space of time encompassing childhood, Muir fed his memory with imaginative impressions of the mysterious simplicity and ancient power which palpably drew him to the storied, fabled world of Orkney. Though these early memories were overshadowed during the dark, rootless years of exile in Glasgow, the sense of timelessness and security and magical closeness of nature located in the first zone of childhood—a brief spot of eternity in time—remained a hidden source of strength locked in a remote corner of the unconscious. Catalyzed by his psychoanalysis and waking visions, Muir began writing poetry in his determination to retrace his life course and so uncover the meaning of his individual story. He sought out the starting place
and starting day of his life journey as he attempted to discover what coiling road through time had brought him to the edges of insanity and what blind inner force had locked him within the narrow place of self and so severed his connection to this immortal core. As he says in An Autobiography: "I realized that I must live over again the years which I had lived wrongly, and that every one should live his life twice, for the first attempt is always blind."¹

When he began writing poetry in Dresden in 1922 as he recovered from the "long illness" which had "seized" him in Glasgow at the age of fourteen,² his poetic journey took him back to his roots, back to his early childhood on Wyre, back to the innocent first "zone," as he called it,³ of childhood. Having learned from his psychoanalysis the importance of recovering and reliving the past to facilitate psychic healing, he found that this technique also served to awaken his imagination. As the first poetic impulses stirred within him, he found himself, as he tells us in his autobiography, writing a poetry "influenced" by the "years of childhood" spent on his father's farm on Wyre, and the beauty he "apprehended then" before he knew that there was such a thing as beauty. These years "had come alive, after being forgotten for so long..."⁴ In recollecting his childhood on Wyre, he "recovered an image of life more complete" than he had known "in all

¹An Autobiography, p. 192.
²Ibid.
³Ibid., p. 32.
⁴Ibid., p. 206.
The process of recovering the past by returning to one's origins, as Mircea Eliade points out, is an archaic conception and hence not unique to modern psychoanalysis. Underlying this technique is the belief that the individual can be freed "from the work of Time by recollection, by anamnesis," and that the knowledge of one's personal history gained through such a process bestows "a soteriological knowledge and mastery over one's own destiny." As Muir took his journey back through memory, he found such a release from time's burden. As he tells us in *An Autobiography*, when he recovered his past by looking "against the direction" of time, he "won a new kind of experience." For once he "no longer marched in step with time," he found that he could "see life timelessly, and with that in terms of the imagination."

As he found ingress to the remote and yet potent world of recollection and explored the distant and inaccessible and yet known time and place of his memories and dreams of childhood, Muir recorded his perceptions in verse. In these poems he relayed the spare, treeless landscape of Orkney with its small, grassy hills, its bare fields, its small winding dirt paths, its dark seas, its vast and changing sky,

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5Ibid., p. 207.
7Ibid., p. 90.
8*An Autobiography*, p. 93.
and its massed islands which, seen from a distance, faded into a silvery mist. And he recorded, in some detail, his childhood impressions of Wyre remembering the Bu, the farm his father worked, the Castle, the green mound on which he often sat as a child, and St. Mary's Chapel, the remains of a Norse chapel from the twelfth-century in which he played as a child. It was the very bleakness and starkness of the Orcadian landscape that aided Muir, as he evolved the mythic world of his mature verse, to transform his remembered world into a symbolic, visionary landscape. Although the early poetry lacks technical achievement—as Muir puts it in An Autobiography, he had to force the "images" of his mind "creaking and complaining, into the mould" of the traditional rhythms of English verse⁹—and although the early poetry drawn from memory found in First Poems is highly subjective and often marred by a nostalgic longing for childhood which verges on the sentimental, a brief look at the poetry of recollection gives valuable insight into not only Muir's poetic use of landscape imagery, but his perception-consciousness of time and space.

In our daily life, as Muir argued in 1928, the "facts of time and space are equally immediate, and all that we are conscious of is a flux, with a significant crystallisation here and there, but without a design. The moment of aesthetic vision lifts us out of the flux."

Muir agreed with Percy Lubbock that in the moment of aesthetic apperception "the landscape that opens before us is whole and single; it has passed through an imagination, it has shed its irrelevancy,

⁹Ibid., p. 205.
and is compact with its own meaning."¹⁰ Through an exploration of
the images of his nostalgias recorded in poems such as "Childhood"
"Houses," and "The Lost Land," Muir gradually uncovered an underlying
universal landscape, one "whole and single" and "compact with its own
meaning." It was in the borderland world of memory that Muir first
evolved his poetic concept of journey and place—the "two sides of
the paradox" of mortality and immortality¹¹—for it was in his recovery
of his timeless childhood world that he found the beginning place of
not only his journey in time, but mankind's.

In only one poem based directly on personal memory—"Child­
hood"¹²—does Muir re-create a sustained vision of the first zone of
childhood which not only protects the child and connects him to the
natural human worlds but allows him to explore, in his imagination,
the blessed world envisioned beyond his delimited world. In "Child­
hood" Muir recalls his feelings during the "motionless blue summer"
days when, as he tells us in An Autobiography, he sat on the "little
green knoll called the "Castle"--the highest point on the relatively
flat, bare island of Wyre.¹³ From his vantage point, he could look
down onto the farmhouse and fields of the Bu and out towards the

¹⁰ Edwin Muir, The Structure of the Novel (London: The Hogarth

¹¹ From extracts of two letters written by Muir providing a
"Commentary" on "The Riders" (section two of Variation on a Time
Theme) in The Modern Poet, ed. Gwendolen Murphy (London: Sidgwick
and Jackson, 1938), pp. 168-70.


neighboring islands of Rousay and Egilsay; and, in the distance, he could see the massed islands of Eday, Sanday, and Stronsay. The world as he saw it was arrested, caught in the motionless moment of the child's eternity so that as he watched the ships pass below him in the sound, outlined against the dark, hilly island of Rousay, they appeared "stationary." This world, described in the autobiography, is successfully evoked in the poem "Childhood." In the muted and prolonged tones of this poem, which encompasses one day in the life of a child beginning with the sunny, motionless morning and ending with the shadowed arrival of evening, Muir re-creates the world of suspended time and space—an eternal world—which he perceived in the first and innocent "zone" of childhood. Significantly, the child envisioned by the speaker of this poem is a lone figure. Populating all of Muir's later poems are lonely, wandering pilgrims who, hemmed in by time and space, try to find the right road of life. Muir's concern, from the beginning, is with the individual psyche which, seen in ultimate terms, is alone. Each man must find his own way. And yet, the journey each of us takes, in ultimate isolation, is a universal journey.

But although the child is envisioned as alone in "Childhood," his place is whole and secure. The bond between child and hill and house indicated in the opening lines of the poem suggests what Muir, in An Autobiography, describes as the "original vision" of the world, one in which "the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life

14 Ibid., p. 32.
of every human being are related to the sky overarching them. 

Contained within a unified world, the child is seen by the speaker of the poem as simultaneously distanced from reality and securely bound to it:

Long time he lay upon the sunny hill,  
To his father's house below securely bound.  
Far off the silent, changing sound was still,  
With the black islands lying thick around.

He saw each separate height, each vaguer hue,  
Where the massed islands rolled in mist away,  
And though all ran together in his view  
He knew that unseen straits between them lay.

(1-8)

The "changing" sound, suggestive of the adult world of flux, appears "still" from the remote vantage point of the child, but the implications of this image are known to the adult speaker of the poem. For this is the world which awaits the child in that fatal moment when he leaves his secure haven to explore the heights of the dark and inscrutable "massed islands" of experience as subsequent poems of remembered childhood make clear in their explicit contrasts between the adult's and child's perspective. But although in later poems mountains symbolize both the obstacle of time and the remote goal discernible in glints beyond time, here the child sees the "separate" heights and "vaguer" hues of the massed islands as something shrouded in mystery. Although he realizes that difficulties lay in the journey to these island worlds, for the "unseen straits" between the islands suggest that the passage to them is long and difficult, in the blessed realm of first childhood, he easily voyages to these remote and un-

15Ibid., p. 33.
known worlds through the magical power of the imagination:

Often he wondered what new shores were there,
In thought he saw the still light on the sand,
The shallow water clear in tranquil air,
And walked through it in joy from strand to strand.

(9-12)

His imaginary journey takes him to a new world, a silent, stationary place infused with the "still light" of innocence. Here he walks in innocent joy. He has not yet reached the threshold of experience.

The world of the imagination is a timeless one. While he has taken his journey "in thought" to the isles of innocence, the motionless day has imperceptibly merged into the shadowed stillness of evening:

Over the sound a ship so slow would pass
That in the black hill's gloom it seemed to lie.
The evening sound was smooth like sunken glass,
And time seemed finished ere the ship passed by.

Grey tiny rocks slept round him where he lay,
Moveless as they, more still as evening came,
The grasses threw straight shadows far away,
And from the house his mother called his name.

(13-20)

The child lives in a motionless, stationary world, one in which time seems "finished." He lives in a private, sufficient world, one in which he feels a mysterious bond with both the natural and human worlds. At the moment of almost complete enchantment and fusion with nature as the subject-object separation between the child and the natural scene seems on the verge of breaking down—for as the rocks take on human qualities, the child becomes identified with their "moveless" forms—his tie with the human world is re-affirmed as "from the house his mother called his name." The total breakdown of subject-object separation which one might expect here and which is
typically associated with types of mystical experience is eschewed. 

Muir's world, as it is revealed in the later poetry, is a circumscribed world. Man is delimited and hemmed in by his mortal situation and except in the remote and inaccessible worlds of dreams, visions, and memories, there is no ready interpenetration between the self and the eternal. Even in the timeless zone of first childhood, there is a sense of an ultimate barrier between the outer world and the consciousness perceiving it and between the imaginative world and the self projecting it. Underlying Muir's vision of life from the very beginning is the intimation of what he describes in Scottish Journey as the "ultimate isolation of every human being, an isolation produced by the mere workings of time and space."16

Throughout the poems of recollection found in First Poems,17 Muir evokes a sense of spatiotemporal distancing as he tries to fathom the structure of the relationship between the self and its remembered world and as he attempts to find the time-space locus of his strange world of memory. In "Remembrance,"18 which is narrated from the point of view of the adult poet who looks back with nostalgic yearning to his innocent past, the speaker-poet tries to return in memory to his Orcadian past only to discover that there is no free and easy passage to that world, that "all is changed, the shining fields, the host/Of shapes who were myself years long ago" (9-10). It is his past selves

16Scottish Journey, p. 218.
18Ibid., pp. 13-14.
who are real while the present self which remembers—the adult who has fallen into the world of experience—is "but a ghost/Exiled from their sole light and jealous glow" (11-12). The speaker is severed from the blessed world of his Orcadian past which is illuminated by the clear light of innocence: "That light is spent,/And he who saw it, long since fallen down" (19-20). His former selves, lodged in memory, seem to exist in a time and place of their own and so remain inaccessible to the adult who has travelled the darkening roads of experience:

I can no more have speech with them, nor know
The light which lights them. Vaster than the sea,
The yawning distances o'er which we go
On our frail paths of sundering destiny.

(25-28)

The adult, exiled from the innocent vision of his past, must travel the dark road into the future. He is remote from his past, separated from it by the vast sea of time and self.

But on other occasions, the adult can successfully bridge the "yawning distances" which sever him from his past and enter into its real presence. In "Houses"¹⁹ the mysterious properties of spontaneous memory are explored as the adult speaker of the poem momentarily recalls the world of his first childhood. Illuminated by the clear light of innocence, his memoried world "seems to come" towards him "across the green estranging land" (1-2). He recalls the "nooks with magic thick inlaid" (8) he knew as a child and the home where "through still-standing days" he "seemed to pace/As if the years were tarrying in a dream" (11-12). But as if in preparation for the moment of experience

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 17-18.
which will soon impinge on the child and which is known to the adult
speaker of the poem, the magical zone of childhood has become con-
tracted, limited to a finite, psychological "place" of refuge:

There was a line around on every side,
And all within spoke to me and was home.
Beyond, the empty fields spread waste and wide,
To the dark sea where ships cut white the foam.
(13-16)

The child now walks the earth in "burning inquisition, half afraid,/
Too empty seemed the wide horizon's girth" (6-7). The age of guilt
approaches. No longer, as in "Childhood," does the magical, pro-
tective zone of innocence free the child to roam, in the imagination,
to the massed black islands beyond his encircled world. Now the world
lying beyond the child's refuge is envisioned as a wasteland, not as
a blessed realm enveloped in the radiance of innocence.

But within the delimited world of the child, there is still
magic, enchantment. In "happy inward dream day after day" the child
pores "on stone and tree" and slowly lifts his "heavy head to see/
Tall men walk on the white roads far away" (18-20). One day soon,
when the enchantment of childhood is dispelled in the searing moment
of the Fall, he, too, will become a pilgrim and walk those white roads
seen in a distance. The adult narrator, having come back briefly from
his pilgrimage on those remote paths, can momentarily re-enter and re-
experience that magical realm of childhood: he can "see once more,
once more can feel/That human magic on the stony earth" (25-26). But
that land is ultimately estranged, its time and place distant, in-
accessible.

Even while Muir sought that remote world of early memories where
he hoped to recover the timeless state of immortality re-created in "Childhood," he ran into dangers as he became enmeshed in his own subjective journeyings and an escapist's longing for that estranged world. In the poem "The Lost Land," based on a dream recounted in his autobiography, Muir's unconscious, as Peter Butter suggests, seemed to be prodding him to take a different road, to strike out in a new direction through its "warning of the impossibility of recovering the lost land by nostalgic yearning into the past, and the danger of trying to do so." In the opening lines of this poem, Muir describes his mysterious return to the Wyre of his childhood through the silent movement of a dream:

And like a mist ere morning I am gone;
My whispering prow through silence furrows on,
I fare far in through circles vast and dim,
Till a grey steeple lifts above the rim,

(1-4)

As the shadowy journey through the "vast and dim" circles of the dream brings the speaker of the poem to his destination, the dim, veiled world enveloping him gives way to a sharply etched landscape. The dream returns him to Wyre and to the ruins of the twelfth-century chapel found on Wyre where he played as a child:

I see the prickly weeds, the flowers small,
The moss like magic on the creviced wall,
The doors wide open where the wind comes in,
And is a whispering presence, salt and thin;

20Ibid., pp. 11-12.
21An Autobiography, pp. 63-64.
The still church standing lonely on the mound,
The leaning tombs which slumber with no sound.  
(9-14)

But now there is a sudden awakening as the speaker realizes:

. . . . . I do not know
This place, and alien people come and go.  
Ah, this is not my haven; oft before
I have stood here and wept for the other shore.  
(17-20)

It is this realization of the unattainability of the "other shore" that has impact on the speaker. He is in the world of remembered childhood, but it is not the "haven" he seeks. Although in "Childhood" the blessed world of the "other shore" is known through an imaginative voyage beyond the massed, black islands, here the speaker, although he returns in his dream to childhood, finds that "other shore" unobtainable. That undefiled world is a totality and he remains outside it. Fully initiated to the ardours of man's pilgrimage through time, the speaker realizes the inherent difficulties of the passage to that luminous world:

And now it lies ten leagues across the sea,  
And smiles, and calls on me perpetually;  
But mountains and abysses lie between,  
And I must fare by uplands coarse and lean.  
(21-24)

Rather than facing the terrors of the journey with its towering cliffs, its wild sea caves, and its dreadful misted valleys, the speaker-poet chooses to bedeck himself with a "pallid garland" of dead orchids

And sleep upon a green and watching mound
Which some child's wizardry has girdled round;  
And I have been here many times before,  
And shall return hereafter many more,
While past huge mountains and across great seas
That haven lies, and my long-sought release.
There tranquil spirits stand forevermore,
And watch the white ships flocking to the shore.
(33-40)

Here the Castle, which in "Childhood" is envisioned as a place of
security from which the child can take an imaginary journey to the
"other shore," takes on sinister connotations. It is animate: it is
a "watching" mound. And although the speaker is unconscious of the
fact, it is the locus of his own childhood "wizardry" for he is the
unknown child who has created this magical, delimited world. Under the
spell of this remembered place, the speaker-poet, compulsively drawn
to it again and again in memory and in dreams, is paralyzed. Under
its jealous, watchful guard, he is compelled to choose inaction—a
death-like, tranced sleep—over action. The compulsive return to
childhood is not enough. As Butter points out, although the revival
of childhood memories is one means of keeping a sense of the boundless
world of innocence alive in oneself, "it can be re-entered only
through the present moment, only by the man one is now" and not by
"a weak, escapist mood, a refusal to accept the responsibilities of
adult life." Although as Muir felt, one must keep the memoried
world of first childhood alive in oneself—for that is the starting
place of man's journey—the road towards the "other shore" for the
adult lies through the "mountains and abysses" of time. One must take
the risk of that fabled journey to reach the "long-sought" haven.

As he shaped this poem, he focused on the dangers of an ob-

23 Ibid., pp. 96-97.
sessive concern with his own subjectivity. The world of self-enchantment, as this poem indicates, was found to be not a creative world but a destructive one. An obsessive exploration of that world did not lead to psychic growth but stagnation and decay. It is true that his poetic journey back in time had aided him tremendously in his recovery from the "long illness" which had seized him in Glasgow at the age of fourteen, and it had returned him to the timeless zone of first childhood—the world re-created in the poem "Childhood"—and so helped him uncover "an image of life more complete" than he had known since those early years. His recovery of that world proved life-supportive and assisted in his self-integration. As he said in a letter in 1925, the year these poems were published: "I feel art is for me the only way of growing, of becoming myself more purely; and I value it for myself, I know it is my good, the only real good for me, and the personal feeling, the personal integration seems to be more and more the thing that really matters."24 But he also learned that a compulsive re-visiting and re-living of the past was not the right path of life, that a total submergence in his own subjectivity and nostalgic longing for the past threatened the development of his poetic imagination. He had found, as Butter suggests, his "Eden" in his first vision of the world.25 What he needed now was to avoid the "escapist" mood which drew him again and again to his Orcadian past. He had found the starting place of his individual journey—now he had to find its

24Selected Letters of Edwin Muir, p. 54.
universal significance.

"The more a consciousness is awakened," as Mircea Eliade suggests, "the more it transcends its own historicity." Catalyzed by his psychoanalysis, memory had acted as a springboard projecting Muir into a private world of his own. But more importantly, it had brought him in sight of a significant threshold—it had brought him before the door that opened on to a fabulous new world, the potent world of symbols and myths found in his waking visions. It was in both the world of memory of his first childhood and in the inner world of myths and symbols that he would uncover the universal fable of mankind and realize that his own life was an individual instance of man's fabled journey through time. And so even as he attempted to evoke the time and place of his remembered world of Orkney in his early poetry, he also began to reach through to his creative source. Put in Jungian terms, Muir began to penetrate through the "personal unconscious" into the "suprapersonal or collective unconscious." As he did so he


27 Carl Jung, in The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1969), pp. 310-311, gives the following definitions:

According to my view, the unconscious falls into two parts which should be sharply distinguished from one another. One of them is the personal unconscious; it includes all those psychic contents which have been forgotten during the course of the individual's life. Traces of them are still preserved in the unconscious, even if all conscious memory of them has been lost. In addition, it contains all subliminal impressions or perceptions which have too little energy to reach consciousness. To these we must add unconscious combinations of ideas that are too feeble and too indistinct to cross
began, as he states in *An Autobiography*, "without realising" it to create a "poetry of symbols drawn from memory."28 The "Eternal Man" which Muir said "possessed" him during the creation of "most" of his poetry29 was struggling into being. He would find, through the imagination, a rich interior world. For as Mircea Eliade states: "All that essential and indescribable part of man that is called imagination dwells in realms of symbolism and still lives upon archaic myths and theologies."30

Vital, potent, and "inconceivably interesting" to Muir were those living truths which he apprehended "behind experience, not on

over the threshold. Finally, the personal unconscious contains all psychic contents that are incompatible with the conscious attitude. . . . The other part of the unconscious is what I call the impersonal or collective unconscious. As the name indicates, its contents are not personal but collective; that is, they do not belong to one individual alone but to a whole group of individuals, and generally to a whole nation, or even to the whole of mankind. These contents are not acquired during the individual's lifetime but are products of innate forms and instincts. Although the child possesses no inborn ideas, it nevertheless has a highly developed brain which functions in quite a definite way. This brain is inherited from its ancestors; it is a deposit of the psychic functioning of the whole human race. The child therefore brings with it an organ ready to function in the same way that it has functioned throughout human history. In the brain the instincts are preformed, and so are the primordial images which have always been the basis of man's thinking—the whole treasure-house of mythological motifs.


30*Images and Symbols*, p. 19.
its surface,"\textsuperscript{31} as he tells us in his autobiography. Through his dreams and waking visions, which he felt emerged from the racial unconscious, Muir believed that he penetrated the living truths of ancient myths and religious conceptions, what he came to call the "fable" of mankind. There are rare moments "in every man's life," Muir believed, "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." It is as though the fable were "always there, invisibly waiting for anyone who wished to enter it."\textsuperscript{32} The stages of the fable which Muir could recognize in his own life—"the age of innocence and the Fall and all the dramatic consequences which issue from the Fall"\textsuperscript{33}—became cast and recast again and again in his verse as he sought to articulate his vision of life. And the place he began was in the first zone of childhood for it is "our first intuition of the world," he felt, that "expands into vaster and vaster images, creating a myth we act almost without knowing it while our outward life goes on in its ordinary routine. . . ."\textsuperscript{34}

As Muir explored the "living" truth of myth, he sought to penetrate the fable underlying the images of his nostalgias. Behind and beyond his own story and his own historical time, he uncovered the

\textsuperscript{31} An Autobiography, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 114.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 49.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 48.
mythical time of his beginnings, what Eliade would describe as "paradisiac time, in illo tempore."\textsuperscript{35} As he sought a creative mytholo-
gy in which he could find wholeness and meaning, so he sought his
center, his "sufficient" place. "Every human being," according to
Eliade, "tends, even unconsciously, towards the Centre, and towards
his own centre, where he can find integral reality—sacredness," and
this desire for the center is a manifestation of man's "nostalgia for
Paradise."\textsuperscript{36} Hence, finding the center, as Eliade states, is tanta-
mount to recovering the "divine condition...the condition before
the Fall."\textsuperscript{37} Just as Muir found the fable always there invisibly
waiting for anyone who wished to enter it, so he found "The Suffi-
cient Place"\textsuperscript{38} there for the man who "should chance" to find it in
time, for the man who could follow the injunction to "See," to open
himself up to his own visionary experience and so find his own center,
his own "sufficient place" within a world of "tumult," the world of
self and the post-Lapsarian world of experience:

\begin{center}
See, all the silver roads wind in, lead in  
To this still place like evening. See, they come  
Like messengers bearing gifts to this little house,  
And this great hill worn down to a patient mound,  
And these tall trees whose motionless branches bear  
An aeón's summer foliage, leaves so thick  
They seem to have robbed a world of shade, and kept
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{35}See Mircea Eliade, \textit{Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter
Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities}, trans. Philip

\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Images and Symbols}, pp. 54-55.

\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., p. 55.

\textsuperscript{38}\textit{Collected Poems}, pp. 86-87.
No room for all these birds that line the boughs
With heavier riches, leaf and bird and leaf.
Within the doorway stand
Two figures, Man and Woman, simple and clear
As a child's first images. Their manners are
Such as were known before the earliest fashion
Taught the Heavens guile . . . .

Although Muir's remembered world of Orkney is still recognizable in
the opening lines of this poem—for the "patient mound" recalls the
Castle and the "little house" the farmhouse on Wyre—here the attempt
is to recover a "place" known at the furthest edge of memory and in
dreams. In "The Sufficient Place" the spare, treeless Orcadian
landscape has been superimposed by a landscape envisioned by Muir in
a dream in which he saw himself, an old man, returning to a "strangely
transfigured and transposed" childhood world: "Great trees stood
round the house, their foliage darker and thicker than any I had ever
seen, the leaves hanging like dark green tongues one over the other
in a motionless security which no wind could reach."39 Redolent of
the quiet fullness and simple purity of the Garden, Orkney takes on
the dimensions of myth.

The poet-speaker, acting as a mentor, enjoins his reader to "See"
this world encapsulated by the poem, to apprehend the riches of the
center, a sufficient place in which the trees bear an "aeon's summer
foliage." In this timeless world "leaf and bird and leaf" take on a
luminous simplicity as Muir, in this early poem, strives to create the
clearness of vision found in the spare world of the ballads where, as

39 An Autobiography, p. 64. See also Peter Butter, Edwin Muir
he puts it, the "real form" of things has the "absolute" existence of things seen in a dream, where the natural object, known in its simple fullness, is resonant with the supernatural.\textsuperscript{40} Not only does Muir evoke an Edenic world here, but he sets up a series of rich associations as he alludes to Christ's birthplace in his description of those persons travelling the roads who "come/Like messengers bearing gifts to the little house," and in his veiled reference to Eden aeons after the Fall and Golgotha aeons after the crucifixion in his image of "this great hill worn down to a patient mound."\textsuperscript{41} A timeless world, the "still place" is the repository of beginnings, of time before the Fall, and endings, the place of salvation and redemption. And at its very center, at the very limits of his beginnings, Muir recovers his first memory of his parents who, as he tells us in An Autobiography, seemed like "fixed allegorical figures in a timeless landscape."\textsuperscript{42} Now imaged as prototypical man and woman—as Adam and Eve—Muir sees them as absolutes, as the form from which mankind has emerged.

Having followed the winding silver road into the rich, interior


\textsuperscript{41}In his discussion of the symbolism of the center in \textit{Images and Symbols} (p. 43) Eliade cites the case of the Christian myth which holds that Adam was created at the center of the earth, the same spot where Christ was later crucified. Although the allusion to this myth is veiled in this poem, in "The Unfamiliar Place" (pp. 78-79), Muir refers to a place "Far up the mountainside/Where Christ and Caesar died/And the first man was made" (6-8).

\textsuperscript{42}An \textit{Autobiography}, p. 25.
world where the first man and woman reside, the speaker, crossing the
threshold of their "little house," penetrates the innermost recesses
of the world of the center where he finds a room:

. . . . .  The room inside is like
A thought that needed thus much space to write on,
Thus much, no more. Here all's sufficient. None
That comes complains, and all the world comes here,
This is the Pattern, these the Archetypes,
Sufficient, strong, and peaceful . . . .
(14-20)

Recovering the archetype and pattern underlying memory and immanent in
myth, the speaker likens this inner world to the mysterious space of
a thought which perfectly expresses the conception of its creator.
Here, within the imageless bounds of Archetype and Pattern is the
originating place of a spare, essential poetry which needs "thus much
space to write on, /Thus much, no more." This is the place of human
beginnings and endings: all of mankind emerge from and merge back into
this pattern and this archetype of perfect humanity which is
"sufficient, strong, and peaceful."

But though all roads lead in, wind in, to this center, these
silver roads are the roads of the fable, the timeless paths towards
visionary experience and integral reality. The storied roads of time
do not lead in to this "still" place:

All outside
From end to end of the world is tumult. Yet
These roads do not turn in here but writhe on
Round the wild earth for ever. If a man
Should chance to find this place three times in time
His eyes are changed and make a summer silence
Amid the tumult, seeing the roads wind in
To their still home, the house and the leaves and birds.
(14-21)
Having reached his center, a new man emerges: one more authentic, one who has uncovered the "summer silence" and the "still home" amid the tumult of self in the world. "Attaining the center," as Eliade points out, "is equivalent to a consecration, an initiation; yesterday's profane and illusory existence gives place to a new, to a life that is real, enduring, and effective."\(^{43}\) In the inner world Muir found the "Eternal Man" which "possessed" him as he articulated, through his poetry, his vision of the fable of life. Perhaps it was the "Eternal Man" that sustained him on the road ahead, the road of wavering light and ever deepening shadow, as he began threading his way along the tumultuous roads of time and self.

For although childhood is blessed, inevitably there comes the searing moment of knowledge, the moment when the vision of pastoral innocence of "father and mother and child/The house with its single tree" is bent by an "angry law," and the moment when the child changes as he passes "through a door."\(^{44}\) Obsessed by this stage of the fable, Muir, in his poetry, rehearses again and again the moment of the Fall as if it were some inexplicable drama which he feels compelled to enact and re-enact in hopes of shedding light on its dark meaning. The harmonious, enclosed world of childhood Eden where, within "the great wall's perfect round/Bird, beast and child serenely grew/In endless change on changeless ground" (1-3) is threatened

\(^{44}\)"The Three Mirrors," 11.21-22, from Collected Poems, pp. 140-141.
from the outset as Muir indicates in "The Window." For the "endless change" of the "serene" growing process inevitably brings the two children described in this poem to the tower located at the highest point of the "great" wall—the point of adult knowledge—where they are held "in thrall" by the "window" of "twisting glass," the window through which they gain a new perception of life as they discern not the "changeless ground" enclosed by the great wall but the "changing marvels" of the time-bound world (6-10). Looking out they see what they inevitably must see: the fallen world, the world of conflict, the world "in anger shaken" (12). The moment in which they see the tower topple, the "last left stronghold sacked and taken,/And earth and heaven in jeopardy" (17-18) is the moment they become time's captives:

Then turning towards you I beheld
The wrinkle writhe across your brow,
And felt time's cap clapped on my head,
And all within the enclosure now,
Light leaf and smiling flower, was false,
The great wall breached, the garden dead.

Across the towering window fled
Disasters, victories, festivals.
(19-26)

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(19-26)

Muir's description of the window with its "twisting glass" recalls a passage in his autobiography in which he describes his first experience of dissociation which resulted from feelings of obsessive guilt. Immersed in a "blind place," a sort of parallel world which surrounded him like a "bubble" cutting him off from the external world, he gradually returned to a sense of reality; "but at last the actual world appeared again in twisted gleams, as through running glass, and the fear and the frenzied longing to cleanse myself went away." But when "that film dissolved," the world seen was a "different" one. The original childhood vision was lost. (p. 35)
In the instant of the Fall, the enclosed, harmonious world of childhood is broken and its rich and fertile garden destroyed. Now all that can be discerned through the window—which has become "towering" as it encompasses all of reality—are the fleeting images of life's tragedies and celebrations.

Whereas in "The Window" the great wall is breached and the tower toppled in the instant of the Fall, in "The Gate" initiation to the world of adult mysteries is dramatized as the moment in which the children find ingress through the gate to the "towering stronghold" (2) of their fathers, the "fortress life" (4). Whereas in "The Window" the world of childhood is envisioned as enclosed within the walls of innocence, in "The Gate" the world of childhood is envisioned as a world not of enclosure but of freedom. For childhood lies outside the walled world of adult life, outside the bounded, constricted world of experience. Innocence must remain outside life's stronghold for built into the very structure of the adult's walled world are sin and shame and guilt.

As the children approach the sundering moment of knowledge, they see the fallen world—which they are yet forbidden to enter for it is "too gross and strong" for their "unpractised palates" (5-6)—in a false light. For though it is a prison, to the uninitiated children it seems a refuge, a place of "safe protection" as it frowns its "stern security" down upon them (5, 2). There will be no refuge, no safety, no security once they cross its threshold. Within

Collected Poems, p. 110.
the walled prison of experience their adult "guardians" cherish the
cal—"with gentle hands" and "in grave play put on a
childish mask" to cover their "shame" (7-11). No true "guardians"
of childhood but sad inmates of life's fortress prison, they feign
innocence while living their sensuous lives. The "rich food" that
plumps "their lusty bodies"—imagery suggestive of the fleshly
appetites of adult life—makes them, ironically enough, "strange as
gods" to the children (11-12). They have strange and secret know-
ledge but not that of the gods.

As the moment of their fall approaches, the children, sitting
outside the wall, feel "safe/As every day, yet outcast, safe and
outcast/As castaways thrown upon an empty shore" (13-15). On the
borderline between innocence and experience, they still remain "safe"
in their world and yet they feel "outcast" for they seek admittance
to the fortress world of adulthood. In the sudden moment of their
fall, their perceptions of the "well-worn" scene of childhood—a
landscape in which we can recognize the spare outlines of the Orkney
so beloved by Muir—become radically altered:

Before us lay the well-worn scene, a hillock
So small and smooth and green, it seemed intended
For us alone and childhood, a still pond
That opened upon no sight a quiet eye,
A little stream that tinkled down the slope.
But suddenly all seemed old
And dull and shrunken, shut within itself
In a sullen dream. We were outside, alone.
And then behind us the huge gate swung open.

(16-24)

At the moment of the Fall, as Muir tells us in his autobiography, as
the childhood vision of harmony is "broken and contradiction enters
life,"^{48} the world subsequently perceived seems "different" from the "first childish one."^{49} In this poem the Castle—which is envisioned as the "sunny" and shadowed hill to which the child is "securely bound" in the timeless world of "Childhood" and as the "great hill worn down to a patient mound" which lies at the center of "The Sufficient Place"—is seen both before and after the fall. Relegated now to a specific stage in life—to childhood—the pastoral world of innocence, no longer exerting a palpable magic on the child, becomes "dull and shrunken, shut within itself/In a sullen dream." Now the world of "Childhood," once illuminated by the "still light" of innocence, is seen as in a "sullen dream." It has become trivial, divested of meaning.

Distilled through the imagination, the Orkney of Muir's youth—originally described as we have seen in the poetry of nostalgia found in First Poems—thus becomes transformed into a symbolic, visionary landscape, a fitting backdrop for the poetic stage on which he enacts the fable of human life: "the age of innocence and the Fall and all the dramatic consequences which issue from the Fall."^{50} As the reader becomes initiated to the mysteries of Muir's vision, the luminous simplicity of the spare Orcadian landscape, which appears and re-appears in countless poems, comes to have the fabulous expectedness of a dream. Orkney always held a "deep fascination" for Muir in

^{48}An Autobiography, p. 33.

^{49}Ibid, p. 35.

^{50}Ibid, p. 49.
what he described as "the bareness of the landscape with its strong colours, the vivid evidences of a past but strange life, the endlessly seductive contours of all those islands spread out in the sea." 51 As he said as late as 1956, a few years before his death, Orkney presents a "spectacle of the first things: land and sea and sky." Treeless, the "shape of the land" is manifest making one aware of the land as an extraordinarily solid reality so that "shape itself takes on a naked significance." There one can see "men and women and children walking on the bare earth against the sky, and houses rising on an ultimate hill with nothing but space and light beyond them," and this is "presented so barely" that house and man and woman and child take on "a universal human meaning." Muir concludes: "I have never had the same feeling in any other place." 52

In the gently hilly, treeless landscape of Orkney, Muir found a world replete with symbolic riches. Here was a world which had survived the flux of time. Here was a stationary world of heraldic stillness. Here was a world in which "house and man and woman and child" were revealed to have a universal meaning. And it was here that he saw an "image of life" for, as he states in An Autobiography, "land and sea and sky, good and evil, happiness and grief, life and death discovered themselves to me there; and the landscape was so

51 *Scottish Journey*, p. 238.

52 From the radio script "Revisiting Orkney," prepared for the BBC in the summer of 1956 but never broadcast. Manuscript drafts of this script are available in the National Library of Scotland, MS.Acc.4316.
simple that it made these things simple too."\textsuperscript{53} As he created his
poetry "of symbols drawn from memory,"\textsuperscript{54} Wyre became transformed into
a universal, symbolic landscape. "The bare landscape of the little
island became, without my knowing it, a universal landscape over which
Abraham and Moses and Achilles and Ulysses and Tristram and all sorts
of pilgrims passed; and Troy was associated with the Castle, a mere
green mound, near my father's house."\textsuperscript{55} Wyre became "a symbolical
stage" on which the "drama of human life" was enacted."\textsuperscript{56} That
remembered landscape became the landscape of the imagination—a
universally recognizable territory of the inner world of man.

Again and again, the simple contours of Orkney appear as the
backdrop to the narrow stage on which Muir's heroes enact their fabled
lives. There are the "roofless chapel," the "twice-dead castle on
the swamp-green mound" and the "little hills,/Head-high, and the wind-
ing valleys,/Turning, returning..." which are seen by the unnamed
protagonist of "The Mythical Journey"; there is the "green hill" on
which Hölderlin sits for thirty years as he muses about his journey
through the "hills of lies"--the "maze of little hills,/Head-high and
every hill the same"--to the mountains of truth; there is the "tarn,
the watching mound" from which the hero of the "Ballad of the Soul"
sees the battle between the wheeling suns, the last battle of time;

\textsuperscript{53} An Autobiography, p. 206.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 208.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 206.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
there is the landscape of "shrunken hills and clouded plains" through which Abraham journeys and the hellish landscape through which the "infidel congregation of mankind" travels, a place where it seems that the ground "heaves about them/Its giant mole-hills"; there is the "Sufficient Place" where one finds "this little house,/And this great hill worn down to a patient mound"; there is "The Unattained Place" where we see "the world of good deeds spread/With its own sky above it":

...once we played upon that other hill,
And from that house we come.
There is a line around it still
And all inside is home.

There is the "small much-trodden mound" of "The Narrow Place"; there is the "well-worn scene, a hillock/So small and smooth and green" known to the children in "The Gate"; and there is the land where there is nothing but faith, a place where

You'd think no ground could be so flat and bare;
No little ridge or hump or bush to brave
The horizon...57

Transformed through the imagination, the Orkney of Muir's youth comes to reflect the multi-valent symbolism of the dream and vision. The gently rolling hills of Orkney become the Edenic world of the child's original vision of life, the world in which evil is first

intimated, the hostile maze of adult experience in the turning and returning hills of lies, and the spare landscape where there is nothing but faith. The Castle becomes the narrow place of the fallen world and the sufficient place of primal innocence; it becomes "The Hill" from which one can see clearly the alternate paths of life; and it becomes the "squat hill-top by Jerusalem" where "they killed the Son of God." And the mountains lying beyond Wyre become "time's bound," a world of delusion and lies from which one dreams

.. .of a peak whose height
Will show me every hill,
A single mountain on whose side
Life blooms for ever and is still.

For the mountains are also the world from which the gods, "as large and bright as clouds" converse "across the sounds in tranquil voices/ High in the sky above the untroubled sea." Muir's imagery, like the Orkney he knew, is spare, simple. It is, as Elizabeth Huberman states, a universal landscape "precisely because it is stripped to the bone."

"All our lives," as Muir states in Scottish Journey, "are bounded by a horizon which is at once familiar to us and beyond our knowledge"; it is "against this indistinct barrier that our imaginings


pile themselves up building for all of us a fabulous world."\(^{60}\) It is this fabulous world of the imagination, of myth and of vision, that Muir strives to reveal in his art. Muir's vision, like that of the Scottish ballads which he so admired, is one in which "life and death have the greatness and simplicity of things comprehended in a tremendously spacious horizon."\(^{61}\) This vision has its source in the first zone of childhood, for it is "our first intuition of the world," Muir feels, that "expands into vaster and vaster images, creating a myth which we act almost without knowing it, while our outward life goes on in its ordinary routine of eating, drinking, sleeping, working, and making money in order to beget sons and daughters who will do the same."\(^{62}\)

In his art Muir explores that vast and spacious myth which piles up against the horizon of the dailiness of life. He attempts to tell the complete story of man as it is seen against the backdrop of eternity. For "there is a necessity in us," he feels, "however blind and ineffectual, to discover what we are. Religion once supplied that knowledge but our life is no longer ruled by religion."\(^{63}\) In his art Muir attempts to penetrate, explore, and give utterance to the "three mysteries" which possess mankind: "where we came from, where we are going, and since we are not alone, but members of a countless family,

\(^{60}\) Scottish Journey, p. 218.

\(^{61}\) A Note on the Scottish Ballads," Latitudes, p. 29.


\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 51.
how we should live with one another. "64 By going back, back to the
world of his first childhood, he found ingress to the realm of
mystery for in the first and blessed zone of childhood he found an
"intuition" of the vast world of eternity. By viewing the life of
man in time and place against that vast horizon, he came to articu­
late, in luminous simplicity, the story and fable of mankind.

64Ibid., p. 56.
CHAPTER IV

FABULOUS BEASTS FROM FORGOTTEN PLACES: THE COVENANT AND THE GROVE

I have had many dreams about animals, domestic, wild and legendary . . . .
-Muir, *An Autobiography*

We do not have enough humanity to be human.
-Muir, "Dreams and Diary Items"

Perhaps the strangest story Muir ventures to tell is that which elucidates the first mystery of man—"where we came from"—for the root of this dark mystery lies entangled in the archaic and forgotten link between man and the animals. Arising from the timeless depths, it is a story of Innocence and the Fall, of the divine revelation of "The Covenant" and the darker metaphysics of "Then." It is a story which takes us on a journey to forgotten places as we seek the "fields of inalienable strangeness" in which the animals dwell. It is a story which takes us to the violent world of the void where shadows writhe on a wall, interlocked in battle; to the nightmarish, idol-crowded Space of the smothering grove where heraldic men and legendary beasts live in ritual conflict; to the organic Eden of the covenant where

1*An Autobiography*, p. 56.

man, god, and fabulous beast live in primal harmony; to the pictorial Eden where all is in its place, where the painted animals walk in peace. This is a dual story because Muir has a dual perception of man. For there are moments, in visions and in dreams which flare out in sleep-walled night, when Muir enters eternity and apprehends the primal innocence of man, his immortal core. And there are those other moments, moments which haunted him throughout his life, when that vision fails him, when he enters "Swift's world," the "small, sensual momentary world of the beast" and exists "outside time without being in eternity."  

The impulse behind Muir's telling of this strange story is articulated in a question found in an early poem, a question which grew directly out of the poet's strange encounters, during his London waking visions, with unearthly and unaccountable ur-creatures:

Where was I ere I came to man?
What shape among the shapes that once
Agelong through endless Eden ran?
("The Fall," p. 69, 18-20)  

In the time/space dimensions of his waking vision, Muir found one possible answer to this question as he had his first "intuition" of the ontological source of the animal/human link. For when, during his first waking dream, he envisioned himself swimming in a vast sea among eyeless sea-creatures, he interpreted this visionary image as a "revelation" of a forgotten "truth": that "long before man appeared on

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3 An Autobiography, pp. 53-54.

4 Beginning with this chapter, page and line references to the Collected Poems (1960 edition) will be indicated by parenthesis within the text rather than as footnotes.
the earth he existed as a dream or a prophecy in the animal soul."\(^5\)

Although Muir could never quite accept this "revelation" with his conscious mind, his imagination found it a potent insight and so it found its way into his poetic fable. In a fragment found among Muir's papers, after his death, we find evidence of his lasting fascination with and questioning of this visionary "revelation":

I see the image of the naked man,
He stoops and picks a smooth stone from the ground,
Turns round and in a wide arc flings it backward
Towards the beginning. What will catch it,
Hand, or paw, or gullet of sea-monster?
(p. 297, 1-5)

When, in the midst of his poetic career, Muir took his evolutionary "Journey Back" to the place and time of man's sacred origins, he imagined the next stage in man's development as he envisioned himself in a remote world where the "well-bred animal" acted as his guide and where

Through forests wide and deep
I passed and as a sleep
My wandering was.
Before the word was said
With animal bowed head
I kept the laws.
(p. 171, 19-24)

In this remote age, the sleep-wandering soulless urmensch was guiltless for he kept the laws of the covenant "with animal bowed head."

But this evolutionary account of man's origins is not the only story Muir tells. In a more traditional version of man's beginnings, Muir tells another story of the man/animal link as he envisions the

\(^5\)An Autobiography, p. 166.
"clear unfallen world" of man's starting day in Eden, a time and place
knowable to post-Fall man only in moments of illumination and vision.
In his dreams and visions Muir had glimpses of this "everlasting
world/Perpetually at work, though never seen/Since Eden locked the gate
that's everywhere/And nowhere." An "everlasting world" of order and
hierarchical structure, Muir's visionary Eden is a world in which
everything is "in its place," it is a world in which the "painted
animals" assemble "in gentle congregations" or walk "in peace, the wild
and tame together" (pp. 198-199, 7, 15-18, 21-25). It is the world
of "The Covenant" where Adam and Eve stand encircled by fabulous
beasts:

The covenant of god and animal,
The frieze of fabulous creatures winged and crowned,
And in the midst the woman and the man --

Lost long ago in fields beyond the Fall --
Keep faith in sleep-walled night and there are found
On our long journey back where we began.

Then the heraldic crest of nature lost
Shines out again until the weariless wave
Roofs with its sliding horror all that realm.

What jealousy, what rage could overwhelm
That golden lion and lamb and vault a grave
For innocence, innocence past defense or cost?

(p. 132)

6 See An Autobiography, pp. 55-56. Also in "From a Diary" Muir
states: "I dreamed last night what must have been a symbolic pictorial
representation of human life, with heaven above and hell beneath,
angels ascending and descending, concentric beams of glory falling from
the height, the animals in their places, and man in the centre. The
picture did not present itself instantaneously, but grew detail by
detail; the last detail, completing it, being a quaint little animal
or sprite insinuated the bottom right hand corner in the manner of an
artist's signature. . . ." (p. 6)
If man would journey back to what Eliade describes as his "center," i.e., his "sacred origins," he must take the night journey of the unconscious. For the lost world of Eden—an organic paradise in which god, man, and beast live in harmony—is revealed to postlapsarian man only in dreams which come to him in "sleep-walled night." There he sees, in glints beyond time, an image of the eternal, radiant world of lost innocence. But this momentary flash of illumination is all that is given him. For the image "shines out" only to be roofed over by the weariless wave of time, of human consciousness, and of the Fall.

Having had this momentary vision of the world of man's symbolic center, the world of innocence and harmony, the speaker is left to question what kind of jealousy or rage could act against such a price-less, defenseless innocence. This is a question which Muir never fully answered for he found the mystery of evil ultimately beyond human comprehension.

Yet, though the prelapsarian world exists in the remote and inaccessible world of dreams and visions, Muir's depiction of it as a heraldic crest signifies, as Frederick Garber points out, "the permanence of Eden, its stubborn continuation in our lives..." Even more importantly, the reduction of the fabulous world of protean myth to a heraldic image signals an attempt to capture the peculiarly expansive and yet enclosed time and space of the imagination through the

7Eliade, Images and Symbols, pp. 54-55.
image of the artifact. As Muir states in "The Emblem," when you have entered the "gate" of the seemingly "shrivelled" realm of the toy or emblem

You will be with space and order magistral
And that contracted world so vast will grow
That this will seem a little tangled field.
(p. 230, 6, 9-11)

Through the device of the symbolic frieze, Muir indicates the concentrated and consecrated inner time and space in which his visionary world exists.9

Fascinated by the static and yet dynamic exclusiveness and ordered structure inherent in the emblematic and the pictorial, Muir also explores this concentrated time/space dimension as it manifests itself not in the organic Eden of the covenant but in the legendary world which arose as the covenant was dissolved and our "remote ancestors"10 entered the "age of organic heraldry"11 and so became "protagonists" in the sacred hunt, the "first sylvan war, half human

9In his discussion of the allegorical representation of sacred talismanic objects, Angus Fletcher, in Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp. 214-16, gives some interesting insights into the fascination with the emblem. Speaking of the shield of Achilles, Fletcher describes the shield or emblem as a representation of the "symbolic center." Through the "microcosmic reduction of the symbolic center," Fletcher claims, the "sacred, isolated loci can take the form of consecrated talismanic objects or consecrated moments of time." Hence, the shield, or in the case of Muir, the heraldic device, becomes "a symbol of the symbol of the center."

10An Autobiography, p. 47.

11Ibid., p. 46.
and half pelted and feathered"\textsuperscript{12} which was fought in the forgotten world of heraldic men and legendary, sacred beasts. Although this age seems "fabulous" to us, yet the "age which felt this connexion between men and animals was so much longer than the brief historical period known to us that we cannot conceive it; but our unconscious life goes back into it."\textsuperscript{13} In the emblemizing poem, "The Little General" (110-111), Muir explores the continuation of the "first sylvan war" into the contemporary world as he uncovers the timeless quality of the ritual performed by the modern hunter. Although, for our remote forebearers, the sacred hunt functioned to transform the guilt felt upon killing the sacred animals through rituals which "united the ideas of necessity and guilt,"\textsuperscript{14} in "The Little General" the hunt is enacted only under the shadow of "necessity" not that of "guilt." For this poem is a poetic version of an actual scene Muir witnessed at the age of five and so it views the hunt from the innocent perspective of first childhood. In his autobiography Muir recalls how his father's landlord, the General, came across from Rousay to Wyre in the spring of 1891 to hunt, and how, as he detachedly watched while the General killed the wild birds, the killing seemed a "mere picture":

Now and then he raised his silver gun, the white smoke curled upward, birds fell, suddenly heavy after seeming so light; our

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 47.

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 48.
cattle, who were grazing in the field, rushed away in alarm at the noise, then stopped and looked round in wonder at the strange little man. It was a mere picture. . . .

In the poem, Muir captures this sense of perspectival removal from reality as the surface of the child's experience of the hunt--isolated in its own moment and within the adult's memory--becomes transformed into visual design, and ultimately, symbolic emblem.

The opening lines of "The Little General" indicate the time/space dislocation enclosing the world of the hunter and so prepare for the peculiar pictorializing mode of perception captured in the poem. For when the General comes "bringing the island death" with his "pious ritual" of the hunt (2-4), the known world of the child is changed into something inexplicable and impersonal. The island becomes "suddenly a place without a name" (3) and the hunt a highly stylized picture as the perception-memory is given structure and contour:

Hunter and quarry in the boundless trap,
The white smoke curling from the silver gun,
The feather curling in the hunter's cap,
And clouds of feathers floating in the sun,

(5-8)

In this pictorial world of perfect composition--for reality is transformed into a static silver and white design depicting the bold lines of the gun gracefully and delicately framed by the curling forms of the smoke and feather and the diffuse cloud of floating feathers--the actual gunshot is not heard, and the reality of death barely surfaces.

15Ibid., p. 15.
For following a momentary description of the fall of the birds in a "deafening shower, Wing-hurricane" and the fleeing of the cattle "in fear," there is a total dissociation from the scene and the momentary chaos of death is systematized and placed into an artistic framework of form and order:

Up on the hill a remnant of a tower
Had watched that single scene for many a year,

Weaving a wordless tale where all were gathered
(Hunter and quarry and watcher and fabulous field)
A sylvan war half-human and half-feathered,
Perennial emblem painted on the shield.

(11-18)

By indicating that the ancient tower (perhaps a remnant from a fortress built during the first sylvan war) silently watches the "single scene" of this ever-recurring, ritualistic slaughter, Muir totally divests the experience of human emotion. The mystery of death is here, but not its guilt. Time, activity, and human agency become eliminated from this experience as it becomes transformed into an emblematic configuration—i.e. a "wordless tale"—depicting the fabulous sylvan war fought between man and beast.

As this emblemizing process is activated, the specific occasion of the poem becomes generalized: the General becomes "hunter," the birds, "quarry," the hunting ground, "fabulous field," and the spectator, an ancient "tower." This is a never-ending war in the "never-conquered land" (17) for "hunter and quarry" are enclosed within the "boundless trap" (5) of their ritualistic behavior. The final lines of the poem present a curious time/space manipulation by the poet as the emblem painted on the shield is suddenly
Held up to cow a never-conquered land
Fast in the little General's fragile hand.
(17-18)

As the experience becomes depersonalized, it becomes an inert, static object: it becomes reified in the "emblem" which the general holds in his hand, an emblem depicting a reduced image of his hunt. In effect, the General is conceived as holding his experience—or an artistic objectification of it—in his hand. He is simultaneously contained within the design of his experience and yet detached from it. He is like the artist who holds, in his fragile hand, a reification of experience, making experience into a thing-in-itself: into a poem.

The timeless mode of perception which occurs as one enters the emblematic world of organic Eden or the fabulous world of organic heraldry can also be activated in other ways. Muir, at times in his daily life, experienced moments when the veil was momentarily lifted and he looked deeply "into the life of things," as he intuited the fabulous quality of the world inhabited by the animals, a world always waiting for man to enter it. In a diary entry, for example, Muir records how he reacted when he caught sight of four horses in a field dragging a harrow-like object. "They looked wild and legendary," he writes, "as if they had just risen full-grown from the mould. As I watched their necks arching and leaping, like four waves overtopping one another, I felt that these creatures had been fed in fields of inalienable strangeness, in quite another world from the world we know." But he also realized that although the horses' world is "a different world from ours," we "centre everything in ourselves so
automatically that we hardly ever realise it."16

In an early poem, "Horses" (pp. 19-20), Muir elaborates on the fabulous quality of the horses' world as he re-captures the worshipful terror and delight he felt in the presence of his father's plough horses at the age of four or five.17 In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker-poet indicates how an everyday scene—that of horses ploughing in a bare field—is capable of transporting him to an earlier time and place:

Those lumbering horses in the steady plough,
On the bare field—I wonder why, just now,
They seemed terrible, so wild and strange,
Like magic power on the stony grange.

Perhaps some childish hour has come again,
When I watched fearful, through the blackening rain,
Their hooves like pistons in an ancient mill
Move up and down, yet seem as standing still. (1-8)

As the speaker-poet first recalls how, as a child, he once watched the horses labour "through the blackening rain," the seemingly stationary and yet constant motion of the horses is imagined as mechanical. But as he summons up the horses' magical presence through memory and the imagination and sees their daily work function as a kind of "ritual," the veil of blackening rain lifts to reveal them as beasts simultaneously rooted to the earth and illumined by a supernatural radiance.

16 "From a Diary," p. 6.

17 In An Autobiography, p. 206, Muir states: "...and when I wrote about horses they were my father's plough-horses as I saw them when I was four or five..." See also, An Autobiography, p. 22 for Muir's description of his childish love and dread of his father's horses.
They become "ecstatic monsters on the mould" and a "mysterious fire" lights their "smouldering bodies in the mire" (12, 20, my italics).

The speaker-poet recalls the "rapture" he felt when

one furrow done,
They marched broad-breasted to the sinking sun!
The light flowed off their bossy sides in flakes;
The furrows rolled behind like struggling snakes.

(13-16)

At dusk, their labours finished for the day, the horses take on an even more mysterious function, appearing as emissaries from a dreadful and terrifying world:

Their eyes as brilliant and as wide as night
Gleamed with a cruel apocalyptic light.
Their manes the leaping ire of the wind
Lifted with rage invisible and blind.

(21-24)

Momentarily identified with the horses of the Apocalypse, servants of the Divine Light, the horses' dark, cruel eyes and flowing manes, terrible in aspect, express the wrath of the final judgment. At the moment of most intense awe and dread, the memory fades and the speaker-poet is left to pine

Again for that dread country crystalline
Where the blank field and the still-standing tree
Were bright and fearful presences to me.

(26-28)

Situated in the time/space dimension of memory, the "dread country" is illumined now by a cold, crystalline brilliance as the dynamic experience is frozen in the stasis of memory. The image of the crystalline country—which may recall Merlin's magic world, his "crystal cave" in the "diamond of the day" (p. 72, 1-2)—provides an intriguing image of the remembered world. The crystal, as C. E. Cirlot
points out in his study of symbolism, fascinates us because of its "transparency": "matter 'exists' but it is as if it did not exist, because one can see through it." The memory, too, is a kind of transparent medium that brings one in sight of a world that simultaneously exists but does not exist. In this crystalline, inner world one finds the locus of a symbolic landscape of the self. For the "blank field" images the world of the future, for it is a field yet to be planted, while the "still-standing tree" depicts the axis mundi, the center of the Garden, the place of origins. Lodged in memory, this world is iconic—it is a stationary world packed with rich meanings. Though absent, its "bright and fearful" presence is momentarily felt by the adult speaker of the poem.

In crossing the threshold of his remembered world and momentarily penetrating that "bright and fearful" place, Muir has adumbrated this experience with a later cluster of emotions surrounding his perception of animals for the horses, in their supernatural purity, bring down a kind of judgment on man. Although between man and horse there exists an "archaic companionship" instituted by "an old
command" that relationship is "long-lost" (p. 247, 44, 43) as Muir indicates in a later poem. Yet in dreams, as the speaker of "The Song" tells us, where "fables turn to beasts and beasts to fables" (p. 258, 11), we can meet the horselike creature that mourns for the breaking of that command. For in dreams we can stray into "some place forgotten in old time"(35) and there confront the great beast in anguish—"Horse or centaur, or wide-winged Pegasus/But far too strange for any fabulous name" (40–41)—whose "resonant moaning" and "unearthly pain" lead the speaker to ask:

Could it be
For us, I wondered dreaming, the strange beast mourned
Or for some deed once done and done forever
And done in vain?

(26–29)

Terrifying enough is the innocent encounter with the apocalyptic horses or the dream encounter with the horse-like beast that moans for man's guilty deed. But even more frightening is the visionary encounter with the kingly horse which judges man for his guiltiness. Muir's conception of the kingly horse, as he tells us in his autobiography, is rooted in a childhood experience in which his initial awe and dread of horses was intensified by a chance occurrence. For when his brother won an illustrated copy of Gulliver's Travels as a school prize, the young poet poured over the book's illustrations, feeding his vivid childish imagination on the "strange and frightening" image of the King of the Houyhnhnms "sitting on a throne judging a crowd of naked men with hairy, hangdog faces"; since he believed the illustra-
tion to be "the record of some actual occurrence" it became a potent psychic image. In a remarkable passage in the semi-autobiographical novel, *Poor Tom*, the strange and terrible adjudicating power of the horse is explored in the narrative description of twelve-year old Mansie's (Muir's counterpart) visionary encounter with a horse.

The "curious experience" which Mansie has on the day he will always refer to as "that strange afternoon," begins as he receives an unexpected holiday from school. Feeling, at first, a vague sense of "displacement," Mansie discovers that the "shifting of time" effected by his school holiday "had subtly redistributed the objects scattered over space as well." As his "curious experience" begins, and the dislocation of time/space intensifies, Mansie translates his experience into verbal statement. For as he sees the young chestnut horse with a white star on its brow, he suddenly stops "as though a hand had been laid on his forehead: into his mind came instantly, as a final statement of something, the words: 'A boy and a horse.'" Although momentarily distanced from his experience by this verbal rendering of it, this is but a flare of conscious perception for Mansie is suddenly hurled into another dimension where he suffers a loss of ego identity:

20 *An Autobiography*, p. 22.
22 Ibid., p. 170.
23 Ibid., p. 171.
24 Ibid., p. 172.
For out of the bushes the horse looked at him with a scrutiny so devouring and yet remote that it seemed to isolate him, to enclose him completely in the moment and in himself, making him a boy without a name standing in a field; yet this instantaneous act of recognition came from a creature so strange to him that he felt some unimaginable disaster must break in if he did not tear his eyes away. This feeling was so strong that his body seemed to grow hollow. 25

Although Mansie survives this first onslaught and gains "courage to stand his ground a little longer," his ordeal is not yet over:

But now as he gazed on at the horse, which still stared steadily and fiercely at him, he seemed on the point of falling into another abyss, not of terror this time, but of pure strangeness. For unimaginable things radiated from the horse's eyes; it seemed to be looking at him from another world which lay like a hidden kingdom round it, and in that world it might be anything; and a phrase from a school book, 'the kingly judge,' came into his mind. 26

Terrified, Mansie takes to his heels fearing that the horse may "trample him to death" or "bear him away to that other world," or, even more frightening, carry "out its sentence on him." 27 With the passage of time, other images become inexplicably associated with this mysterious occurrence. When he sees the portrait of John Knox in a book, the "long face" of Knox, "still more elongated by the wiry, animal-looking beard" transports him to that distant field where he confronted the chestnut horse, and he feels "afraid of the eyes gazing

25 Ibid., p. 172.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., pp. 172-3.
out at him from the flat smooth page." And when, years later, he sees a plaster cast of Michaelangelo's horned Moses in a Glasgow shop window or discovers, in a friend's book, an illustration of the King of the Houyhnhnms, he is palpably drawn back to that remote field.\textsuperscript{28}

Mansie's dramatic encounter with the irreducible otherness enclosing the world of the horse provides a powerful expression of the intensity of feelings Muir had towards animals. And it is quite probable, as Muir's biographer, Peter Butter, suggests, that this incident is drawn "from life."\textsuperscript{29} As Mansie is wrenched out of his daily world and plunged into the "hidden kingdom" of the horse, the darker metaphysics of the Fall surface. For the kingly beast, existing in the supernatural purity of its genesis, forcibly reveals to Mansie the primary core of fallen man's relationship to the animal world: predestined guilt. Imprinted in the psyche as a kind of absolute event, Mansie's visionary encounter with the horse becomes assimilated to other potent guilt-evoking images: that of Knox, the adjudicating and forbidding Calvinist leader and that of Moses, the stern and forbidding law-giver. In Mansie's intuition of the inherent animality of these religious figures, we find a reflection of what Muir, in his autobiography, describes as the primitive instinct which divines the "immediate though concealed relations"\textsuperscript{30} which exist between man and beast. But we also find here a reflection of a

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., pp. 173-4.

\textsuperscript{29}Edwin Muir: Man and Poet, p. 21.

\textsuperscript{30}An Autobiography, p. 47.
vision which recurrently haunted Muir throughout his life in moments of profound guilt and despair: the nightmarish glimpse of animal traits flitting across the human face.

For there were moments when the vision failed, moments when Muir fell into an "unhistorical world," one "outside time without being in eternity": there were times when Muir found ingress to "the small, sensual, momentary world of the beast." It was on a hot summer evening in 1919, as he rode home from work on a Glasgow tramcar, that the poet entered, for the first time, this nightmarish dimension:

Opposite me was sitting a man with a face like a pig's, and as I looked at him in the oppressive heat the words came into my mind, 'That is an animal.' I looked round me at the other people in the tramcar; I was conscious that something had fallen from them and from me; and with a sense of desolation I saw that they were all animals. . . . I realized that in all Glasgow, in all Scotland, in all the world, there was nothing but millions of such creatures living an animal life, and moving towards an animal death as towards a great slaughter-house. I stared at the faces, trying to make them human again and to dispel the hallucination, but I could not. This experience was so terrifying that I dismissed it, deliberately forgot it by that perverse power which the mind has of obliterating itself. I felt as if I had lived for a few moments in Swift's world, for Swift's vision of humanity was the animal vision.

In passages found in his war diary, written some twenty years later, Muir remained obsessed by the animal traits he discerned in human beings:

31 An Autobiography, p. 53.
32 Ibid., p. 52.
Yesterday I caught a glimpse in the street of a middle-aged woman whose eyes glittered like those of a bird of prey. We are so intimately involved with the animal world that to find some feature of a particular animal in a human face produces a kind of embarrassment and distress—almost fear.33

At the nadir of despair, he wrote:

We all come out of a hole and go back into a hole. Leave hiding and go back into hiding. The distance between is disguise.34

Although Muir conceived of man as intimately involved with the animal world, he also conceived man to be more than a "mere part of the natural world."35 In another diary entry, he wrote:

I can see men and women as really human only when I see them as immortal souls. Otherwise they are unnatural, self-evidently not what they are by their nature; they do not exist in their own world.36

Human beings, Muir believed, "are understandable only as immortal spirits; they become natural then, as natural as young horses; they are absolutely unnatural if we try to think of them as a mere part of the natural world."37 The animal world, as Muir conceived it, is a "great impersonal order, without pathos in its suffering." Although man is bound to it "by necessity and guilt and by the closer bond of

34An Autobiography, p. 245.
36Ibid., p. 246.
37Ibid., p. 51.
life, for he breathes the same breath," when man is "swallowed up in nature nature is corrupted and man is corrupted."38

There were moments, during the darkening years of the war when Muir, separated by the wedge of despair from the luminous vision which flashes out in sleep-walled night, succumbed to the nightmarish vision of humanity swallowed up in nature and saw violence and aggression at the center of human life. In one diary entry from his "War Diary" (1937-1939), for example, Muir describes how, as he walked the streets of St. Andrews during the war years, he sensed a hidden "continual, deadly, locked struggle"39 underneath the passive faces he encountered. And on another day, as he passed the carpet-beaters and meditated on the "sad and shameful" dust which accumulates on old carpets, he uncovered an emblem of his dark intuition of human life. For in the dust permeating faded carpets he imagined one might find writhing and battling "past lives . . . locked together, immovably saturated with one another."40 It is this frightening image of the beginning and end of man as battling dust that informs the stark vision of "Then" (94-95), a poem in which Muir envisions the ontological place of man's genesis not in ancient forests where the law was kept with animal-bowed head nor in the pictorial and harmonious world of Eden, but in a shadow world torn by ritual violence:

38 Ibid., p. 53.
39 "Extracts From a Diary, 1937-1939," in The Story and the Fable, p. 239.
40 Ibid., p. 238.
There were no men and women then at all,
But the flesh lying alone,
And angry shadows fighting on a wall
That now and then sent out a groan
Buried in lime and stone,
And sweated now and then like tortured wood
Big drops that looked yet did not look like blood.

And yet as each drop came a shadow faded
And left the wall.
There was a lull
Until another in its shadow arrayed it,
Came, fought and left a blood-mark on the wall;
And that was all; the blood was all.

Existing in the dimension of controlled nightmare, in an uncanny world of wavering shadows, the world of "Then" provides a bleak answer to the question "Where was I ere I came to man?" (p. 69, 18). In an eerie and continuous forward movement, the shadow-men form a dark processional as each takes its place in the dark ritual of repeated deaths. Energized by violence and yet contained by ritual, the shadow-world displays a fearful pattern: that of the endless cycle of aggressor and victim. Through the juxtapositioning of plain and ambiguous language with stark, startling descriptions ("sweated now and then like tortured wood"; "Big drops that looked yet did not look like blood"), Muir heightens the effect of this poem. And through the contained and incantatory power of the verse with its use of repetitive words and structures, Muir both evokes the ritualistic cycle described in the poem and disciplines the intense perceptions which underlie the vision of this poem. "Then" evokes a nightmarish world but the nightmare is contained.

And yet the world of "Then" is not a totally inhuman world. The animal order, as Muir conceives it, is a "great impersonal order, with-
out pathos in its suffering." But the world embodied by the wall is "haunted"

By mute maternal presences whose sighing
Fluttered the fighting shadows and shook the wall
As if that fury of death itself were dying.
(18-20)

The "sighing" of the "maternal presences," which is the prototype of human pity, has the power to disrupt the pattern of ritual death, to shake the wall of that world, to suspend, momentarily, the violence by "fluttering" the shadows, and to dissolve the incantatory power of the verse. Pity—or the prototype of it—foreshadows human life.

In "Then," Muir seeks the root of human violence and evil in a remote shadow world; in "The Grove" (108-109) he traces the evolution of the fallen man-in-animal soul from its remote origins as wavering shadow shapes to its materialization in the arrogant, well-bred and self-sufficient animal, the founder of cities and civilizations. Just as there is need for pity in the world of "Then," so the grove is a legendary world where there is "place for pities" (40). Though the journey through the grove is terrifying, it is a journey that must be taken, an initiatory ordeal that must be sustained for there is "no road at all to that high place/But through the smothering grove" (1-2). The questers who seek the light must travel in shadows and darkness. The wayfarers who seek the sufficient place of the center, the remote, inaccessible "high place" of clear vision, must tread the road of the grove for they are separated by a magical time and space—the time and

41 An Autobiography, p. 53.
space of the controlled nightmare--from the simple, unambiguous vision they seek.

The journey begins in a crowded shadow realm of wavering forms, a world inhabited by bestial shadow-men. For whereas the animal world is an "impersonal order" and hence one devoid of human emotions, the shadows animating the world of the grove successively weave "Adulterous shapes of animal hate and love" (4). The grove is

The idol-crowded nightmare Space,
Wood beyond wood, tree behind tree,
And every tree an empty face
Gashed by the casual lightning mark
The first great Luciferian animal
Scored on leaf and bark.

(5-10)

An "unhistorical world," one "outside time" and outside "eternity," the world of the grove is the world of the Fall. It is an "idol-crowded" space and scored into the very element of that world--the faces of the trees--is the sign of the "great Luciferian animal": emptiness, indifference. For Muir, indifference is the great demon; pity the saving impulse. 42 A world of maze-like redundancy, the grove presents ever-repeating barriers to the "high place" sought: it is a place of "wood beyond wood, tree beyond tree."

The doomed wanderers who seek a teleological vision of wholeness have tracked their way back in time. They have found ingress to what Muir calls the age of "organic heraldry," a "timeless, crowded age" populated by heraldic men and legendary beasts and torn by ritual conflict, an age which seems "fabulous" to us and yet "our unconscious

42See, e.g., Collected Poems, pp. 50-52.
life goes back into it":43

This was, we knew, the heraldic ground,
And therefore now we heard our footsteps fall
With the true legendary sound,
Like secret trampling behind a wall,
As if they were saying: To be: to be.
(11-15)

Unlike the poem "The Little General" where the heraldic age is viewed
from the innocent perspective of childhood and from the daylight world
of our contemporary age, in "The Grove" all the nightmarish potential-
ities of the archaic age are revealed to the travellers as they thread
their way forward. The muffled, hidden sound heard as their footsteps
disturb the silence of the "drugged thicket dozing/Deep in its dream
doze/Deep in its dream of fear" (16-17) tells them that they are in the legendary world: the
world of becoming. And the fact that the sound they make is like a
"secret trampling" heard "behind a wall" signals that this world is
one of contained aggression and of the animal-in-man.

Magically, as if in response to the command "to be," the wavering shapes take definite form as the "ring" of the grove closes in on
the wayfarers. The travellers see and hear

The well-bred self-sufficient animals
With clean rank pelts and proud and fetid breath,
Screaming their arrogant calls,
Their moonstone eyes set straight at life and death.
(20-23)

Even more terrifying as the journey moves ambiguously forward is the
progression from the animal to the animal-in-man which occurs as cities
and civilizations come into view and then "powers and dominations/Like

43An Autobiography, p. 47.
shapes begotten by dreaming animals" (26-27). A grotesque version of a medieval pageant, a slow-motion processional passes by as the proud animal dreams magically crystallize and ride, booted and saddled, on the backs of the arrogant beasts:

And staring with the arrogant animal's eye:
The golden dukes, the silver earls, and gleaming black
The curvetting knights sitting their curvetting steeds,
The sweet silk-tunicked eunuchs singing ditties,
Swaying like wandering weeds,
The scarlet cardinals,
And lions high in the air on the banner's field,
Crowns, sceptres, spears and stars and moons of blood,
And sylvan wars in bronze within the shield,
All quartered in the wide world's wood,
The smothering grove where there was place for pities.
(30-40)

An opulent, sensuous world of sight and sound—of vivid colors and sweet music—, the world of "animal dreams uplifted high" reveals richly arrayed members of the court, the warrior class, and the church. Leaders and guardians of their world, they are grotesque parodies of human ambition and human power. In their forms we are confronted with what Muir, in his autobiography, described as the "terrifying artificiality of the clothed human form," and in their "arrogant animal" eyes we encounter more than pride, we encounter that look which Muir found so "hateful," what he described as the "cold, considering eye which one human being sometimes turns on another. . . . The same look that one animal gives another at their first encounter."

44 Ibid., p. 216.
45 Ibid., p. 245.
terms as "the first sylvan war, half human, half pelted and feath-
ered," these heraldic creatures are aggressors in the first sacred hunt
"from which rose the hearth, the community, and the arts." They are
our forebearers. Symbolized on their martial banner is the king of
the beasts surrounded by images of royalty (crowns, sceptres), battle
(spears), and cosmic conflict (stars and moons of blood) and depicted
on the quarterings of their heraldic shield is an image of the sylvan
war.

As the questers who seek the light look at the talismanic emblem
on the shield, there is a sudden dislocation of time and space. The
emblem expands to encompass the "wide world's wood": it becomes, in
essence, the very time and space of their nightmare, the very time and
space of the grove. For time and space have become what Muir, in
another poem, describes as "Quarterings on the turning shield/The
great non-stop heraldic show" (p. 103, 38-39). And yet, as the
nightmarish world becomes concentrated in the expansive world of
the emblem, it becomes a static image. The questers, in a state of
elusive betweenness, are both within that world and distanced from it.
When they see, in the static emblem, a replica of the world in which
they travel, they gain a kind of mastery over the spell which has en-
closed them. The spell begins to break. They realize that the grove
is a "place for pities." Pity, as we have seen in "Then," is a human
impulse; pity separates man from the "great impersonal order" of the
beasts. As the word "pities" is uttered the nightmarish vision dis-

\[46\] Ibid., p. 47.
solves. There is a break in the poem. Now the questers are ready to enter the light:

We trod the maze like horses in a mill,
And then passed through it
As in a dream of the will.
How could it be? There was the stifling grove,
Yet here was light; what wonder led us to it?
How could the blind path go
To climb the crag and top the towering hill,
And all that splendour spread? We know
There was no road except the smothering grove.

(41-49)

The trance, as Ralph Mills puts it, "has accomplished its purpose" for the travellers "waken to the reality of their dual nature. . . ."47 Further, the externalization of the dream and the expression of it through artistic form serve an important function here. The "externalizing tendency" of the mythmaker, as Jerome Bruner points out in the discussion "Myth and Identity," provides "a basis for communion" between men. "By the subjectifying of our worlds through externalization, we are able, paradoxically enough, to share communally in the nature of internal experience."48 Even more importantly, Bruner states, "externalization makes possible the containment of terror and impulse by the decorum of art and symbolism."49 It is just such 'an externalizing process that we find in "The Grove."

And significantly, the moment in which the controlled nightmare of


49Ibid.
the vision becomes replicated in the quarterings on the shield--i.e.,
the moment in which it is imagined to be fully embodied in art--the
nightmare ends. This is the moment the questers find the light.

In the beautifully controlled terza rima of "The Ring" (113)
we find another externalization and containment of terror. A fable
of Innocence, the Fall, and Redemption, this story of the emergence
of and triumph over the beast-in-man begins not as "Then" or "The
Grove" in a bestial shadow-world, but in a sacred time and place of
harmony and order:

Long since we were a family, a people,
The legends say; an old kind-hearted king
Was our foster father, and our life a fable.

Nature in wrath broke through the grassy ring
Where all our gathered treasures lay in sleep--
Many a rich and many a childish thing.

She filled with hoofs and horns the quiet keep.
Her herds beat down the turf and nosed the shrine
In bestial wonder, bull and adder and ape,

Lion and fox, all dressed by fancy fine
In human flesh and armed with arrows and spears;
(1-11)

As they recount their fable, the speakers of "The Ring" reveal their
awareness of their dual nature. For they are the inheritors of a
legendary world of harmony and order, and they are the "sons" (20) of
the destroyers of that kingdom--the grotesque human-animals who, in
a war-like posture, once broke through the enclosure protecting the
"rich" and "childish" treasures of innocence and desecrated that
shrine. Their "fathers," like the creatures encountered in the
smothering grove, exist in the "small, sensual, momentary world of
the beast"; they are the embodiment of those spectres which so
terrified Muir in his daily life: "animals furnished with human faculties... faculties which they have stolen, not inherited." Not knowing of life's sorrows (for they "haughtily put aside the sorrowful years") or its pity ("they had tears that were not like our tears"), these human creatures are corruptions of nature and corruptions of humanity. For "when man," Muir states, "is swallowed up in nature nature is corrupted and man is corrupted." This corruption is a type of evil, the evil that "consists in a hiatus in the soul, a craving blank, a lack of one of the essential threads which bind experience into a coherent whole and give it a consistent meaning."52

And yet the "sons" have progressed beyond the world of their "fathers." They can feel pity; they have a sense of life's meaning; they know the "vow and the pilgrimage" (18). For they, like the questers through the grove, have been given the knowledge which binds life into a coherent whole and they have been given it by the "fatherless, sonless, homeless haunters" (17) who are their fathers:

We are their sons, but long ago we heard
Our fathers or our fathers' fathers say

Out of their dream the long-forgotten word
That rounded again the ring where sleeping lay
Our treasures, still unrusted and unmarred.

As their "fathers"—the original destroyers of the sacred ring—utter the "long-forgotten word," they renew that lost world for their

50 An Autobiography, p. 53.
51 Ibid.
52 Essays on Literature and Society, p. 43.
"sons." Out of the nightmare of their existence comes the dream of innocence: the treasures of innocence remain a hidden, potent force deep in the psyche of even these totally fallen creatures. Inviolate, uncorrupted, the world of the "sacred center" exists in hope, in memory, in dreams, and in the time and space of the poem. For the terza rima stanzaic form acts as a kind of "thread" which "binds" the narrative of this poem into a coherent whole. Through the decorum of art, Muir rounds a ring about the nightmare which erupts at the center of this poem and at the center of human experience.

Although "The Ring" provides a vision of an ultimate redemption from the Fall, in a very real sense the initiatory ordeal of the smothering grove never completely ended for Muir. For though he achieved, as Elizabeth Huberman puts it, a type of resting place in his last published volume of verse through his acceptance of "paradox" and his belief in the "impossible reconciliation of the irreconcilable," i.e., of good and evil and innocence and the Fall, yet he remained obsessed, to the end of his life, with his nightmarish perception of "animals furnished with human faculties... faculties which they have stolen, not inherited." We find evidence for this not in Muir's last published volume, but in the poems discovered among his papers after his death and published by his editors in the Collected Poems. "The Ballad of Everyman," (290-291) for example, gives testimony to Muir's continuing preoccupation with the animal-in-man in its terrifying story of Everyman's peace mission and his ultimate des-

struction by a corporate beast-in-men, an image which embodies Muir's fears, in the forties and fifties, of the rise of impersonal political systems.

As the narrative of Everyman's fate unfolds, we are momentarily disarmed by the naive trust implicit in the opening lines of the ballad, a naivete reinforced by the artlessness of the ballad stanza:

Stout Everyman set out to meet
   His brothers gathered from every land,
   And make a peace for all the earth
   And link the nations hand to hand.

(1-4)

After two days of "patient listening," Everyman can take no more. And so on the third day, he angrily denounces the peace conference as a sham:

... . . . . . . . . . . .
"Nothing but slaves and masters here:
   Your dove's a liar and a whore.

"Disguised police on the high seats,
   In every corner pimps and spies.

... . . . . . . . . . . .
(11-14)

As he leaves the hall in anger, never to be seen again, there is a "deadly silence" as the "great room" turns "to watch him go" (17-18). Although we only realize this in retrospect, the description of the "room" gazing at Everyman presents a corporate image of that human look Muir found so "hateful," the "cold, considering" animal-like gaze that bespeaks of indifference and that grows out of a "hiatus in the soul, a craving blank." For in the second section of the poem, which is cast as a dream vision, we find the reification of that deadly gaze in the killing beast.
The terrifying perception underlying the nightmarish vision unfolded in the second part of the ballad is heightened by the simple, insistent, and almost childlike rhythms of the ballad stanza. In a nightmarish dream which recurrently haunts the narrator, he envisions the ultimate fate of Everyman. For "night after night" he dreams of his strange flight above a "playing field" where he sees "two great sides in combat" (21, 27-28). As he looks, the opposing forces become metamorphosed into a strange, ox-like beast:

And then they change into a beast
With iron hoofs and scourging tail
That treads a bloody harvest down
In readiness for the murdering flail.

And then a rash of staring eyes
Covers the beast, back, sides and head,
And stare as if remembering
Something that long ago was said.

And the beast is gone, and nothing's there
But murderers standing in a ring,
And at the centre Everyman.
I never saw so poor a thing.
(29-40)

As the murdering, corporate "eye" encountered in the peace hall becomes reified in the killing beast, Everyman succumbs to its deadly and destructive power. In the closing lines of the poem, the narrator hurtes "Curses upon the traitorous man/Who brought our good friend Everyman down" (41-42). There is no toleration here for human evil. For the narrator, Everyman's spokesman, speaks from the viewpoint of the simple, good man, one who finds such evil an unaccountable corruption.

But in a second version of this same tale in which Muir speaks in his voice of reconciliation, there is an attempt to come to terms
with this obsessive vision and incorporate it into a total vision of
life, one encompassing both good and evil. In "Nightmare of Peace"
(pp. 291-93) the speakers have a different reaction to the ox-like
killing beast:

. . . . . then we saw the lies
Spring open, watched the rows of eyes
Break out upon the animal's back.
And all dissolved in a common ring.
At the centre, truly dead,
Lay Everyman. So both were true,
Animal and human, and we knew
These were God's creatures after all
Ashamed and broken by the fall
Into the dark.

(40-49)

But though the speakers can feel a sense of pity for the human beast
and see the fallen animal-in-men as "God's creatures after all," the
attempt to insert the totally fallen man into a harmonious vision of
life falters. For when the speakers return to the conference hall
"With Peace the Tyrant's pitiless law," they "still" envision the
beast "trampling" Everyman down (58-59). Both "Ballad of Everyman"
and "Nightmare of Peace" make bleak pronouncements on the persistence
of the animal-in-man and its deadly nature. The flash of perception
which comes upon the realization that "These were God's creatures
after all" can scarcely reconcile us to this terrifying insight into
human evil and cruelty and indifference.

But there are other moods, other moments in these final poems.
For here we also encounter the image of man which predominates in
Muir's poetic vision of life: that of the lonely quester, the fallen
man who, like the questers in the grove, seeks his home in the light.
We are more convinced when the lonely wayfarer in "Dialogue" (273-75)
tells us, in his long catalogue describing all he has seen, that the world is, finally, one in which "all is in its place, / The good and the evil, equal and strange order" (22-23). "Home" to the quester is not found in this world but in a momentary illumination, a memory, or a flash of perception: "Tree, bird, and man and the nightward hastening sun/In endless stasis..." (58-59). For the road always goes on, always goes forward.

Although Muir's pilgrims encounter, along their roads through the smothering grove and the world of time, the animal-in-man, they also encounter, in sleep-walled night, the vision of the covenant and in moments of illumination, the "clear unfallen world" of man's starting day. Near the end of the road, they may even find an image of man's sacred center in a transfiguration of the purely earthly, in the sunset:

Yet now each bush and tree
Stands still within the fire,
And the bird sits on the tree.
Three horses in a field
That yesterday ran wild
Are bridled and reined by light
As in a heavenly field.
Man, beast and tree in fire,
The bright cloud showering peace.

(p. 299, 8-16)

But this vision is an earned vision. It comes from the journey backward into our remote animal origins as we attempt to penetrate the first mystery of man—"where we came from"—and it comes from the ongoing, repetitive, forward journey, it comes from the quest which seeks to penetrate the second mystery of man—"where we are going."
I know in myself that I have been, I suppose, unusually concerned with the problems of time and eternity. . . .

-Muir, Selected Letters

There is a law by which the momentary self continuously ousts the permanent self. Consequently to know what we are we must cease for a time to be what we are. Otherwise we live in a perpetual bright oblivion of ourselves, insulated in the moving moment and given a meaning only by the moment.

-Muir, "Yesterday's Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography"

Throughout his poetic exploration of the second mystery of man—"where we are going"—Muir struggles to tell a story which has its roots deeply embedded in the soil of human tradition and experience and a story which haunts the twentieth-century consciousness: the

1 An Autobiography, p. 56.

2 As C. A. Patrides points out in his "Introduction to Aspects of Time, ed. C. A. Patrides (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), pp. 1-2: "It were indeed an understatement even to claim that the twentieth century is obsessed with time. . . . Samuel Alexander regarded time as 'the most characteristic feature of modern thought,' while Bernard Boxanquet termed it 'the central crux of philosophy'. Within a religious context, it is true, man has never ceased to inquire into the relationship between time within which he exists, and eternity toward which he aspires; so much so, that religion has not
story of man's existence in time. Muir's primary obsession\(^3\) and central theme in the poetry of the 1930s and 1940s, the story of mankind's journey through time and place is a great, flawed story. Relating the loss of a bond and an ontological root, it is a story of man's fall into the darkness and disunity of time and his quest to find, in the moment of vision, the timeless pattern of life. It is a story which tells how man, "Under the years' assaults,/In the storm of good and bad" strives to make himself "whole/Smashed to bits by the Fall" (157, 29-30, 35-36). Growing out of the felt tension between man's belief in immortality and his perception of mortality, between the twin poles of time and the timeless, good and evil, necessity and freedom, it is a story told with special urgency for it arises out of a deep-seated urge to reveal the pattern of life in the midst of its formlessness and to find a nexus of self-unity in the face of life's disharmony.

It is in the journey and place poems of the thirties and early forties—Variations on a Time Theme (1934), Journeys and Places (1937), inaccurately been defined as 'the expression of man's fundamental instinct to seek security from the menace of Time'.

\(^3\)Although Muir, in a letter written in 1934, described himself as "getting away from my obsession with Time (a static obsession)", time remained his great theme and "obsession." In another letter, written in 1940, he admitted: "I feel I probably have a sort of obsession about Time, and I wish I could look at it more objectively. Instead of seeing Time as the dimension of growth, I see everything passing away—the other pole, and I expect there is some perversity in my attitude, though on the other hand it is what stimulates my particular kind of imagination." And in a letter written in 1949, he admitted himself to be "unusually concerned with the problems of time and eternity. . . ." [See Selected Letters, pp. 84, 120, 152]
and *The Narrow Place* (1943)—that Muir uncovers the categories of his split framework as he explores both the metaphysical and psychological boundaries encountered on the quest for wholeness. Once he has imaginatively conceptualized and poetically conveyed his experience of the time-sense, he is able to slowly find his own tentative resolution to the time problem in his recognition of man's life in time as a living mystery. In his poetry, as in his autobiography, he tries to "make clear the pattern" of his life "as a human being existing in space and moving through time, environed by mystery." From the start, he feels that poetry must deal with "great themes" in a simple way: "simplicity can never be wrong," as he states in a letter written in 1924. In these years of poetic discovery, as Muir strives to write a poetry of simplicity and clarity, he continuously seeks a "rounded conception of existence": "all I can see is a flash here and there, which tells me that such a conception exists." He seeks what he sought from the beginning—to open his eyes to all those things that are "hopeless" and "helpless" and "inexplicable" in man's life in time and then to "triumph" above them, to "affirm life." Those flashes of recognition of life's coherence found in the poetry of the 1930s and early 1940s prepare us for the harmonizing radiance of the


5*Selected Letters*, pp. 42-43.

6Ibid., p. 116.

7Ibid., p. 45.
final poems of *The Voyage* (1946) which give a full affirmation of life and a total acceptance of its triumphs and tragedies, its field of good and ill, and the loss inherent in man's time-bound existence. But the road to that affirmative vision is long and difficult. Muir's description of Odysseus's journey as one of "persistence and frustration over a long stretch of years" is an apt description of his own poetic quest, his own ceaseless toiling towards a "rounded conception" of existence and towards a poetic expression that is both "simple and unexpected."

It is the vision of life's disunity which motivates the journey, the ceaseless quest for a time and place in which man can live an authentic life. Underlying Muir's dual vision, his ruptured perspective, is the deep discord he perceives between his visionary, timeless world and his quotidian, time-bound world. A voice he once heard upon waking from sleep gives powerful expression to his vision of the human condition:

A dream, or rather a voice, which came to me in half-sleep this morning. ... The voice spoke from behind and a little above me, and said, "I lean my cheek from Eternity for Time to slap."

Having apprehended in isolated, timeless moments a transcendent framework underlying the structure of human experience, Muir encounters the conditions of human existence—the situation of being in a particular

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8Ibid., p. 167.

9Ibid., p. 143.

time and place—as delimiting. He feels the need to "see life timelessly: the only way in which it can be seen as a whole"\textsuperscript{11} and yet recognizes that he cannot see, for time "keeps" him from seeing.\textsuperscript{12} Seeking what lies just beyond the boundaries of human life, he finds himself stranded in the world of time and place, lost in the vacancy of the present moment. For the "momentary self" perpetually ousts the "permanent self" so that he lives" in a perpetual bright oblivion" of himself, "insulated in the moving moment."\textsuperscript{13} He belongs to the troop of assorted travellers on the "enormous road" of life who, "linked wrist to wrist with time," are "enlisted in the enigma's exploration" (270, 6, 1, 3).

As he explores the conundrums of the time-sense to find its meaning, Muir locates the beginnings of man's flawed story of time in an

\textsuperscript{11}Selected Letters, p. 116.

\textsuperscript{12}As Muir states in "Extracts from a Diary, 1937-39," in The Story and the Fable, p. 237: "Walking up from the pier the other evening, I became conscious of a feeling which has often troubled me vaguely: that I can never see everything at once, the whole scene, for Time enters into it, imperceptibly disintegrating it: the act of looking even at a simple arrangement of objects takes up some time. I fixed my eyes on the two towers of the ruined cathedral, but could not hold them. I stared at one of them, but even that was too much, for the tower was a multitude of details, and one, a small round hole, a mere pin-point above the pointed window, was all that I could seize instantaneously, without being conscious of a sequence of images. I cannot see, for Time keeps me from seeing. If I had a row of perfectly functioning, perfectly co-ordinated eyes running all round my head in a belt I could see everything at once. But then, perhaps, there would be nothing but the present; no past and no future. As it is I can see a section, say a quarter, of the whole scene, though never instantaneously. What lies outside that, behind and at both sides of me, is the past.

inscrutable instant, a caesura. Man's headlong descent from eternity into time's realm occurs in a blind, bewildering moment. As the soul, like an arrow shot by an unknown archer, flies from "eternity's immaculate bow," it is drawn vortically "Straight to the heart of time's turning ring" (I11, 1-3). The blind, speeding race of the soul ends when it reaches the "sole remaining place": the "restless home," the "heaven," the "hell," the "ground" of human existence (42, 10-12). Lost is the boundless union and freedom of eternity in which the soul ranges freely "through all of Time and Space" (69, 8). Lost is the "one eternity and hourless day" known by the dreaming child in "Adam's field" (42, 1-2). The Fall marks the beginning of man's imprisonment in the moving moment, the beginning of his story. Shut in his simple, recurring day, he must uncover his fable if life is to have meaning and significance.

It is in the life-span of the individual that Muir traces the outlines of man's "story" in time and intuits the deeper substance of that story--the "fable" of life--for "individuality," he believes, "is the universal form in which human life manifests itself." Viewing

It is interesting to note that Muir does not focus on the drama of the temptation but on what Paul Ricour, in his analysis of the Adamic myth, terms the "Instant" of the Fall. As Ricour states [in The Symbolism of Evil, trans. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 244]: "The first man... is summed up in one act: he took the fruit and ate of it. About the event there is nothing to say; one can only tell it; it happens and henceforth evil has arrived. About the instant, as a caesura, one can only say what it ends and what it begins. On the one hand, it brings to an end a time of innocence; on the other, it begins a time of malediction."

man's span of time both as moving in a linear "progress from the cradle to the grave"\textsuperscript{16} and as participating in the circular succession of generations, Muir describes the life of the individual "as the endless repetition of a universal pattern." We "become human by repetition," he believes, for "our life is a rehearsal of lives that have been lived over and over. . . ."\textsuperscript{17} As the simply articulated but cryptic poem, "Twice-Done, Once-Done" (134-35) states:

\begin{quote}
Nothing yet was ever done 
Till it was done again,
And no man was ever one
Except through dead men.

I could neither rise nor fall
But that Adam fell.
Had he fallen once for all
There'd be nothing to tell.
\end{quote}

(1-8)

A man's life, as story, has meaning because it participates in the fable of Innocence and the Fall for "Even a story to be true/Must repeat itself" (23-24). The individual is a unique manifestation of all that is, and his movement through the passing day of time towards the goal of integral reality is a unique and universal action:

\begin{quote}
For first and last is every way,
And first and last each soul,
And first and last the passing day,
And first and last the goal.
\end{quote}

(29-32)

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}"The Poetic Imagination," in Essays on Literature and Society, p. 225.
Man's progress in life is towards the realization of and participation in his own true nature which occur during what Muir calls "those isolated moments of pure vision which have a feeling of timelessness. . . ."18 "I can never know myself," Muir states in his autobiography, "but the closer I come to knowledge of myself the more certain I must feel that I am immortal, and, conversely, the more certain I am of my immortality the more intimately I must come to know myself."19 Muir's conceptions of the unidirectional movement of individual life and the circular succession of human generations—both images of man in time—are redeemed by his apprehension of the vertical bisection of time by eternity. He envisions the "timeless human life as the intersection and interpenetration of a stationary beam falling from heaven and the craving, aspiring dust rising forever to meet it, in denial or submission, in ignorance or comprehension."20

But the path to a vision of the "timeless human life" is fraught with difficulties. For "insulated in the moving moment," shut in his recurring day, man lives cut off from awareness of his immortal self. Although those rare occasions in an individual's life when he becomes "part of the fable" and recapitulates some act in the timeless drama of mankind "should 'go into' life," Muir feels, yet "there seems to be no technique by which one can accomplish the work of their

18Selected Letters, P. 214.
19An Autobiography, p. 54.
20Ibid., p. 166.
inclusion." It is the task of the poet, in telling our fable, to create an image of our life, and delineate its pattern and so help us find a path through the contradictions and confusions inherent in our time-bound existence. "It is necessary for us to have a picture, an image of our life," Muir believes, "if our life is to be of any significance. . . ." The poet helps us fulfill a basic human need, the need "to discover what we are" by providing an interpreted world, one that puts us in a deep relationship with the reality we inhabit. Despite the disorder intrinsic to our life in time, Muir believes that it is possible to perceive coherence in the world.

It is through the controlling image of the journey that Muir sheds light on man's mysterious encounter with time and provides a way of envisioning life's undertaking. For the "old story" which conveys the unique and universal movement of man through time, Muir holds, "remains the most pure image that we have of temporal life, tracing the journey we shall take." The journey image has resonance because it strikes a hidden chord within us: it is a "deep archetypal image in our minds." Muir's vision of man is that of the pilgrim, the restless traveller who wanders blindly on the redundant roads of time seeking a vision of eschatological wholeness. Each man must find

21 Ibid., p. 114.
22 Selected Letters, p. 159.
24 The Estate of Poetry, p. 29.
the road—his road—and each man must take his journey which is the sad, stationary journey of mankind. As the journey is taken by the various pilgrims populating Muir's poetic world—both the nameless questers and those of historical and mythical fame—their countless journeyings become one journey, their countless times and places, one time and place. It is a journey through the stark, symbolic landscape of time: the turning, returning hills of time's maze; futurity's high-walled land; the on-going road leading forever towards the locked gate of the horizon. The submissive faith and quiet reconciliation to time Muir finally achieves in the poetry of homecoming is an earned vision. Only by taking the arduous journey on the enormous road of life—"that deafening road, /Life-wide, world-wide, by which all come to all" (175, 16-17)—and ceaselessly exploring the enigmas of time and place can he approach that final goal. And even then there is no rest. For the road always goes on; the goal always beckons ahead.

In the journey poems found in Variations on a Time Theme (1934) Muir gives an early indication of the difficulty of the path he has chosen as he explores "journeys and places," which he defines here as the "two sides of the paradox [of mortality and immortality] one of which implies the other." 26 For the journey through "radiance" and "darkness" (34) described in the fitful, disrupted rhythms of the opening segment of the poem (I, 39-40) leads to a dead-end, to the wasteland world inhabited by modern man. In a world in which traditional beliefs in a transcendent meaning of life have receded and lost

26Selected Letters, p. 214.
directive force, the journey is bewideringly complex. The road of life has a Kafkaesque deceptiveness so that the apparent right path of life proves the wrong one. The road branches, turns "like an enemy turning/Stealthily, suddenly, showing his other face/After the knife stroke" (9-11). And yet the road is "all clear" behind and before the wayfarers: it is an "answer and a riddle" (19-20). Although the pilgrims have experienced moments of illumination—"they "have seen Heaven opening,/And fields and souls in radiance" (32-33)—the world they must inhabit is the twilight world of time. Uncertain whether they can "build a house" or erect a "shrine to some god" or till the "nameless fields" in the wasteland world they inhabit (35, 39), they are fateless, anonymous. They are modern man who must "make friends with the mangled stumps/And splintered stones, not looking too closely/At one another" (35-37).

As Muir follows the enigmatic road of time in subsequent journey meditations in the poem, he finds that the road is, indeed, an answer and a riddle. For although the existence of the road implies that there is a path towards integral reality, the road is firmly affixed to the temporal world. Hence, the "painful emotion" underlying the journey described in Section II (40-42), as Muir indicates in his commentary on this poem, stems from "the feeling that we, as immortal spirits, are imprisoned in a very small and from all appearances fortuitously selected length of time. . . ."27 Caught in the endless-

27 Ibid., pp. 213-14.
ly repeating pattern of time, the "immortal" wanderers ride captive in the saddle of time, for the horses, as Muir indicates, provide an "image of human time, the invisible body of humanity on which we ride for a little while. . . ."28 As the riders take their solitary, sleep-wandering journey through vast stretches of time and space—the "boundless plain" (1)—they follow a stationary course. They move in time and yet come no closer to their goal:

Our horses pace and pace
Like steeds for ever labouring on a shield,
Keeping their solitary heraldic courses.

(2-4)

Imprisoned in time, the significance of their ritualistic journey is nullified:

Time has such curious stretches, we are told,
And generation after generation
May travel them, sad stationary journey,
Of what device, what meaning?

(11-14)

Through the faculties of memory and anticipation, they are given a glimpse of an existence beyond time. The sense of freedom inhering to their memories and anticipatory hopes contrasts sharply with the "sealed horizons" of their here-and-now. For as they travel, always "staring at the same horizon," their hearts fly "so far ahead they are lost/Long past all finding" (8-10); and they "still remember" a time before the horizons were sealed, they recall the "princely dream" of their origins in a "golden country" where their "silvery breaths" went on before them "like new-risen souls" (41-45). Yet, as Muir indicates

28 Ibid., pp. 213.
in his discussion of this section of the poem, although such "isolated moments of pure vision" may momentarily release us "from the presence of Time," the timeless vision does not "go into Time," it does not "change the actual physical body of Time, symbolised by the horses." 29 And these moments are fleeting while time endures. The inexorable pacing of the horses continues and will always continue. New riders will fill the saddles when the present riders "fall" and new riders will look towards their own "sealed" horizons and remember their own dreams of eternity: "We sit where others have sat before us/And others will sit after us" (28-29). Despite their belief in immortality, time has the power to "charm" the riders and make them oblivious to the meaning of their journey:

Yet these worn saddles
Have powers to charm us to obliviousness.
They were appointed for us, and the scent of the ancient leather
Is strong as a spell. So we must mourn or rejoice
For this our station, our inheritance
As if it were all. This plain all. This journey all.
(51-56)

Though the final line of this section is stated as a conditional, its quietly insistent verbal repetitions give the effect of finality to the pronouncement "This journey all." Because of the elusiveness of the immutable self, the rider is easily lost within the limits of existence. The illusiveness of the mutable self--time's self--has the power to charm one to forgetfulness.

There is no refuge from the impingement of time, Muir indicates,

29 Ibid., p. 214.
as he traces the legendary history of man (III, 42-43) to find the prototype of modern man's equivocal journey. The fable of the exiled soul begins in an instant, the instant in which man is expelled from "Adam's field" and time begins:

A lonely shaft loosed from the bow's calm heaven
Blind as an arrow I sped upon my race
And swiftly reached the sole remaining place,
My first and last since then.

(8-11)

Both good and evil become manifest in man as he makes his legendary way through time. Both sinner and sinned against, he falls "Edenwards in innocent Abel slain" and arises "twice-armoured in the flesh of Cain" (15-16); both damned and saved, he drowns in the Flood and arrives safely at Ararat's hill; both savior and conspirator, he is Abraham, the father of his people, and he plots against his tribe, selling them into bondage; both enslaver and enslaved, he is the proud Egyptian ruler and the quivering slave. And he is finally, the exile, the pilgrim who wanders through the wilderness: "Set free, or outlawed, now I walk the sand/And search this rubble for the promised land" (42-43).

The journey, as Muir indicates in sections V and VI, can be taken in both hope and despair. When the dream of the promised land fades (V, 44-45), the "infidel congregation of mankind" (1), more wraith-like than human, is condemned to take its stationary journey through a stark wilderness of dead stones, a place where there once existed "ancient cities" and "shrines, /That branched from Adam's world" (21-22). But all that is now but a lost memory: "That is long ago;/A memory of our fathers" (34-35). In irregular rhythms and appropriately prolonged tones, the speaker questions whether their journey is
real or illusory, whether it is a "Slow-motion flight" over the bottomless road" of time or a "clinical fantasy begotten by/The knife of demon Time the vivisector/Incising nightmares" (3-6). It is unclear whether the travellers move or whether the ground

heaves about them
Its giant mole-hills, lengthening league by league
The ghastly thin anatomy of Space Time
Striped to the nerve?
(8-11)

Whatever the case, their journey remains one of grinding futility.

In stark contrast to the distorted journey of the infidels is the sleep-wandering journey of Moses and his tribe described in the sonorous, repetitive language of the following section (VI, 45-47). While the journey of the infidels is grounded in despair, that of Moses and his tribe hovers on an affirmation of life even though their forty years' journey is also a stationary one through vast stretches of empty space:

Forty years this burning
Circuitous path, feet spurning
The sliding sand and turning
The wheel, turning again
Sharp rock, soft dust, a land
Choked in sand.
(1-6)

Though they are fated to follow the circuitous path of time's turning and returning wheel, they are sustained both by memory and by elusive visions of their goal:

We have passed great kingdoms by
In a separate dream.
Have seen tame birds wheel homing through the sky,
And towers caught in a distant gleam.
(39-42)
They know that there is a goal and that they will find the path towards it: "We cannot miss/The road that leads us to it. Fate/Will take us there that keeps us here" (61-63). It is this positive faith in their ultimate deliverance which redeems our ancient counterparts from the destructive dislocations inherent in man's quest for timeless reality.

But whatever directive to the time-eternity antithesis offered through the Biblical fable of exile, modern man's belief in the elusive, timeless goal remains tentative. It is the beat of time, not the silence of the timeless, which sounds at the base of the chord of existence, as Muir indicates in the insistent rhythms and harsh, compressed speech of the following fifteen-line poem (VII, 47-48).

Ending twelve of the fifteen lines with the word "Time," Muir verbally reinforces his vision of modern man's imprisonment in time:

Ransomed from darkness and released in Time,
Caught, pinioned, blinded, sealed and cased in Time;
(1-2)

The law of time is the Calvinist law of iron necessity:

Summoned, elected, armed and crowned by Time,
Tried and condemned, stripped and disowned by Time;
(3-4)

Time is the very source and substance of our mortal beginnings and endings; it is the very condition of human existence:

Suckled and weaned, plumped and full-fed by Time,
Defrauded, starved, physicked and bled by Time;
Buried alive and buried dead by Time:
(5-7)

Momentarily altering the forceful beat of the poem to describe, in sonorous, quiet tones, the "trackless" world of eternity, Muir indicates that the speaker's faith in the eternal is tentative; it is
prefaced by a pondering "If":

If there's no crack or chink, no escape from Time,
No spasm, no murderous knife to rape from Time
The pure and trackless day of liberty;

Imprisonment's for ever; we're the mock of Time,
While lost and empty lies Eternity.

(8-10; 14-15)

Locked in the space/time situation, man is time's prisoner.

This vision of man's imprisonment in time casts an anticipatory
shadow over Muir's treatment of time in his next two volumes, Journeys and Places (1937) and The Narrow Place (1943), which continue the ex-
ploration of "journeys," i.e. "movements in time," and "places," which Muir now comes to define as the "places" reached through time's journey and as "imaginary places," i.e. "pauses in time."30 Despite his urgent need to escape time, Muir is also acutely aware of what Hans Meyerhoff, in his analysis of the obsession with time in modern literature, de-
scribes as the tension between our dual perception of time as "an objective structure in nature" and as a "subjective background of human experience."31 Despite our intuitions of the timeless, Muir feels, we are also deeply aware of objective time, the "remote astronomical course" of time which we perceive as "regular, arithmetical, and, in a sense inhuman and featureless."32 And our lived experience of


objective time, as "The Stationary Journey" (57-59) indicates, can and
does undercut our attempts to exit time through the imagination. Al-
though the main body of the poem describes an imaginative release from
time, the structure of the poem—which both opens and closes with a
description of man's enclosure within time's limits—belyes the
possibility of such an escape. And the poem's steady, plodding tetra-
meter lines reinforce this dark vision through their "regular,"
"arithmetical," and essentially "featureless" beat. Man, as the
speaker indicates in the opening quatrain, is "bound" by time:

Here at my earthly station set,
The revolutions of the year
Bear me bound and only let
This astronomic world appear.
(1-4)

Seeking a release from the barriers imposed by time, the speaker
considers the possibility of a journey back in time as he searches for
a new path of life:

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

While held "stationary" in the here-and-now of objective time, the
speaker takes a backward journey in time through the power of memory.
As the individual's journey from old age to manhood to childhood is
replicated in the historical journey of the race from Charlemagne to
St. Augustine to Jesus to Venus and to the Pharaohs, the path followed
remains time's path: "So, back, or forward, still we strike/Through
time and touch its dreaded goal" (29-30). For eternity is the "fatal
flaw/Through which run out world, life and soul" (31-32). When the
"crack" or "chink" in time sought in Variations VII is uncovered, the "eternity" thus revealed is a lost and empty one. Devoid of "world, life and soul," it is a silent, stationary world of absolute form. It is a world of pure geometry:

For there Immortal Being in
Solidity more pure than stone
Sleeps through the circle, pillar, arch,
Spiral, cone, and pentagon.

(37-40)

This spatial perception of the Eternal Now revealed through the regressive journey in time is totally bereft of human significance.

But there is another "eternity," one which offers a momentary respite from the binding power of time:

To the mind's eternity I turn,
With leaf, fruit, blossom on the spray,
See the dead world grow green within
Imagination's one long day.

(41-44)

The vision of time offered by the "mind's eternity" is similar to that described in a passage from The Three Brothers in which God is conceived as envisioning, in the "self-same moment," the unfallen world of Eden and the redeemed world of the cross:

33 This spatial perception of the Eternal Now, as Elizabeth Huberman points out [in The Poetry of Edwin Muir: The Field of Good and Ill, p. 85], is similar to Muir's description, in Scottish Journey, pp. 212-13, of the cone-like and pyramidal rock formations found in the north Western Highlands. He recalls them as "unearthly not in any vague but in a quite solid sense, like blocks of an unknown world scattered blindly over a familiar one." In the viewer such a scene evokes "the same feeling one might have if one could have a glimpse of an eternal world, such as the world of mathematics, which had no relation to our human feelings, but was composed of certain shapes which existed in a complete, changeless autonomy."

There while outstretched upon the Tree
Christ looks across Jerusalem's towers,
Adam and Eve unfallen yet
Sleep side by side within their bowers.

(45-48)

And yet, despite the attempt to rescue a moment of value in the vision of simultaneity—the vision of an eternal present—, the overriding restrictions of "objective time" are re-asserted. The "mind's eternity" is but a "dream," the "astronomic years" the reality (57), as the last stanza of the poem indicates. Framed by a vision of delimitation, the poem's structure conveys the closed nature of objective time. And yet the central vision of the poem, that of an escape into the timeless realm of the fable, resonates beyond the poem's borders. It is the dream of escape that goads man on in his continuous search for wholeness.

As Muir continues to probe the insolubia of time's riddle in "The Mountains" (59-60), he seeks to discover how to tally his imaginative urgings with his lived experience of sequential time. Poetically transforming his experience of time into a spatial setting—that of the spare Orcadian landscape with its rolling hills and distant mountains—, Muir indicates that time has a way of closing in behind and before the life-traveller. And through his use of a compressed, rhythmically insistent ballad-like stanza \((a^4b^3c^4b^3)\), he reinforces his vision of man's time/space restrictions. Situated in the redundant "hills" of time present, man, as the speaker of the poem indicates, is carried by time from a past, now inaccessible, towards a future, equally remote. Although the speaker feels an inner drive to travel the memoried path back in time or the anticipa-
tory path forward, he is confined to the present moment. For the world of memory is undifferentiated and inaccessible. A "single field," it is "So far away, if I should turn/I know I could not find/That place again" (3, 5-7). And though he can discern "the ranges rising clear/Far in futurity's high-walled land," he is "rooted" to the here-and-now (10-12). Uncertain whether his path to integral reality lies "backward or forward," the speaker desires to reach his ultimate source or goal:

If I could
I'd leap time's bound or turn and hide
From time in my ancestral wood.
(14-16)

Time's region imposes limits and makes the "dream" of escape seem illusory:

Double delusion! Here I'm held
By the mystery of the rock,
Must watch in a perpetual dream
The horizon's gates unlock and lock,
(17-20)

Only in the dream can the speaker envision the fruitful outcome of the forward journey--the "harvest fields of time" (21)--or the success of the backward movement in time as the days of the past which have "closed" behind him (1-2) open out, giving passage to that lost world. The speaker can only dream

.of a peak whose height
Will show me every hill,
A single mountain on whose side
Life blooms for ever and is still.
(25-28)

From this peak he transcends time's hills and achieves a vision of
wholeness and perfection. A place of ceaseless activity and stasis, this is the urgrund, the sacred mountain found at the centre of the world, where one experiences a vital synthesis of time and the timeless. This is what Mircea Eliade, in his analysis of religious symbolism, calls the "Cosmic Mountain" found at the world's centre. The traveller who reaches its highest point, as Eliade explains, experiences a symbolic "break-through into another state": he "transcends profane space and enters into a 'pure region'."35 Such a "pure region," to Muir, is tantamount to those "imaginary places" he so urgently seeks, those "pauses in time."

And yet, though man may reside at the world's center, there may be barriers to his entry into such a "pure region." The place he seeks is at hand and yet inaccessible, a felt presence and yet unknown. The place he seeks--the place of man's innocent source and his salvation--is the "unfamiliar place" (78-79):

I do not know this place,
Though here for long I have run
My changing race
In the moon and the sun,
Within this wooded glade
Far up the mountainside
Where Christ and Caesar died
And the first man was made.

(1-8)

The uncertainty of the speaker, conveyed in the fretful rhythms of these short, hesitant lines, stems from his imprisonment in time. Although on the borderline of mystery, he remains stranded in time's flux:

35 Eliade, Images and Symbols, p. 43.
I have seen this turning light
For many a day.
I have not been away
Even in dreams of the night.

(9-12)

Seeking the "living way" (41) towards integral reality, the speaker takes two different paths. He follows the "dark and winding" trail "inland" (20, 18), the path of dreams and unconscious "fears and shames" (19), and he takes the visionary path as he stands "aloft" (22) and views life from the vantage point of the mountainside. Both paths lead to the same fearful vision (38-42) of time's kingdom. The speaker watches

... the bad and the good
Go up and down the hill,
The peasants on the plain
Ploughing the fields red,
The roads running alone,
The ambush in the wood,
The victim walking on,
The misery-blackened door
That never will open again,
The tumblers at the fair,
The watchers on the stair,
Cradle and bridal-bed,
The living and the dead
Scattered on every shore.

(24-27)

From his remote perspective, the speaker envisions life as a mosaic, a static design. Through his spatial vision of the world of time, he contemplates the pattern of life's destined activity. But his range of vision does not allay his fear: it intensifies it. The "earthly day" awaits him (46): he must take his place in the complex design of life. He must find entrance to the world of good and evil, the world of suffering and joy, the world of love and hate, the world of birth and death. He seeks existence pure and simple but must follow
the winding paths which penetrate deep into life's paradoxes. And this is a path pursued in fear. In these early journey and place poems Muir gropes towards an "image" of life but finds it difficult to conceive of that strange and complex experience without feeling a sense of loss and the stirrings of fear.

And yet, from the very loss inherent to our existence in time, Muir can salvage some meaning, some significance, as he indicates in "The Unattained Place" (83-84). Although we may seek the "unattained place," a self-enclosed world of integral reality, we are separated from it by our "earthly day":

We have seen the world of good deeds spread
With its own sky above it
A length away
Our whole day,
Yet have not crossed from our false kindred.

(1-5)

Although we could have "leapt straight from the womb to bliss" (6) and thus entered the "unattained place," a realm of "natural fields" and "life-fostering seas" (22), a world where "lies our predestined power and ease" (21), we are bound to the "frontier" world of our earthly day by the ties of hatred and weakness. We could have attained the unattained place

But that we hate this place so much
And hating love it,
And that our weakness is such
That it must clutch
All weakness to it . . .

(10-14)

And yet if we could sever the bonds that unite us to this world, if we could "break/This static hold with a mere blank, with nothing" (24-25), if we could rid ourselves of "Memory and thought and longing"
(27), if we could cut ourselves off from our "lost" existence, then we would lose

Our loss,
Our kingdom's crown,
And to great Nothing toss
Our last left jewel down,
The light that long before us was,
The land we did not own,
The choice we could not choose.
(35-41)

For the kingdom we inhabit--the "reverse side" (58) of the world we have lost--is all that we have. And yet from our earthly kingdom, we are given a glimpse of that which we seek, the sacred world of innocence which is our "home":

For once we played upon that other hill,
And from that house we come.
There is a line around it still
And all inside is home.
(42-45)

The presence of the world is felt in its absence in this world as "from that missing heaven outspread/Here all we read" (62-63).

Living as we do on the "reverse side" of the timeless kingdom, it is easy for us to lose our foothold upon what is real and enduring in life. When the vision of the "unattained place" fades, we may enter the "solitary place" (80-81) of visionless life. No longer in touch with the eternal depths of life, we become lost players upon life's hill (43). The deep, plangent harmony underscoring the vision of "Woman and man and beast and rock and sky" becomes meaningless. It becomes nothing more than "a flat image shut behind an eye" (38-39).

When we lose "our loss," when we relinquish the "memory and thought and longing" which link us to the unattained place, we become like the
indifferent creatures who dwell in the "human fold" (99-101), human-animals who "creep severally" to the "hole" they inhabit, bringing "no memory and no grace/To furnish evidence of the soul,/Though come of an ancient race" (41-44). We live that dark, indifferent animal existence Muir found so frightening and so real. "We all come out of a hole and go back into a hole," as he states in his diary. "Leave hiding and go back into hiding. The distance between is disguise."\textsuperscript{36} Imprisoned within the structure of objective time, as Muir suggests in the compressed tetrameter lines of "The Human Fold," we are like penned animals, animals who have learned the futility of shaking the intransigent bars of time's cage:

Here penned within the human fold
No longer now we shake the bars,
Although the ever-moving stars
Night after night in order rolled
Rebuke this stationary farce.

(1-5)

Resigned to our existence in time, we become shut in our recurring day, cut off from our immortal core. As the "ever-moving" stars wheel through their remote, astronomical course ranging through a vast space of time, the incomprehensible immensity of stellar movement—which be-speaks of some predestined, eternal order in the universe—rebukes our "stationary" journey. Encaged by time, our journey through a brief space of time is but a farcical enactment of life's fabled journey.

Only in the timeless moments which come in dreams and visions do

\textsuperscript{36}An Autobiography, p. 245.
we gain insight into our timeless fable. When the cage-door of our
time-consciousness momentarily opens, we gain a deepened awareness of
the categories of our split universe. We peer into that mythical land
Muir envisioned during his waking visions—the world of the dragon,
i.e., supernatural good, and the world of the sphinx, i.e. super-
natural evil (16-20). And we see, in a borderless perspective, a
pictorial representation of the two-fold nature of our moral universe:

Hell shoots its avalanche at our feet,
In heaven the souls go up and down,
And we can see from this our seat
The heavenly and the hellish town.
(21-24).

And we see that although Eden is lost, the cross of redemption is fer-
tile, life-giving. It is the new tree of life, the symbol of the God
of salvation who actively seeks to save us from the Fall. We see

The green cross growing in a wood
Close by old Eden's crumbling wall,
And God Himself in full manhood
Riding against the Fall.
(25-28)

Such symbolic visions of life are important, Muir feels, for we must
have an image or vision of our life if it is to have any significance.
And yet, during "most of our lives we live without any vision at all
. . ."37 For during most of our lives we are encaged within the
human fold.

There is the "all" of the vision but within the confines of
human existence "our sight is bound" by the dull mask-like features
of our fellow creatures, each with a "made-to-measure glance/That

37 Muir, "From a Diary," The New Alliance, vol. 4, no. 5 (Sept.-
is in misery till it's found" (29-32). The pathetic trapped space of the human fold mirrors the ingrown space of the isolated, sterile self. Yet, as the speaker-poet surveys each face, he becomes aware of the imponderables of human existence:

Yet looking at each countenance
I read this burden in them all:
'I lean my cheek from eternity
For time to slap, for time to slap.
I gather my bones from the bottomless clay
To lay my head in the light's lap.'

(33-38)

Though the faces he sees are varnished by indifference, the speaker-poet reads their hidden story. In each dull face he reads the cycle of human existence as it progresses from the boundless world of eternity to the constrained world of time and from time's mortal self back to the timeless spiritual light.

Looking beyond the mask of the surface self, the speaker-poet gains insight into the profound mystery of the pure self. Yet he realizes that an alien distance intervenes between the pure self and the temporal identity. The inmates of the human fold have come a "long" and "dark way" (39) to the "hole" of their time-bound existence. Lacking "memory" or "grace" (42), they are, following Muir's special definition of the term, "evil": "for it may be that evil consists in a hiatus in the soul, a craving blank, a lack of one of the essential threads which bind experience into a coherent whole and give it a consistent meaning."38 They are modern man who, suffering the

exigencies of "public trouble and private care" (50) have lost both faith and hope. Although Muir considers love to be "the supreme quality and more closely connected with immortality than any other,"

love, as it exists in the human fold, is without faith and hope:

And of the legends of our day
This one remains alone:
'They loved and might have loved for ever,
But public trouble and private care
Faith and hope and love can sever
And strip the bed and the altar bare'.

(47-52)

"Genuine" love is predicated upon "genuine liberty" (7-8) and genuine liberty is predicated upon "free will"—the "feeling that, in spite of the fact that all our actions and thoughts are obviously determined by all the things around us, and by our position in time, we are not completely contained by these things, therefore that there is something else in us not dictated to by time." Penmed within the human fold, man is without faith and hope, memory and grace. Although there is "no alternative" but love in such an ingrown world (6), indifference is reflected from the dull faces with their made-to-measure appearances. And yet, the gap between the speaker-poet's lived experience and his vision of the infinite potentiality of human life remains. For though he, too, is an inmate of the human fold, he can read the fable of human life in each face as Muir indicates by repeating, in the final lines of the poem, this simple but haunting refrain:


40 Ibid., p. 137.
And yet looking at each countenance
I read this burden in them all:
'I lean my cheek from eternity
For time to slap, for time to slap.
I gather my bones from the bottomless clay
To lay my head in the light's lap'.

(56-61)

But Muir was not always able to read the fable of life. There were times in his life when he looked into the faces of his fellow men and found himself unable to read their "burden." In his diary he tells of one occasion during which he became aware of his own indifference. Attempting to recapture a visionary experience he had had while watching, from a removed perspective, the busy activities of people in a city street, he discovered that the exact same scene, viewed on another day, could be totally visionless:

Looking at them, I felt neither grief nor satisfaction—merely that official indifference in which we pass ninety-nine hundredths of our lives. I sat and looked at them almost contentedly through the scales that covered my eyes, like a mildly damned spirit, a spirit pickled in a discreet solution of damnation, while something far within me, as faint and forlorn as a hunter's horn in an immense forest, cried that I wanted to see.41

Muir knew the difficulty of "seeing." He knew that the timeless self had to be perpetually recovered only to be lost, snuffed out by the indifferent self of daily existence. He knew the "sufficient place" revealed, during timeless moments of illumination, at the threshold of our experience. But he also knew the "narrow place" of a visionless life, he also knew of that "hiatus of the soul," that

"craving blank" symptomatic of our fallen perception.

The place which all men seek, "The Sufficient Place" (86–87), is the visionary world of integral reality, the world of the centre. It is the place of beginnings and endings, the place to which "all" the world "comes, and goes out again, and comes again" (18), the place of burgeoning life where the motionless trees bear an "aeon's summer foliage" and leaves so thick:

They seem to have robbed a world of shade, and kept
No room for all these birds that line the boughs
With heavier riches, leaf and bird and leaf.

Because it is a remote, inaccessible place, one may travel the writhing roads of time forever and never reach it or one may "chance" (24) to find that timeless world in time. But one is more likely to happen upon the constricted, limited world of "The Narrow Place" (101–102), the negative image of the sufficient place. Here "all the roads creep in" (1) and "nothing comes and goes/But the bleak mountain wind" (10–11). Here one finds a place, not of burgeoning life, but a place where the "parsimonious ground" is so "proud" and "niggardly" and "envious" that it "will trust/Only one little wild half-leafless tree/To straggle from the dust" (22, 26–29). And yet, underneath this tree, man can momentarily experience the bounty of the sufficient place:

Yet underneath it we sometimes feel such ease
As if it were ten thousand trees
And for its foliage had
Robbed half the world of shade.

42 See pp. 80–84 of this dissertation for a fuller discussion of "The Sufficient Place."
All the woods in grief
Bowed down by leaf and bird and leaf
From all their branches could not weep
A sleep such as that sleep.

(30-37)

But the place of sufficiency is now perceived as "bowed down" in grief. The loss of wholeness, resulting from man's fallen perception, weighs heavily.

Whereas the eyes of the wayfarer who chances to find the sufficient place "three times in time" are "changed" and "make a summer silence" amid the tumult of time (24-26), the visionless eyes of the dweller in the narrow place are "murdering" (39). Whereas the wayfarer in the sufficient place is enjoined to open his eyes and "see," the inhabitant of the narrow place is told to "shut" his eyes "and see" (42) for only in dreams can he re-enter the world of inner vision:

Sleep underneath the tree.
It is your murdering eyes that make
The sterile hills, the standing lake,
And the leaf-breaking wind.
Then shut your eyes and see,
Sleep on and do not wake
Till there is movement in the lake,
And the club-headed water-serpents break
In emerald lightnings through the slime,
Making a mark on Time.

(38-47)

As sleep passes, dreams of sufficiency fade. The serpents of time—an image suggestive of the inherent evil of time and its coiling redundancy—greet the awakening dreamer. The narrow place is the limited strip of time we inhabit in the time-bound world. But it is also the narrow cell of the isolated self, the self which recoils from the vacancy of the present moment and withdraws into a world of private
selfhood. The narrow place is the ingrown world of the indifferent self for the faces of those who dwell there "have lost all look of hate or love/And keep but what they have" (16-17). The "murdering eyes" of man's indifference "make" the narrow place what it is: the sterile space of our fallen perception.

While the space inhabited by the unconscious self—the dreamer and the visionary—is mythic, dynamic, and sufficient, the space inhabited by the conscious self is ingrown, static, and narrow. It is, to use Ernst Cassirer's term, space without "accent." The journey through time can lead to such a dead-end world when the total otherness of indifference possesses the self, cutting it off from its true identity. Indifference, as Muir tells us in the simple, tetrameter couplets of his psychological allegory, Variations IX (50-52), can act as an alien force which intrudes between the self and experience:

Packed in my skin from head to toe
Is one I know and do not know.
He never speaks to me yet is at home
More snug than embryo in the womb.

His name's Indifference.
Nothing offending he is all offence;
Can stare at beauty's bosom coldly
And at Christ's crucifixion boldly;
Can note with a lack-luster eye
Victim and murderer go by:

(1-4; 10-15).

43Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 2, Mytical Thought, trans. by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 85. Cassirer states: "In contrast to the homogeneity which prevails in the conceptual space of geometry every position and direction in mythical space is endowed as it were with a particular accent—and this accent always goes back to the fundamental mythical accent, the division between the sacred and the profane."
The split framework of the metaphysical universe is replicated within the psyche of the individual. The inner drama of the soul immured in time is a drama of a split consciousness. As man becomes isolated within himself, his indifference—that part of the self which severs him from a full vision of life—seems to take on a character of its own. An unbidden intruder, it possesses the self.

Indifference, as Muir conceives it in Variations IX, is a primary fault. A non-feeling mode of apprehending the self in the world, it lies at the heart of man's separation from integral reality:

If I could drive this demon out
I'd put all Time's display to rout.
Its wounds would turn to flowers and nothing be
But the first Garden. The one Tree
Would stand for ever safe and fair
And Adam's hand stop in the air.
Or so I dream when at my door
I hear my Soul, my Visitor.

(22-29)

The inner conflict between the self's Indifference and the soul's Pity is a conflict between the self's sense of separateness from the world and the soul's sense of relatedness. For whereas Indifference stares coldly at life, in all its good and evil, the soul's Pity "Weeps for the hero's and the beggar's fall;/The conquerer before his fallen foe" (33-34). But as Pity comes to efface Indifference and right the wrongs of life, it cancels what it "feeds upon" (44). If Pity could succeed in ending "all passion, flaw, offence," then the "homespun fiend Indifference" would return and possess the self "wholly" (46-48). Man must recognize both elements of his dual and undecided identity if he is to gain self-knowledge. It is the isolated, fragmented self which urges man to find the nexus of self-unity.
Indifference, as the speaker-poet indicates in "The Private Place" (82), is both an "ally" and an "only enemy" (8) for it is only by struggling with his indifference that the speaker can gain a vision of harmony and a feeling of self-awareness. Indifference is the "deaf usurper," the "stranger" holding the speaker "from head to toe" (1-2). Only in moments of "strife and the aftertaste of strife/With this dull champion and thick-witted king" (26-27) does the speaker achieve momentary wholeness. For as he takes up the "cleansing blade" (9) and fights the "predestined fight" (11) with his inner indifferent enemy—a fight predetermined by man's mortal condition, his time-bound existence—he achieves self-unity and so finds himself "home" (17):

The ancestral stroke, the opening gash of light:
Side by side myself by myself slain,
The wakening stir, the eyes loaded with gain
Of ocean darkness, the rising hand in hand,
I with myself at one, the changed land,
My home, my country.

(12-17)

In the dramatic instant of self-union, the individual enters a new space of placeless depth. The space of self-encounter is full, alive, dynamic. It is "home." But the "thief time will steal" bit by bit the "boundless treasure/Held in four hands" (18-19):

... . . . I shall regain my measure,
My old measure again, shrink to a room, a shelf
Where decently I lay away myself,
Become the anxious warder, groan and fret
My thankless service to this martinet
Who sleeps and sleeps and rules . . . .

(20-25)

The true self is known only in those fleeting moments of illumination—those moments of "the wakening stir, the eyes loaded with gain"—
which follow the struggle to see. And this struggle is destined to be repeated again and again for time and its accompanying indifference reconstruct the barriers that separate the self from its vision of wholeness. "The great sin," as Muir states in his diary, "is to let everything slip past in a sort of dream or stupor, aware neither of yourself nor of the world: the normal state of human life. The task is merely to waken up." But when the self is harnessed to the restricted world of time and to the oppressive closeness of its own indifference "merely to waken up" is an on-going, lifetime struggle.

As a dweller in time and place, Muir has a deep-seated urge to escape the irreversible forward press of time and the prison of the indifferent self and to find entry to the boundless world of eternity intuited through the imagination. But his very time-sense casts a penumbra of uncertainty around his vision of the timeless. He feels that he has deluded himself with a mere "dream," as he indicates in "The Stationary Journey." He seeks a timeless moment of vision, one that can break into the horizontally-directed, self-contained movement of time and invest life with meaning. Instead, he discovers a static eternity of pure form, the eternity of "Immortal Being in/Solidity more pure than stone." Or he uncovers, in "The Road" (61-62), the dark revelation of the "country of Again," an eternal world in which time's unfolding events exist as a simultaneous now. In the paradoxical "country of Again" where there is time without temporality—for the "busy clock" shows no hours (6)—there is no escape from the

conflict and tragedy which inhere to the structured world of time. Here the recurring pattern of hunter and hunted is forever fixed, determined. Endlessly, the hunter shoots the "empty air" ahead of his quarry which "falls though nothing's there to parry" (8-10). Endlessly, the lion "Rolls down the everlasting slope/Bones picked an age ago,/And the bones rise up and go" (13-15). And here the before-and-after moment of tragedy is forever present for the ship "sailing safe in harbour" has "long since" been "drowned" in "many a sea" (21-22). Here "the beginning finds the end/Before beginning ever can be" (16-17) and here man reclines on his tomb while "within the womb,/The cell of doom" (29-30)

The ancestral deed is thought and done,
And in a million Edens fall
A million Adams drowned in darkness,
For small is great and great is small,
And a blind seed all.

(31-35)

As the four-stress lines of this five line stanza dwindle into a final line of three consecutive stresses, the rhythmic energy of the poem slows down and subsides into darkness. The inscrutable, dark vision of "Again" offers no release from the ever-recurring "Fall" into blindness for the innermost core of that world holds, in a simultaneous now, the endless moment of man's headlong descent from eternity into time. The vision of "Again," a vision of time's patterned and endlessly repeating cycles, is terrifying, incomprehensible. It is a controlled nightmare.

Equally frightening, as Muir indicates in "The Recurrence" (102-104), is the Nietzschean concept of Eternal Recurrence, a doctrine
which teaches the patterned necessity of time, the endless return of
the same in a world of Becoming. If, as Nietzsche claims, "all
things return" as the ancient wheel of time revolves (1-2), then man
is totally predetermined:

Rise, take up your numbered fate;
The cradle and the bridal bed,
Life and coffin wait.
All has been that ever can be,
And this sole eternity
Cannot cancel, cannot add
One to your delights or tears,
Or a million million years
Tear the nightmare from the mad.

(3-11)

The doctrine of eternal return is at best an enigmatic concept,
one riddled, as those philosophers who have studied it claim, with
logical difficulties. As Zarathustra, teacher of eternal return,
states:

"'Now do I die and disappear,' wouldst thou say, and in
a moment I am nothing. Souls are as mortal as bodies.
But the plexus of causes returneth in which I am
intertwined,—it will again create me! I myself pertain
to the causes of the eternal return.
I come again with this sun, with this earth, with this
eagle, with this serpent—not to a new life, or a better
life, or a similar life:
—I come again eternally to this identical and selfsame
life, in its greatest and its smallest, to teach again the
eternal return of all things,—"

[from The Complete Works of Frederich Nietzsche, ed. by Dr. Oscar Levy,
18 vols. (reprint ed. of 1909-1911 ed.; New York: Russell and Russell,
Inc., 1964), vol. 2 Thus Spake Zarathustra, trans. by Thomas Common,
discussion of this concept see Joan Stambaugh's Nietzsche's Thought
of Eternal Return (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press,
1972). Stambaugh states on pp. 112-13: "Despite all the problems,
contradictions and diverse possible interpretations of Nietzsche's
thought of eternal return, one thing about it is indisputable. Its
basic meaning, stated in neutral fashion, is that there is no finality.
This lack of finality embraces this world, as well as any possible
'transcendence.' With reference to transcendence, lack of finality
simply means that there is no final, static ground of the world which
transcends that world."
The doctrine of the Eternal Return is nihilistic, mechanistic. In the "sole eternity" of time's recurring events, the meaning of man's existence in time is nullified. The "sole eternity" of Becoming, like that of "Immortal Being in/Solidity more pure than stone," is bereft of human meaning. There is no significance to the suffering sustained by life's victims; there is no value in the prizes won by life's victors. Man is totally determined so that the "ill be always ill" while the "happy be happy still" (31-33). Man lacks the freedom to direct the course of his life for the events of his life are fated to occur, in the exact same sequence, again and again as the "sole eternity" of recurrence continuously unfolds. What is, is forever.

Or, is it? Recurrence, as Muir indicates in the final section of the poem, is nothing more than what the "eye" sees as it looks at the world and beholds the images spun off by time's revolving wheel. The "eye" cannot "see" beyond the chronometric and cyclical movements of time:

This is only what the eye
From its tower on the turning field
Sees and sees and cannot tell why,
Quarterings on the turning shield,
The great non-stop heraldic show.

(35-39)

But there is another vision given to those who can "see" beyond the fatalistic pattern of time. The "heart" and the "mind" know that

What has been can never return,
What is not will surely be
In the changed unchanging reign,
Else the Actor on the Tree
Would loll at ease, miming pain,
And counterfeit mortality.

(41-46)
The "heart" and "mind," sustained by faith, can see through the appearances of the "sole Eternity" of time to the eternal verities which invest life with meaning. Time is not a closed circle. Man moves toward a redeemable future.

Mid-career, Muir finds himself, as he writes in a letter in 1940, totally devoid of a "philosophy." "I suppose what I mean when I say I have no philosophy," he explains, "is that I have no explanation, none whatever, of Time except as an unofficial part of Eternity --no historical explanation of human life, for the problem of evil seems insoluble to me: I can only accept it as a mystery, and what a mystery is I do not know." But though he lacks a philosophy, what he does have, he discovers, is "faith." And though he retains a haunting fear that his faith may be "a little too easy, considering the enormity of these things," yet, he feels, "there may be something more in faith than we can account for, a source of energy and reconciliation which philosophy cannot reach." It is his tentative, but growing faith which allows him, mid-way on his poetic road, to reach a new acceptance of life.

For even as Muir, in his journey and place poems, recoils from the nihilism implicit in the eternity of "Again" and in the "sole Eternity" of the Eternal Return, he realizes that if he wishes to "see life timelessly" and see it "whole," if he wants to "affirm life" in sight of all that is "hopeless" and "helpless" and "inexplicable," then he must come to terms with the evil and suffering and

46 Selected Letters, p. 112.
loss which inhere to man's lived experience of time. For though, in his journey and place poems, he seeks the "unattained place" of "pre-
destined ease" and the "sufficient place" of the visionary life, Muir also comes to realize the deep and abiding truth stated in "The Original Place" (85-86)—that the world of time is our "native air," our "native land" (19, 1). And he also comes to realize that the "rounded conception" of life he seeks can be found by penetrating the hidden pattern underlying the "fearful" vision granted to the speaker of "The Unfamiliar Place" (78-79), the vision of man's "earthly day":

And aloft I have stood
And given my eyes their fill,
Have watched the bad and good
Go up and down the hill,
   * * * * *
The roads running alone,
The ambush in the wood,
The victim walking on,
   * * * * *
Cradle and bridal bed,
The living and the dead
Scattered on every shore.
(22-25; 28-30; 35-37)

As Muir, mid-career, gropes for a complete vision of life, he comes to a deep understanding of the opposing forces of life. He begins to realize that the evil and suffering inherent in man's "earthly day" are part of the pattern, part of the fable of life.

The first, tentative approach to this belief is found in the dream-vision described in "The Dreamt-Of Place" (87-88). As the speaker-poet recounts his dream of the end of evil and time on the day of "reconciliation," the "day after the Last Day" when time "has caught time and holds it fast forever" (13-4, 17), he suddenly asks himself a deep and penetrating question:
And then I thought, Where is the knife, the butcher,
The victim? Are they all here in their places?
Hid in this harmony? But there was no answer.
(18-20)

His early endeavors to behold a vision of "reconciliation," as Muir indicates in his 1937-1939 diary, were fraught with difficulties. For when he attempted to imaginatively perceive people as immortal spirits, he achieved, not a vision of "reconciliation" but a deepened "consciousness" of the "pattern of good and evil," a pattern which he conceived to extend "into eternity." 47

But by 1940, he had discovered an approach to the reconciling vision he sought. In an article written in that year, Muir describes the "three ways" in which life can be seen through "yesterday's mirror," the contemplative mirror which reflects a vision of the past. When the "realist" glances into the mirror of the past, the mirror which "shows life as it is lived," he perceives "a world where wrong triumphs and right suffers." When the man with the "normal" vision of life looks into the same mirror, though, he sees an "indefeasible rightness beneath the wrongness of things; a struggle between good and evil, and not merely the victory of evil; and to him the rightness of human life has a 'deeper reality, a more fundamental appositeness, than the evil, as being more truly native to man.'" But the third glance into that same mirror, Muir feels, offers to the "greatest poets and mystics at their greatest moments," the "supreme vision of human life," one "beyond rational description," one which "reconciles all oppo-
sites." For the world perceived by the mystic and the poet is one in which both "good and evil have their place legitimately." It is a world in which the king and the rebel, the tyrant and the slave, the assassin and the victim, each play "a part in a supertemporal drama which at every moment in its totality, issues in glory and meaning and fulfillment."48

As Muir, in the poetry of the early and mid-1940s moves toward a comprehensive vision of life, he approaches, though ever so tentatively, this overarching vision of life as a "supertemporal drama" as he poetically explores, in "The Three Mirrors" (140-141), the "three ways" in which the fallen world of time—the world of man's "earthly day"—can be viewed through "yesterday's mirror." As the speaker-poet looks into the "first glass" (1), he perceives the world of the "realist," a world of deep discord and imponderable evil. Here he sees nature set against itself as the vine scribbles "with wrath the stone" (5-6). Here the "mountain summits"—symbolic of the world of the future and the final goal of life's journey—are "sealed/In incomprehensible wrath" (7-8). Here, where the roots run wrong, and the paths go "askew," the roads of life are "hunting roads" which run "round the flying hill" and "bring the quarry"—i.e., the pilgrim-traveller—to his grim "home" (9-11). Here, where the "lumbering fate" falls wrong, the speaker-poet recognizes the triumph of evil in the world of time.

But when he looks into the "second glass," he penetrates beyond

the realist's vision and discerns an image of good behind life's evil. As he looks "through the twisted scroll" of the realist's world, he uncovers a vision of deep, plangent harmony, a vision "In virtue undefiled/And new in eternity" (18-20). Here he regains a vision of the timeless radiance of first childhood and the bounty of the sufficient place as he sees "Father and mother and child,/The house with its single tree" (21-22). But this vision does not remain whole. For the natural "blade and leaf" are "bent" to "shapes of terror and grief" by the "angry law" of time and the Fall (25-27).

With the advent of maturity, the child "at peace in his play" (30) becomes initiated to the world of time and death. He changes as he passes "through a door" (31). And as he changes, so his primal world of "house" and "tree" becomes irrevocably altered as "locked in love and grief/Good with evil lay" (32, 34-35).

Although the speaker-poet does not indicate that he has achieved the mystical vision perceived within the "third glass"--for he states "If I looked (my italics)--yet he has an insight into what he "should" see there if that vision were given him:

If I looked in the third glass
I should see evil and good
Standing side by side
In the ever standing wood,
The wise king safe on his throne,
The rebel raising the rout,
And each so deeply grown
Into his own place
He'd be past desire or doubt.

(36-44)

Although Muir does not lay claim to a first-hand experience of the "supreme vision" of human life seen within the "third glass"--for he
does not place himself among the "greatest" of poets and mystics--,
he does record his approach to the threshold of this vision in an
earlier poem, "The Trophy" (116). For as the speaker-poet of
"The Trophy" ponders the meaning of those "images" which "haunt" him,
images of the "wise king dowered with blessing on his throne,/The
rebel raising the flag in the market place" (1-2), he is able to
penetrate their enigmatic significance. Although the king and rebel
"clash in horror and blood" on time's "blindfold battlefield" (8-9),
viewed from the "supertemporal" perspective their conflict is frozen
in the stasis of an iconic design: "Motionless in the grove of evil
and good," they "grow together" and their "roots" are intertwined in
"deep confederacy far from the air" (10-12). King and rebel are "like
brother and brother,/Or father and son, co-princes of one mind,/Irreconcilables, their treaty signed" (14-16). In the integral time-
space unit of a moment of insight, Muir uncovers the paradoxical two-
fold unity of life, the reconciliation of opposites. The search "to
see life timelessly" and to see it "whole," as Muir comes to under-
stand, can ultimately lead to a vision which incorporates life's evil
and suffering.

But there is more than the reconciliation of good and evil to be
seen in the "third glass," as the speaker-poet of "The Three Mirrors"
indicates. For "if" he "could" look into that concentrated and con-
secrated world of vision, he "should see" there an overarching vision
of harmony. He "should see" the interpenetrating harmony of mankind,
he "should see" the "world's house open wide,/The million million
rooms" (46-47). And, as Muir closes his poem with a personal refer-
ence, he imagines that he also "should see" his wife there with himself: he envisions the two of them encompassed by the peace of harmony and joined together in a deep and profound love:

   Tranquillity in the air,
   Peace of the humming looms
   Weaving from east to west,
   And you and myself there.

   (50-53)

Held within the borderless perspective of vision is the woven pattern of life's good and evil and an overarching vision of love and harmony that spans life's beginnings (its east) and its endings (its west).

   The journey through time and place "under the years' assaults,/
   In the storm of good and bad" (157, 29-30) brings Muir to this essential affirmation of life, to this imaginative vision of the totality, the wholeness of human life. And in the final poems of *The Narrow Place* and *The Voyage*, his journey also brings him to what William Sadler, in his analysis of the "spatial structure" of love, describes as the "boundless" space of a loving encounter.49 "Love," as Sadler states, "constitutes a new structure of existential space"50 for the "space of a loving encounter stretches endlessly in directions of joy and fulfillment."51 The individual is "released by love" for participation in an existential possibility that transcends the narrow


50Ibid., p. 178.

51Ibid., p. 166.
confines of isolated existence." The individual finds his "home" in the love relationship for to find a home "means to find another person, for one is not really at home alone." To Muir, love provides just such a "spatial structure" and just such a "home." Finding the beloved, as Muir states in "The Confirmation" (118) is like finding "a place/of welcome suddenly amid the wrong/Valleys and rocks and twisting roads" (4-6). His wife is like a "fountain in a waste,/ A well of water in a country dry" (7-8) found by the weary "traveler" (4). She gives back to him the lost world of the original creation: her "open heart,/Simple with giving, gives the primal deed,/The first good world, the blossom, the blowing seed" (10-12). And she gives back to him the lost world of home—the "hearth," the "steadfast land"—and the world of potentiality known to the pilgrim-traveller—the "wandering sea" (13). In his love for his wife, Muir finds a new possibility for personal existence, and, as he states in "The Annunciation" (117), in love he finds a new freedom from the "iron reign" of time (1). For their love is one in which "each asks from each"

What each most wants to give
And each awakes in each
What else would never be,
Summoning so the rare
Spirit to breathe and live.
(4-8)

Though their love "was born/Here in a time and place," it has the

52 Ibid., pp. 182-83.

53 Ibid., p. 163.
power to "magnify" life (21–22, 24) and to make them "each for each" and in their spirit "whole" (31–32).

The quest for wholeness, the quest to escape the ingrown space of the human fold and the narrow place of self is fulfilled in the expansive and elevated moment of love. For love, as Muir states in a letter written in 1944, is "the supreme quality and more closely connected with immortality than any other..." In the spiritual interpenetration achieved in the time-space unit of a moment of love, Muir finds something that survives the onslaghs of "unpitying Time" (p. 21, 1.28). For the strand woven by the poet and his wife in their "monologue of two" is enduring: "time cannot undo/That strong and subtle chain" (119, 30–32). Though time may take "all" from the lovers, as Muir indicates in the sonnet "Time Held in Time's Despite" (155), yet there is an ineluctably mysterious "residue" which survives time. Though the "all" of their human existence may be "lost," there is the spoken "guarantee" that the essence of their spiritual coinherence will survive. For a higher force, the "word of terror or of grace" (6), "spoke, when all was lost, the guarantee": "'Imper-sonally soul and soul embrace,/And incorruptibly are bodies bound.'" (7–9) As time passes, dissolving like melting snowflakes, a new spatial structure—a new Eden—arises out of the interpenetrating love between the poet and his wife:

The hours that melt like snowflakes one by one
Leave us this residue, this virgin ground
For ever fresh, this firmament and this sun.

Selected Letters, p. 138.
Then let us lay unasking hand in hand,
And take our way, thus led, into our land.
(10-14)

"I feel I probably have a sort of obsession about time," Muir states in a letter written in 1940, "and I wish I could look at it more objectively. Instead of seeing Time as the dimension of growth, I see everything passing away..."  

But though time passes and life with it, love, as Muir indicates in "Time Held in Time's Despite" has a staying power.

And it is love that empowers him, in the celebratory poem "In Love for Long" (159-160) to come to an absolute awareness of life and to find the hidden, unifying ground of existence. In this poem 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." As he seeks to give concrete form to his experience of an irreducible and ir-

55Ibid., p. 120.

56Cited 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 Swanson 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."
resistible love, a love grounded in the soil of this world, Muir seeks
to create a poetry of a higher order, a poetry which tells the un-
tellable and gives shape to the intangible. He seeks 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 poetic powers of 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 rich 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. For 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 "can-
not part from him" (9-10). What he loves resides in paradox and con-
tradiction 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?
(13-18)
What he loves cannot be grasped through the reason nor can it be localized or confined by the intellect—i.e., he cannot "prove" it. What he loves can only be grasped in a poetic song, a song of utter simplicity and child-like intensity.

It is his love for being that enables him to find a domain of freedom within time's prison, a world of good within the framework of the world's evils, an overarching joy within the realm of life's sorrows. For though his "happy happy love" for being is besieged with the "crying sorrows" of death (19-20), though time's "vice" crushes it "beneath and above/Between to-days and morrows" (21-22), yet he retains his love for being. His love is "A little paradise/Held in the world's vice" (23-24):

And there it is content
And careless as a child,
And in imprisonment
Flourishes sweet and wild;
In wrong, beyond wrong,
All the world's day long.

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.

(25-37)

Though the "happy" moment of love passes, in its integral time-space unit the speaker-poet recovers the world of innocence, joy, and fulfillment. Though vulnerable and doomed by time, his love, like the "happy doe" found in the tiger's grasp, "vindicates its cause" by the very fact of its existence. For his love creates its own dynamic world of perfected order and value, its own fullness of presence, its
own open moment of time. Freedom and joy emerge within the boundaries of time. Human life can be infinitely expanded within the boundless moment of love.

Despite his obsession with time and his vision of things "passing away," Muir comes, as he indicates in "The Transmutation" (154-55), to a knowledge of the immutable and ineffable core of life which survives time as he approaches a "strange" and marvellous vision, one beyond "all contrivance, word, or image, or sound, or silence, to express" (4-6). For he realizes that though "all should change to ghost and glance and gleam" (1) with the passage of time, the very process of time transforms substance into essence and so gives rise to that which stands "beyond all change" (2). Poised "between the unmoving dream/And the sole moving moment" (3-4), we "who fall/
Through times' long ruin" (6-7) can "weave" an enduring design within the "ghostly borders" of transmuted time:

There incorruptible the child plays still,
The lover waits beside the trysting tree,
The good hour spans its heaven, and the ill,
Rapt in their silent immortality,

As in commemoration of a day
That having been can never pass away.

(9-14).

Childhood innocence, love, the vision of the good and the ill—all are preserved in the incorruptible, iconic time/space unit of a moment of vision.

With his growing faith in his vision of "silent immortality" and

57Selected Letters, p. 120.
his growing realization that time is "an unofficial part of Eternity,"\textsuperscript{58} Muir comes, in the poetry of the mid-1940s, to a new waystation on his poetic road of life: he reaches a new acceptance of the earthly. As a poet, he pledges himself to things "transitory and good": he pledges himself "to the earth" (158, 2, 11). As he looks back over his road in "A Birthday" (157-158), he sings with a new simplicity of the common things of this world, the "tingling smell and touch" of the humble dogrose and sweet briar (3-4), the "sours and sweets" growing in "hedge or marsh or ditch" (6-8). Recovering, from fifty years before, his innocent "first look" at life, he gathers to his heart "Beast, insect, flower, earth, water, fire,/In absolute desire" (10-11). As he recovers this vision of earthly delight and fulfillment in these simple trimeter lines, he reaches a new acceptance of life and its road:

\begin{verbatim}
Before I saw the wood
I loved each nook and bend,
The track going right and wrong;
Before I took the road
Direction ravished my soul.
Now that I can discern
It whole or almost whole,
Acceptance and gratitude
Like travellers return
And stand where first they stood.
\end{verbatim}

(21-30)

As Muir, in his following—and his greatest—volumes of poetry resumes and re-constitutes his on-going journey on the "track going right or wrong," the road he takes remains one of maze-like confusions and of wavering light and ever-deepening shadows. For the road re-

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p. 112.
mains one in which "Hour and place/Are huddled awry, at random teased and tossed" (163, 5-6). But though the path forks and twists and turns, the quest he takes becomes, more than ever before, a targeted quest, a quest with "direction." A pattern emerges in the midst of life's patternlessness and so Muir comes to find a positive value even in the chaotic "hour and place" to which he is confined. And as he persists in his journey, a journey which he takes in both faith and doubt, in both acceptance and revolt, so he persists in seeking out, ever so blindly, his "in eternity written and hidden way" (122, 14). And late in his journey, following years of struggle in the vast arena of life, there comes the earned vision of the traveller, the traveller who continuously seeks the way of life even when it leads through the chaos of the labyrinth. For late in the journey the pilgrim approaches his goal—he finds the Eden he so tirelessly has sought—and he finds it within the confines of this world. By the mid-1940s Muir has uncovered the structure of the fable. He has glimpsed the pattern of human life. In the years ahead he comes to verify that vision as he finds a way to live an authentic life within time and place. Although the world of time is a difficult land, it is also, as Muir realizes, our home.
He went straight ahead with his eyes fixed on the place where he thought the dawn would sometime appear. But day after day the sun rose behind his back, casting before him a great maze of shadows and at the heart of the maze, blacker than all the others, the shadow of himself. Late in the day the sun appeared before him at last, already in its descent, so that all he ever saw was a recurring sunset. Yet he went on, never once turning his head.

By devious ways we grow straight.
-Muir, "From a Diary"

The supreme rite of initiation is to enter a labyrinth and return from it, and yet every life, even the least eventful, can be taken as the journey through a labyrinth. The sufferings and trials undergone by Ulysses were fabulous, and yet any man’s return home has the value of Ulysses’ return to Ithaca.

-Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion

No longer shunning the life of man in time, no longer seeking only the perfected life beyond time, Muir, in his final journey and place poems—The Labyrinth (1949), One Foot in Eden (1956), and his final uncollected poems—tests his vision against the reality of the world he inhabits. Both the dark and light of that world are inter-
woven into his poetic fable as Muir becomes acutely aware of the dual revelation of human history, a history shadowed by the fearful spectres of Nazism and Communism and illumined by the Incarnation, the Promise of man's redemption from time and history. The journey, in its final stages, is a journey through the chaos and negations of the labyrinth to the threshold of a new affirmative vision, a new approach to Eden. The governing drive behind the story Muir tells in his final journey poems centers not on the urge to escape time, but the urge to find an inspired sense of direction, to find the "way" through life's complexities and evils. For the affirmative vision achieved in the poetry of the mid-1940s, the vision of a world "in which both good and evil have their place legitimately"1 is difficult to sustain, Muir realizes, as we struggle in life's moral arena "for in life we are ourselves the opposites and must act as best we can."2

As Muir continues his on-going journey, he must "make friends with the evils, take his part,/Salute the outer and inner strife,/The bickering between doubt and faith" (269, 37-39). For he grows blind as he seeks to read the fable of life in the earth's "dark story" and as he attempts to discern our "in eternity written and hidden way" while travelling the dark roads of human history. He must face a world stripped to nothing, nothing but faith, on his journey to wholeness. He must thread his way through the lightless, chaotic paths of the labyrinth--his own inner doubts--before he can come to


2Ibid.
a renewed and deepened faith in the world of our fallen perception and
a renewed love of the "lawless" world of time with its "knotted landscape," its "thickets running wild,/The thorny waste, the flourishing
grove" (213, 40-43). But by acting out his fable and seeking out the
hidden path towards reconciliation, he learns how to shape experience
and how to find the significance of what time and human history give
him. And near the end of his road, he comes to a deep understanding
of human life. He realizes that "all is in its place" in this world,
for the "good and evil" keep an "equal and strange order" (273-5,
22-3).

Finding the "archetypal image"\(^3\) of the journey a total myth,
one that is open and accessible and yet infinitely rich in meaning,
one that says all that there is to say about the modes of becoming
inherent in the human condition, Muir, in his final journey poems,
faces the frustrations and terrors and losses involved in the journey
again and again. Though the pilgrim seeks a resting point in the
sacred centre of existence, the life of the wanderer, as Muir en-
visions it, involves a continuing process of self-discovery, of be-
coming. Caught, deep "in the center of the endless maze," the travel-
ler must face the "twilight nothingness" of the labyrinth and its
roads that "run and run and never reach an end" (163-65, 45, 9, 68).
The road of life forever runs on, leaps on, leads on (166). But
though the traveller can find no firm core of ontological security
in his life of restless, random wanderings along life's redundant

\(^3\)An Autobiography, p. 217.
roads, the radical assumption underlying the vision of the road is that there is a "way" towards integral reality. Muir's analysis of Kafka's use of the road image is clearly self-referential:

The image of a road comes into our minds when we think of his [Kafka's] 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.4

Through the "supreme and exhausting effort" of his ritual of repeated journeyings, Muir confronts us with an image of our life and reveals that our life-journey is at once knowable and ineluctably mysterious. Travelling the road of self-revelation, Muir teaches us, in his final journey and place poems, to face the terrors of the road, the road we take in both doubt and faith. For though man is doomed to be a wanderer and to often lose his way on the deceptive and threatening roads of life, he is also fated, if he continues his journey, to discover the pattern underlying life's patternlessness: he is fated to uncover the fable of life. And for the traveller who has taken that long and difficult journey, there is another reward: there is the promise of the homecoming. For in the center of the maze and at the end of the on-going road, we find an approach to that home so tirelessly sought: we find the path leading to our sacred center. With the final step at the end of the journey, we discover that the road, despite all of its intricacies, "is a road which as it con-

continues curves round toward its beginnings. . . ."\(^5\) As we approach the end of our road so we approach our sacred source: we approach Eden.

As Muir, in the final journey poems, re-examines the beginnings of our storied journey, our following of a "way" that is "not a way," he again reaches back to the mythic moment which so obsessed him: the sundering instant of the Fall. In "Adam's Dream" (210-12), a poem, as several commentators have pointed out, suggested by Adam's vision of the future in *Paradise Lost*,\(^6\) Muir imagines the disquieting dream-vision granted Adam when he awoke from his "agelong daydream in the Garden" (2), his daydream of an organic Eden where man and nature existed in mutual harmony. Muir, imagining Adam as an unprepared spectator of his "changing dream" (56) of human time and history, skillfully manipulates Adam's spatial perspective—moving from an initial wide angle of vision to a final, isolated close-up—to signal his protagonist's growing identification and involvement with his dream-vision and his growing comprehension of its significance.

Initially detached from his dream-vision, Adam perceives it objectively, as cut off from reference to himself. Standing high on a mountainside, he looks down upon a vast plain where he sees a "few small figures running" (16), figures that resemble men and women in form. Although the reader recognizes these running figures


as a symbolic representation of fallen man's race along the hurtling
track of time and history, to "one lately in Eden" (54), such as Adam,
that realization comes only slowly. All that Adam can see, at first,
is an inscrutable, incessant cycle of activity: the figures run, then
fall, then rise and run and fall and rise, always "the same yet not
the same, Identical or interchangeable, Different in indifference"
(20-22). Their movement—symbolic of the linear sequence of genera-
tions of men, the fall of one giving rise to the next—is a parody of
motion. As time passes in Adam's telescoped vision of the future of
his progeny, these atomized figures increase in numbers in a
mechanical fashion, as by "an alien arithmetical magic" (24). As
mere moving objects, they join only "Number to number in no mode or
order, Weaving no pattern" and moving toward "no fixed mark" (27-29).
In Adam's dark revelation of the future, war appears as a random,
chaotic activity engaged in by these "creatures" as they clash to-
gether and then fall in "mounds of bodies" (30-1) while love appears
as a random convergence of figures, as "fortuitous assignations/In
the disorder" (39-40). And man's earthly journey in the vast arena
of time presents an image of disconnected, chaotic wanderings, of
movement without meaning. "Identical or interchangeable (32), these
creatures follow a way

. . . . that was not like a way;
Some back and forward, back and forward, some
In a closed circle, wide or narrow, others
In zigzags on the sand. Yet all were busy,
And tense with purpose as they cut the air
Which seemed to press them back. . .
(33-38)
Suddenly moved to uncover the significance of his vision, Adam cries out to these figures "'What are you doing there?'") (46-7) only to be answered by his own echo. But as he steps back from his vision to ask its meaning, he suddenly intuits what it is he sees: it is time. With this flash of recognition, Adam, in his "changing dream" (56-57) moves nearer to the figures, for now he wants to know "who" the figures are: he wants to see their "faces" (55). With this change in spatial position, Adam realizes that these figures are engaged in an activity beyond his comprehension and theirs. For they act out a drama which has a "form and sequence past their knowledge" (59). Each cast "singly for his part," they unknowingly make up and illustrate "a story" (61-3). As Adam longs to see more than this "mere moving pattern," this "illustrated storybook of mankind" (64-5), he is abruptly transported into the center of his vision. No longer above his vision but within it, his new perspective creates a new alliance between himself and the figures revealed to him. Suddenly, Adam recognizes that "each face" is "like his face" (67-68). About to hail these creatures as "sons of God," Adam is suddenly restrained:

And he remembered all, Eden, the Fall,  
The Promise, and his place, and took their hands  
That were his hands, his and his children's hands,  
Cried out and was at peace, and turned again  
In love and grief in Eve's encircling arms.  
(70-74)

As his encounter with the alien otherness of his vision becomes a self-encounter, as the objective vision is revealed to have subjective resonance, Adam, no longer a dispassionate spectator, becomes emotionally involved with his vision. And as he discovers his vital link to
the world he envisions, he also intuits the "fable" underlying the surface appearances of the "story": Eden, the Fall, and the Promise. Accepting the conditions of the Fall with only a cry, Adam, as Ralph Mills suggests, "realizes that the journey back to the estate he has sacrificed cannot be borne or won without love."7

Despite life's surface appearance as mere motion and change, mere displacement of interchangeable "figures" within a time-space continuum, Muir's inner vision revealed to him the truth of the fable of life--Eden, the Fall, the Promise--and committed him to the completion of the journey, to a life of undeviating movement towards a goal, a life obsessive in its singlemindedness. "There is a necessity in us," he felt, "however blind and ineffectual, to discover what we are."8 As a character in one of Muir's novels written some twenty years earlier, put it: though we are "like blind folk," yet we are "convinced" that there is a road though "we've never seen a road, and we dinna ken where this road may be."9 But although there is a "road"--i.e., a correct path of life--the road remains, as it was in Section I of Variations on a Time Theme, an "answer and a riddle" (p. 39, 1.20). Although the existence of the road implies a rite of passage, yet, Muir realizes, it is possible for a man to "reach the


9The Three Brothers, p. 321.
end and miss the whole road."\(^{10}\) While travelling at our ease along an apparent right and straightforward path of life, we may suddenly wake up to the fact that we follow a way that is a barrier to the way, as Muir indicates in his sonnet, "The Road" (223).

In this stark, haunting fable of the condition humaine, Muir gives concrete form to his vision of the enigmatic quality of the road of life showing how its surface clarity and simplicity can deceive those who travel it. For the "great road" that stretches ahead "clear and still" seems "so fine a track,/Honest and frank past any thought of ill," that the wayfarers ignore the injunction, coming from one leading their group, to "'Turn back! Turn back!'" (1-4). But then, when they look back on the road they have traversed, that "honest and frank" path appears in a new, startling light: it appears as "wild demented windings in and out--"(6). They fear to retrace their steps:

\[\text{How could they penetrate that perilous maze} \\
\text{Backwards, again, climb backwards down the scree} \\
\text{From the wrong side, slither among the dead?} \\
(9-11)\]

And as they travel on, they are haunted by the thought: "'There was another road you did not see.'" (14) As their retrospective glance discloses the true nature of their way of life, the travellers discover that their apparent straightforward path is in reality random and chaotic. Unaware, initially, of the dichotomy between truth and

\(^{10}\)"Extracts from a Diary, 1937-39," in The Story and the Fable, p. 244.
illusion, they have been led astray by false appearances. What begins as a means to discovery, the road, becomes an end in itself. Behind them stretches the labyrinth, an image Northrop Frye describes as "the image of lost direction."\(^{11}\) They follow a way that is not a way.

Although in "The Road" we receive, in the backward gaze of the travellers, little more than a glimpse of the maze, in "The Labyrinth" (163-65) we are plunged into the utter chaos of the maze with its ever-repeating barriers to self-understanding. Although based loosely on the Greek myth of Theseus's escape from the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur, this poem ranges far beyond its mythic source, as Muir indicates in his commentary on this poem. For while "thinking" about the "old story of the labyrinth of Cnosses and the journey of Theseus through it and out of it," he recalls, "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 he also felt the need, he tells us, to provide an alternate vision to the labyrinth, 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."\(^{12}\) Through this juxtapositioning of the image of chaos and order—that of the bewildering maze of the traveller and the harmonious ordered world of the gods—Muir underlines the dual vision which is an integral part of his whole poetic


and philosophic structure: his vision of man "struggling in the
arena" of life and his transcendent vision of life as a "super-
temporal drama" which "issues in glory and meaning and fulfillment."\textsuperscript{13}

But though he finds an eternal truth immanent in the chaotic world
of the labyrinth, he also discovers that the indeterminate world of
the maze can create a totality, a world of "deceits" that "are strong
almost as life" (71).

As Muir re-creates this world verbally, through what he de-
scribes as the "deliberately labyrinthine"\textsuperscript{14} sentence of thirty-five
lines which opens this poem, he initiates his reader into a verbal
labyrinth through his use of repetitive syntax (he repeats the
opening clause of the poem "Since I emerged that day" twice, in
lines eleven and twenty-three, before finishing his statement), his
use of parenthesis and dashes to expand the sentence, and his use of
abrupt shifts between the present and past tenses of the verb. The
reader, disoriented in the verbal space of the poem, is, like the
protagonist, swallowed up in the intricacies of the maze. As the
poem opens, the speaker-poet, in the persona of Theseus, has since
emerged from the labyrinth but he remains haunted, as the verbal
hesitancy of the opening sentence indicates, by memories of his
experience. For in the "twilight nothingness" (9) of the maze, with
its "tall and echoing passages/The swift recoils" (2-3), movement is


\textsuperscript{14}From the B.B.C. "Chapbook," 3 Sep. 1952, cited by Butter, p. 216.
reduced to its mythic essence, to the "image of lost direction."¹⁵

The maze is a basic mode of existence, one which disorients and
numbs the traveller causing feelings of dissociation and self-division:

I almost feared
I'd meet myself returning at some smooth corner,
Myself or my ghost . . .
(I might have been
A spirit seeking his body through the roads
Of intricate Hades) --

(3-5; 9-11)

Bewildered by the maze, the speaker is lost in an "unreal." (5)
world, one which images a chaos of inexhaustible complexities. In
the alien vacancy of the labyrinth, he experiences a time/space dis-
placement:

. . . in the maze time had not been with me;
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

(17-21).

Existing outside of time and space, the maze is a total world, a world
of continuous nightmare.

In stark contrast to the sterile shadow world of the labyrinth
is the pastoral world of burgeoning life into which the speaker
emerges, a world described in a series of sonorous, measured
monosyllables which aptly convey the simplicity and overarching harmony
of this world. Here the "still fields" are "swift with flowers" and
the trees "bright with blossom." Here he finds an Orcadian landscape
of elemental forms, a world of becoming in which sea, sky, earth, and

¹⁵Frye, p. 150.
man exist in primal harmony: "the little green hills, the sea, / The sky and all in movement under it, / Shepherds and flocks and birds and the young and old" (12-15). Described parenthetically within the long description of the maze, this self-enclosed world of unity and security provides only a momentary respite from the twists and turns of the maze. For although the speaker has emerged from the labyrinth, his release does not signal a re-birth into a pastoral world of order and harmony. He has not found a world of security, a home. Nor has he escaped the maze: for it is the labyrinth which expels him, sweeps him "to its enemy, / The lovely world" (22-23). After his first appreciative look at this "lovely world" of simplicity, he is plunged, again, into the endless intricacies of the maze as its orbit expands to include all of life. Both within and beyond location, the frightening, inscrutable world of the labyrinth is everywhere and nowhere. For it becomes an inner locus. It becomes the mental atmosphere in which the speaker is confined:

    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.

    (23-38)
The disorder of the maze with its proliferating series of ways and byways, is an emblem of an unstable state of being, of the self caught in a web of confusion and self-doubts. Pursued by his own inner disorder, the speaker experiences a split consciousness. In a self-dialogue, two opposing visions of the road of life come into sharp contrast. For as the authentic self claims man's essential freedom on life's roads, his "bad spirit" insists that there is no road, there is only the maze: "'You'll end where you are,/Deep in the center of the endless maze.'" (44-45)

At the depth of despair, as the "bad spirit" seems triumphant, the speaker asserts, at first in tones of desperation but then with growing confidence, his faith in "another" world: "I could not live if this were not illusion./It is a world, perhaps; but there's another" (46-47). In sonorous, measured tones and simple but dignified language which appropriately evokes the luminous yet lucid quality of the dream-vision, the speaker recalls his vision of transcendence, his vision of the gods, each sitting atop a mountain-isle far above a toy world replete with human activities—with holidays and work and with life and death—and "all permissible, all acceptable,/Clear and secure as in a limpid dream" (55-56). Viewing life from this vantage point, the ever-expanding world of the labyrinth becomes dwarfed by distance and its unresolved flux is held in the dynamic stasis of a vision of radiance and unity. For as the gods conversed across the sounds

... their eternal dialogue was peace
Where all these things were woven, and this our life
Was as a chord deep in that dialogue,
As easy utterance of harmonious words,
Spontaneous syllables bodying forth a world.
(60-64)

The gods, from their infinite eschatological bowers, weave a vast vision of peace and harmony through their mysterious, spontaneous poetic dialogue.

His vision of the luminous totality of the god's world is life-directive. Having "touched" that world once, the speaker "shall know it always" (65-66). Such a vision gives teleological direction to the journey through the maze, the "wild-wood waste of falsehoods, roads/That run and run and never reach an end" (67-68). The speaker's perception of the ultimate wholeness of life frees him from a life of profane indeterminancy: it gives his soul "birdwings to fly free" (70). Or so it seems.

For it is easy to lose one's foothold on what is "real" and enduring in life as the final lines of the poem indicate:

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.
(71-73)

Ending with a return to the nightmarish vacancy of the maze, Muir indicates that an alien inner distance intervenes between the speaker and his vision. Disoriented, bewildered, the speaker's path remains one of chaos and confusion. Inner chaos and confusion. For the darkest shadow in the maze, as Muir indicates in a diary entry, is the shadow of self.\(^{16}\) Though faith in the unifying vision has deep

accord with the self, the complexities of life fill the traveller
with doubts, doubts which plunge him into the baffling, ominous world
of the maze, an inner world which threatens the authentic self and
betrays its freedom.

It is the rift between the authentic and inauthentic self, as
Muir indicates in a diary entry written some ten years earlier, that
leads the quester astray:

I am not one man, but two. Yet I have only
one road, intended for me, not for the other.
If it were not for him I should never have left
that road, and should still be walking along it.
But it is not wide enough for two. So my companion
keeps looking about for more convenient and wider
roads, and, as it happens, there is one at every
few yards. He inconspicuously edges me into one
of these. . . . When we have gone along some
particular road for a while I come to myself, accuse
him of deceiving me, and start back for the original
road again. But then he begins to manufacture
excuses, flings himself down, says he is tired: why
not take a rest? And when we have struggled back
to the right road—the return journey is always
much harder than the first one; great boulders,
even dangerous chasms, appear in it, though it
had seemed perfectly smooth before—when we have
struggled, or rather, straggled, back (for my
companion loiters and complains all the way; some-
times I have actually to carry him on my back), I
am so tired that I have to rest for a long time.17

Although man cannot choose but to be a wanderer, there is nothing to
keep him from a life of meaningful direction; nothing, that is, but
the "law by which the momentary self continuously ousts the per-
manent self."18 Commitment to the completion of the journey


necessarily entails self-commitment, as Muir indicates in the English sonnet "My Own" (251-2). For, as the speaker-poet argues in the opening line: "There's nothing here to keep me from my own." Nothing, that is, but self-deception. Employing irregular stress patterns to suggest the journey along life's deviant pathways, Muir supplies an example of such self-deception in the first quatrain and the beginning of the second:

The confident roads that at their ease beguile me
With the all-promising lands, the great unknown,
Can with their gilded dust blind me, defile me.
It's so.

(2-5)

Momentarily, the speaker accepts this assertion that it is the surface glitter of life that beguiles and lures him: "It's so," he pronounces with quiet emphasis. But then he breaks through his shell of self-deception and admits, in the second quatrain: "never did their lies deceive me" (5). And when lost "I say/I seek my soul, my soul does not believe me,/But from these transports turns displeased away"

(6-8). Examining why he allows himself to be "duped, ten, twenty times an hour" in the final quatrain, the speaker realizes that his behavior is designed to "save" him from "the true knowledge and the real power" (9-12). With ironic emphasis on the word "save," Muir indicates that by keeping, i.e., "saving," himself from true self-knowledge, the speaker condemns himself to a life of fruitless wanderings through "time's changeable seasons" (13). Had he, as the concluding couplet indicates, unfalteringly followed the path of truth, he "might" have discovered, at the center of his being, a place of repose: "I might have stayed, unshaken, with my own" (14).
It is his refusal to acknowledge or recognize what is his "own," i.e. what belongs to his pure, innermost self, that leads him to follow a way that is not a way.

The image of human unrest, of unremitting, unresolved, and repeated motion, is central to Muir's vision of man's continuous search for a way of life. In the dialogue poem "The Way" (166), the relentless, forward movement of the journey is invoked through a series of speeches in which a weary, lost traveller addresses an obdurate, unearthly voice, identified as "Friend," in an appeal for a sense of direction. Through the monosyllabic understatement of this spare little poem, Muir conveys the ongoing, step-by-step nature of the journey and by skillfully manipulating rhyme, meter, and stress patterns, he expresses both the uncertainty of the traveller and the inflexible persistence of his spiritual "Friend." Whereas the iambic trimeter of the earthly interlocutor is occasionally varied, the iambic dimeter of the responding voice is highly regular. And the movement from front vowels (ay, ah,) in the rhyming, monosyllabic couplets of the traveller to back vowels (aw, uh) in the responding lines of the spiritual voice--lines which move in a regular sequence of vowels from front to back--reinforces the strong sense of closure, of finality implicit in the shorter, more contained speeches of the unearthly "Friend":

Friend, I have lost the way.
The way leads on.
Is there another way?
The way is one.
I must retrace the track.
It's lost and gone.
Back, I must travel back!
None goes there, none.
Then I'll make here my place,
(The road runs on),
Stand still and set my face,
(The road leaps on),
Stay here, for ever stay.
None stays here, none.
I cannot find the way.
The way leads on.
Oh places I have passed!
That journey's done.
And what will come at last?
The road leads on.

In the muted, haunting tones of this poem, Muir expresses the irreducible essence of the life of the pilgrim. Directionless, he seeks a firm sense of direction. Rootless, he seeks a place of repose. But there is no resting place for the journeying soul. Doomed to a life of constant movement, he has no choice but to advance forward. The life of the pilgrim is a life of perpetual disquiet and unrest. The image of his way is the image of lost direction.

And yet, for the wayfarer who tirelessly follows that inner "necessity," however "blind and ineffectual" it may be, to discover integral reality, there come those sudden flashes of intuitive cogni- tion. For there come moments of illumination and certainty, moments when pattern emerges out of patternlessness, vision out of blindness, affirmation out of negation. Such a moment is celebrated in the sonnet "Too Much" (163), a poem in which we find Muir, as Elizabeth Jennings puts it, "living among the symbols he has brought to life."20 Travelling the path praised by his "fathers," the speaker-poet sets

But, as the emphatic opening words of the octave indicate, he recoils from the reality of the "famous way" he must pursue: "No, no I did not bargain for so much" (1). In the fitful, disrupted rhythms of the second quatrain, Muir gives experiential immediacy to the speaker's wayward path, appropriately slowing down the pace to describe the hurdles in his path ("Too much piled on too much") and then speeding up the pace in the final line to suggest the hurried race along time's track:

For everything is different. Hour and place
Are huddled awry, at random teased and tossed,
Too much piled on too much, no track or trace,
And north and south and road and traveller lost.

(5-8)

The speaker's sudden awareness of a new perspective is described in the sestet in appropriately sustained speech:

Then suddenly again I watch the old
Worn saga write across my years and find,
Scene after scene, the tale my fathers told,
But I in the middle blind, as Homer blind,

Dark on the highway, groping in the light,
Threading my dazzling way within my night.

(9-14)

In the balanced antithesis of the concluding couplet, the dialectics of the speaker's vision—the dark and the light—are brought into dynamic resolution. Moving from the negations of the octave to the ringing affirmations of the sestet, the speaker's final statement has a striking quality, a quality of validity, of truth. He affirms the essential rightness of the path he must pursue: the path of paradox. Underlying the surface chaos of his life, he finds evidence of that
"old worn saga" which encompasses the mystery of man's fable, the fable of Innocence, the Fall, and the Promise.

Hence, the journey which begins in the dramatic instant of the fall is structured through a series of repetitive contradictions, contradictions which become resolved in a sudden flash of perception which reveals the form amidst life's formlessness, the fable underlying its chaotic story. Though man grows blind as he travels the lightless roads of time and self, if he pursues the path of the Promise, as Muir indicates in the sonnet "Milton" (207), he may cross the threshold of revelation and enter a new and higher structure of existence. But the journey to that revelation is a journey through darkness and chaos: it is a journey through the "hell" of human life. Unflinchingly, Milton faces both spiritual and physical ordeals on his quest for wholeness:

Milton, his face set fair for Paradise,
And knowing that he and Paradise were lost
In separate desolation, bravely crossed
Into his second night and paid his price.

(1-4)

Suffering both spiritual and physical blindness, an alien distance obtrudes between Milton and his goal.

Muir, as he initiates his reader to the difficulties of the way, builds up an oppressive sense of hell's reality through visual and sound imagery and thus gives experiential immediacy to the massive obstacles which Milton must face in his journey. Approaching the "end" of his journey, Milton comes to a "dark tower" set "square" in hell's gate, a "mass of blackened stone/Crowned with vermilion fiends like streamers blown/From a great funnel filled with roaring flame"
(5-8). Unable to see, Milton recognizes his location when he hears the "steely clamour known too well/On Saturday nights in every street in Hell" (10-11). Through the "concrete common-language quality" of the phrase "On Saturday nights in every street," Muir tells us, as John Holloway claims, "where we are."21 Further, as we "wander in this imaginary landscape" and "experience its strangeness and terror," we "re-enter our own real landscape by an unexpected and revelatory gate."22 For the "steely" clamour Milton hears is an industrial clamour; the "hell" Milton has found entrance to is the industrial "hell" of our modern world.

It is when Milton is in the very depths of "hell" that the speaker obtrudes to ask: "Where, past the devilish din, could Paradise be?" (12). This "human outcry," as Elizabeth Huberman puts it, indicates that the "limits of endurance have been reached."23 It is at this point that the ultimate structure of the journey emerges:

A footstep more, and his unblinded eyes
Saw far and near the fields of Paradise.
(13-14)

As Milton takes that final, fatal footstep, he experiences a sudden influx of eternity. In that moment, the massive, oppressive bulk of hell, so carefully evoked in two quatrains, abruptly dissipates. However concrete, immediate, and particular the hell of this life

22Ibid.
23The Poetry of Edwin Muir, p. 196.
seems, its reality can be transcended in the moment of revelation. Released from the cluttered space of life's nightmare, Milton crosses the gateway of the sacred and enters a world of light and silence and expansive space. He enters a transcendent space of infinite potentiality. In the concluding couplet, the central strategy of the poem becomes manifest. Structured to give inspiration, "Milton" conveys the chaos of the way and records the transforming vision earned by those who make the "supreme and exhausting effort" to find the "right way" of life.  

In "Milton" Muir carries us to the threshold of vision: In "The Transfiguration" (198-200) he invites us to enter his visionary world. Based on several dreams, this poem conveys Muir's own personal vision of the Transfiguration. "Deeply struck" by the Gospel account (Matthew XVII, 2) describing the glorious transformation of Christ's face and clothes during the Transfiguration, Muir recalls, in a B.B.C. broadcast, how that "story" led him to imagine that "at the moment of Christ's Transfiguration everything was transfigured, mankind, and the animals, and the simplest natural objects." Upon learning that his conception of the Transfiguration, which he believed to be totally unique, had historical precedence, Muir came to specu-


late on the symbolic and imaginative resonance of this visionary account. "Perhaps," he considered, "in the imagination of mankind the Transfiguration has become a powerful symbol, standing for many things, and among them those transformations of reality which the imagination itself creates." It is this "transformation of reality" created by the imagination that Muir poetically conveys in the measured tones of his blank verse. Harmoniously intertwining sounds through assonance and alliteration, Muir verbally reinforces his vision of an overarching unity as he creates a simple yet dignified poetic speech appropriate to the speakers of the poem, the disciples.

Capturing the sense of reverential awe felt by the disciples, Muir begins his poem without introduction or explanation: he does not identify the speakers or subject of the poem but invites the reader to experience, first-hand, the dramatic breakthrough of the sacred experienced by the disciples. In the opening statement of the poem, Muir conveys the gradual unfolding of the disciples' visionary experience in a skillfully controlled sentence which irresistibly carries us, moment by moment, through the purification process. Rooted to the thisworldly, the spiritual cleansing experienced by the disciples is envisioned as an organic process. For Christ's purifying "virtue" arises from the "ground" and plant-like grows, returning veins, wrists, and hands to their original wholeness and giving back, to the purified eyes, a vision of the flawless first world:

27 Ibid.
So from the ground we felt that virtue branch
Through all our veins till we were whole, our wrists
As fresh and pure as water from a well,
Our hands made new to handle holy things,
The source of all our seeing rinsed and cleansed
Till earth and light and water entering there
Gave back to us the clear unfallen world.

(1-7)

No longer blind, the speakers see, in the very elements of this world
—in earth and light and water—that which is sacred and perfect.
They transcend their everyday, fallen human perception.

Reinforcing this vision of the transmutation of the everyday and commonplace, Muir describes, in the following lines, the cleansing of the disciples' "sour and travel stained" clothes which suddenly appear to be "made of immortal substance" (9-10):

And the soiled flax and wool lay light upon us
Like friendly wonders, flower and flock entwined
As in a morning field.

(11-13)

In expressing this homely detail, Muir conveys the organic harmony of the scene through an alliterative-linked language (repeating initial "f" and "w" sounds) and through his imaginative insight that the flax and wool found in the disciples' clothing signal the entwining of plant-life (flower) with animal-life (flock). Through such homespun particulars, Muir gives immediacy to the disciples' experience, presenting it as something natural and as something penetrable.

Shifting now to a questioning frame of mind, the speakers wonder whether what they saw was a "vision" (or, in the original version of the poem, "delusion")\(^\text{28}\) or if they saw the "unseeable" that day, the

\(^{28}\) Cited by Butter in *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet*, p. 221.
spatially indeterminate world of innocence, a timeless world con-
tinuously "at work, through never seen/Since Eden locked the gate
that's everywhere/And nowhere?" (13-14; 16-18). Did they, during the
radiant simultaneity of the Transfiguration, recover that lost terri-
tory, the sacred center of life? Did they enter the forgotten world
of the fable? Was their vision co-existent with the fallen world—
was the "enormous earth still left forlorn,/An exile or a prisoner"
(19-20)—or did they experience an actual transformation of the world?
Was the world made divine again, redeemed? Whether reality or vision,
their experience, which is rooted in the soil of this world, infuses
them with a fresh awareness of the absolute value of life, a pure
and simple life. They see a world of peace and harmony, a world in
which the natural order is perfected:

Yet the world
We saw that day made this unreal, for all
Was in its place. The painted animals
Assembled there in gentle congregations,
Or sought apart their leafy oratories,
Or walked in peace, the wild and tame together,
As if, also for them, the day had come.
(20-26)

A pictorial world of childlike simplicity, the world seen by the
disciples is at once formal and flowing, static and dynamic (the
"painted" animals "assemble" or "walk" in peace). As Muir illuminates
the iconography of the world of the center, he insistently shapes his
vision to incorporate the lowly and unclean things of this world:
underneath the soot covering the shepherd's "hovels" exists the stone
"clean at the heart/As on the starting-day" (27-29); within the "re-
fuse heaps" are found grains of "that fine dust that made the world"
(29-30). And he also gathers, into his reconciling vision, the corrupt and lost people of this world: murderers and outcasts come to worship Christ and those "who hide within the labyrinth/of their own loneliness and greatness" and those emmised "in their own devices,/
The silent and garrulous liars" (33-39). Sin is annulled and the burdens of self fall away as the visible sign of His presence is made manifest to the worshippers. All step "out of their dungeons"--the prison of sin and the cell of self--and become "free" (40). Whether their experience be "reality or vision"--objective or subjective--the speakers assert an incontrovertible fact: "this we have seen" (41). Their visionary experience remains a luminous icon before the mind's eye.

They have known the totality of the sacred world at the center of life; and they know the emptiness of its loss. As their assertive insistence gives way to quiet acceptance, the speakers face the inevitable:

If it had lasted but another moment
It might have held for ever! But the world
Rolled back into its place, and we are here,
And all that radiant kingdom lies forlorn,
As if it had never stirred; no human voice
Is heard among its meadows, but it speaks
To itself alone, alone it flowers and shines
And blossoms for itself while time runs on.

(42-49)

In the diminishing tones of these lines, lines reverberating with words expressing loss--"forlorn," and the twice-repeated "alone"--the remoteness and inaccessibility of that visionary world are successfully evoked. And the sense of loss expressed is made all the more poignant as the speakers project their own feelings of isolation and aloneness.
onto the landscape. But these lines also express a quiet faith in the hidden presence of that "radiant kingdom" through a shift from the past to the present tense of the verb: that lost Eden "flowers and shines/And blossoms." Having once crossed the boundary of the sacred, they are convinced of the permanence of that world. They have found the native ground of human life.

And having found their vital connection to that lost world, the speakers can live in a state of continuous anticipation: "he will come again" when he is summoned, when "all things"—the beasts, woods, rocks, seas, and all mankind—"call him with one voice" (50-54). In forceful language, made all the more intense by alliteration (repeating "c" and "d" sounds) and the emphatic repetition of negative prefixes (un- and dis-), the disciples express their affirmative faith in the undoing of history at the Second Coming, the time when "he will come, Christ the uncrucified,/Christ the discrucified, his death undone,/His agony unmade, his cross dismantled—"(56-58). With Christ's return, time will dissolve returning all to its original source. The "tormented wood" of the cross will "grow into a tree/In a green springing corner of young Eden" (59-61); and Judas will take a long backward journey from the darkness of the betrayal to the light of innocence "and be a child/Beside his mother's knee, and the betrayal/Be quite undone and never more be done" (63-65). Christ's coming will not bring about the destruction of the world but its fulfillment and perfection as these final lines of the poem indicate. Muir grounds his faith in the very stuff of this earth.

It is Muir's growing faith in the iconic world of the center,
the visionary world of the lost Eden, that leads, in his final journey and place poems, to an ever-deepening acceptance of human life with all its griefs and troubles. As his faith in our earthly day, our "native land," our "native air," so tentatively suggested in "The Original Place" (86) becomes supported by an underlying clarity of vision, he comes to a new love for the chaotic surface image of life, the "lawless world" which is quietly celebrated in "Outside Eden" (212-214). As Muir, in the opening lines of the poem creates an image of that world, a spare spatial setting, the assured rhythms of his four-stress lines give a calm certainty and directness to his symbolic depiction of the dual world we inhabit, a world in which "Guilt is next door to innocence" (27):

A few lead in their harvest still
By the ruined wall and broken gate.
Far inland shines the radiant hill.
Inviolable the empty gate,
Impassable the gaping wall;
And the mountain over all.

(1-6)

Although, with the passage of time, the wall of Eden has crumbled, it remains "impassable"; the broken gate, "inviolable." The "few" members of Adam's "clan" (7) who live near the gate of that lost kingdom are forbidden--spiritually barred--from entering there. "Haunted by guilt and innocence" (7), they are deeply aware of the dual structure of human life. But they also retain a vital link to the "radiant" world forbidden them, that luminous world of permanence and perfection, for they hold "in reverence" the story of their origins--the fable of Innocence and the Fall (see 12-25). Because they intuitively grasp the central meaning of their fable, they
quietly accept their fallen lot and guard themselves from further knowledge of sin, realizing that such knowledge can "blind" (see 29-37). Directly linked to their fable, they are in touch with the "simple," eternal truths of life for, as the speaker-poet aphoristically states: "The simple have long memories./Memory makes simple all that is." (38-39). And because of their penetrating simplicity of vision, they "can love" the surface chaos of life, the "lawless world" with its "thickets running wild,/The thorny wastes, the flourishing grove" (40-42). For they can see in the "knotted landscape, wrong and clear/As the crude drawings of a child" (43-44), an image of human life with all its contradictions and confusions. Though life is full of complexities, their faith in the simple fable of man allows them to accept life, and to affirm its value. They are reconciled to life with all its sorrows and troubles:

Their griefs are all in memory grown
As natural as a weathered stone.
Their troubles are a tribute given
Freely while gazing at the hill.
Such is their simplicity,
Standing on earth, looking at heaven.

(47-52)

As Muir, in the final lines of this poem, holds in dynamic balance his dual vision of man, he offers an image of human life in its most elemental, essential form and thus poetically conveys the underlying "simplicity" of life affirmed in this poem. In the lives of those who live close to the fable and the vision of that "radiant hill," the earthly and spiritual are mysteriously reconciled. For while the earthly is the field of human experience, vision projects man beyond the horizons of this world: vision projects man towards an exalted
and expanded sense of redeeming selfhood.

And vision, as Muir indicates in the title poem of his last volume of poetry, reveals that, in a very real sense, man "still" has "One Foot in Eden" (227): a vital part of him has never left that sacred starting-place of life's journey. As the speaker-poet, with "one foot in Eden," stands and looks "across the other land" (2), the "fields" of time, and contemplates what he sees there, he achieves a vision of reconciliation: he envisions a world "in which both good and evil have their place legitimately."\textsuperscript{29} For in those fields "that we have planted/So long with crops of love and hate" (4-5), he finds a dual world of permanence. Conveying this world in imagery that is, as J.R. Watson points out, both Biblical and Miltonic,\textsuperscript{30} Muir describes how the "corn and tares," i.e., the good and the evil, of life are eternally intergrown and intertwined:

\begin{verbatim}
And nothing now can separate
The corn and tares compactly grown.
The armorial weed in stillness bound
About the stalk; these are our own.
Evil and good stand thick around
In the fields of charity and sin
Where we shall lead our harvest in.
\end{verbatim}

As he pictorializes the abstract through planting and harvest imagery and evokes a stationary world of heraldry in his description of the "armorial weed" twined round the stalk of corn, Muir takes us into an


\textsuperscript{30}Watson, p. 246.
emblematic world of static exclusiveness.  For as he penetrates the eternal mystery of life—the mystery of good and evil—, he takes us into a changeless world of poetic contemplation, a world where opposites are shaped into a coherent pattern and an artistic whole. The stability and permanence of this dual world are verbally reinforced through the use of compressed, rhythmically assured tetrameter lines.

Although good and evil are inseparably interwoven in the surface design of man's time-haunted country, there is another, timeless reality located at the inner core of that world: for "still from Eden springs the root/As clean as on the starting day" (14-15, my italics). And even though the tree of life is fated to spring up from its Edenic source only to have its foliage and fruit taken by time and its "archetypal leaf" burnt to "shapes of terror and of grief" and then strewn along death's "winter way" (16-19), yet, miraculously, new life springs out of death. Using alliterative-linked language to reinforce the contrast between the withered, scorched world of time and the delicate new life which emerges from it, Muir asserts his positive faith in human life:

But famished field and blackened tree
Bear flowers in Eden never known.
Blossoms of grief and charity
Bloom in these darkened fields alone.
(20-23)

As Butter points out in Edwin Muir (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 90: "'Armorial' draws one's attention to the possible heraldic meanings of other words in the poem. 'Field' can be used as a heraldic term, for the background upon which an emblem is painted. So perhaps the weed bound round the corn can be taken as the emblem of humanity painted on the blackened 'field' of time."
Just as the tree rooted in Eden but blossoming in time produces flowers unknown in Eden, so man, who finds his source in Eden but exists in time's imperfect world, acquires virtues unknown in Eden:

What had Eden ever to say  
Of hope and faith and pity and love  
Until was buried all its day  
And memory found its treasure trove?  
Strange blessings never in Paradise  
Fall from these beclouded skies.  
(24-29)

By cherishing the memory of his lost estate, man invests his existence in time with meaning and significance. Though this world of good and evil, love and hate, is, as Muir states in another poem, a "difficult land" where "things miscarry," it is also "our home" (237-38, 1, 52).

As Muir, with his deepened faith in the fallen world, continues his ongoing journey on the "enormous road" of time, that road on which he began his long and arduous poetic quest, he realizes, more than ever before, that time offers a "way" to the life-long traveller: "how could I come/To where I am but by that deafening road,/Life-wide, world-wide, by which all come to all" (175, VII, 15-17). And so the "sad, stationary journey" of mankind (40-42, 57-59), once an image of man's fruitless efforts, of his imprisonment "in a very small, and from all appearances fortuitously selected length of time,"32 is now acknowledged to offer the wayfarer a vision of the true shape of human life with its mysterious reconciliation of opposites. Man's ritualistic progress from cradle to grave and the cyclical movement of human generations through history is now affirmed, in "The West" (167-68),

in a new mood of serenity.

In tones of quiet acceptance, the unnamed speakers of this poem describe the vast "migration" (16) of human life from the "east" (birth) to the "west" (death). As they follow their dying friends into "the west," unable to "step one step/Beyond the little earthen mound that hid/Their traces from us" (2-5), they recognize that the grave is both "an end" (5) and a beginning. For beyond the borders of the earthly west, the souls of the dead take another journey to the "west beyond the west" (8). And, from the "east" there is a continuous stream of "newcomers" who "Pour in among us, mix with us, pass through us,/And travel towards the west" (14-16). The speakers accept this ever-repeated movement of human life through time as inevitable, as something, according to tradition, that was there "from the beginning": "long before men's memory it was woven/Into the tranquil pattern of our lives" (17-19). As they contemplate the mysterious stationary movement of human time, which "like a quiet river" is "always flowing yet is always the same" (20-21), they achieve a vision of reconciliation:

So that when we look
Out at our life we see a changeless landscape,
And all disposed there in its due proportion,
The young and the old, the good and bad, the wise and foolish,
All these are there as if they had been forever,
And motionless as statues, prototypes
Set beyond time, for whom the sun stands still.
And each day says in its passing, 'This is all.'--
While the unhurrying progress goes its way,
And we upon it, year by year by year,
Led through the endless stations of the sun.

(22-32)

Despite the dualities inherent in the human condition, life can be
affirmed and seen as a formalized pattern, an ordered structure. Although delimited by time ("Led through the endless stations of the sun"), the speakers achieve a timeless vision of human life, a vision underscored by clarity and simplicity: they recover something of the child's perception of "the stationary archetypes of mankind." For the contemplative vision is granted to those who have known evil and "passed through experience to another innocence"—it is granted to those pilgrims who take the sad, stationary journey of mankind.

Deeply aware of life's "changeless landscape," i.e., its prototypical pattern, the speakers accept time's "unhurrying progress" from birth to death: "All came hither so, and shall leave so, / Even as these friends we followed to their west" (34-35). And as they accept the whole span of human life, they affirm the present moment. They affirm the "Now and here" of time and place as a basic structure of existence in which man can discover the meaning and significance of human life:

And yet this is a land and we say 'Now',
Say 'Now' and 'Here', and are in our house.
(36-37)

We must, Muir believes, both "feel" life by projecting ourselves into the "present" moment and gain "knowledge of life" by reading "into the pattern of our own past the universal pattern of human existence."

For through our knowledge of the past and our vital awareness of the

34 Ibid.
present we find "our earthly meaning." 35

"Linked wrist to wrist with time," Muir remains, to the end of his poetic quest "Enlisted in the enigma's exploration": he still follows the "enormous road" of time on which there is "no turning back, no deviation, Nor resting place" (270, 1-6). Although the existence of time remains enigmatic to the end, he has cast light onto the mystery which motivated his quest, the mystery of "where we are going." 36 And he has succeeded in another goal: he has made "clear" the "pattern" of his life "as a human being existing in space and moving through time, environed by mystery." 37 In touch with his fable, as he indicates in the last poem he ever wrote (302), he has been "taught by dreams and fantasies," has learned "from the friendly and the darker phantoms" and gained "great knowledge and courtesy" from his ancestors, friends, and parents (1-6). In touch with the good they have given him, he no longer strays "To the deadly path/That leads into the sultry labyrinth" where the "fruit" of Eden, still fresh and "moist," becomes consumed and shrivelled. He has found a way of life. And he has drawn

... at last from time which takes away
And taking leaves all things in their right place
An image of forever
One and whole.

(15-18)

36 An Autobiography, p. 56.
He has found something whole and complete within time. He has found a vision of eternity. And as his "time grows shorter," he quietly affirms his faith in the transcendent, the faith which has sustained him through his long and difficult poetic quest:

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

(10-22)

Vitally aware of the fable, Muir has found a "way" through the chaos of time and self. He has found integral reality. But this is not the end of his journey. There remains the journey which increasingly occupied Muir from the mid-1940s to the last years of his life: the journey through the fragmentary day of modern history, a history made by men who have lost contact with the fable. Muir faces the terrors of history—as our history—as he seeks to renew our faith in the fable of life and as he seeks to penetrate the third mystery of man: "how we should live with one another."38

38 An Autobiography, p. 56.
CHAPTER VII
THE JOURNEY THROUGH HISTORY

In our life and in our literature, history has become radical reality.
- Harvey Gross, The Contrived Corridor: History and Fatality in Modern Literature

Modern man is trying to learn how to live without God, alone in a universe that is unmoved by the calamities that befell him. The nightmare of history cannot save him.
- Charles I. Glicksberg, Literature and Society

... a man cannot be free or remain free except in the degree to which he remains linked with that which transcends him ...
- Gabriel Marcel, Man Against Mass Society

Can the "ordinary human being," Muir asks, survive in today's world "together with the traditional beliefs and customs and feelings which have fostered him and made him what he is?" Profoundly disturbed by the increasing dehumanization of man and the growing belief in the total insignificance of the individual human life in the face of inevitable historical forces, Muir, in the murder-haunted years of the 1940s and 1950s, shapes his "politics," i.e., his "conception of

1 The Estate of Poetry, p. 86.

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what is good in society" as he seeks to uncover the third mystery of man: "how we should live with one another." If we are to live meaningful lives in the "difficult land" of time and history, Muir feels, we must shape a politics which holds sacred the individual existence from cradle to grave and one which cherishes the customs, traditions, and memories which link man to his fable. We must fight against the modern world view which conceives man as a thing: as a unit of work energy, and as an infinitesimal cog in a vast, historical and political machine. We must shape a politics grounded in a belief in the fundamental sacredness and dignity of human life. We must shape a politics of the fable.

A politics of the fable, Muir feels, is more urgently needed in our time than ever before for the politics of totalitarianism, the politics of terror and power, threatens to annihilate us, to reduce us to little more than "conscious ciphers in a historical process whose intentions are not ours but its own. . ." As historical process has become the "sole significant embodiment of human life" in the contemporary world view, and as that history has come to be made by an increasingly smaller number of men who regard the "sacred

2"The Politics of King Lear," in Essays on Literature and Society, p. 34.
3An Autobiography, p. 56.
4Ibid., p. 195.
order of society" as their "prey,"\(^6\) life has been drained of meaning and significance for the large numbers of people touched by these things. The "principle" of contemporary history, as Gabriel Marcel puts it, "is that the human person has no right to respect except in so far as he consents to submit his acts to what one might call the rulings of history," i.e., to the "rulings" of those in power who are the new history-makers.\(^7\)

"Everything is dark and getting darker," Muir writes in a letter in 1939 as he perceives, in the political ideologies of the time—Nazism, Fascism, Marxism, and Communism—a "denial of" and "contempt for" humanity.\(^8\) For contemporary history, as Muir reveals it in his art, is a history of betrayal, the betrayal of man and his basic humanity. It is a history of our "new impersonal age" (242), our age of impersonal calamities; it is a history of "trained terrors" (93) and "murdering lies" (267), one in which men "obsessed and neat" act as "prentice killers" and bring, through their ordered ranks, a "dark disorder" to Europe (77); it is a history in which passive by-standers watch "the wrong/Last too long/With non-committal faces" as the "always homeless/Nationless and nameless" refugees of war take their sad pilgrimage from nowhere to nowhere (95-96).

"How," Muir asks as he reflects on the terrors and evils of modern history, "can an eye or brow/Disclose the gutted towns and the

\(^6\) "The Politics of King Lear," p. 49.


\(^8\) Selected Letters, p. 108.
millions dead?" (280-81). As Muir discloses the frightful images of our history by telling the story of our modern age, a story of "time and war and history" (93), he strives to "retrieve the shape of man/Lost and anonymous" (148) from the carnage of war and political violence and from the modern historical machinery which works to reduce the image of man and to depersonalize and dehumanize the individual.

In an early poem, "The River" (93-94), Muir discloses some of the images which haunted him during the years of World War II, as he remained in Scotland and viewed the war from a distance. Although this poem ultimately lacks imaginative impact, perhaps because Muir had no real first-hand knowledge of the war, it is of interest because it marks one of Muir's first attempts to poetically convey his vision of our modern history. "This poem," as Muir explains in a letter, "was written during the war, soon after the invasion of France, which brought images of universal disaster to so many of us... I had an image of a Europe quite featureless, with all the old marks gone."9 Employing a ponderous, five-stress metrical base to convey the ongoing flow of the river—an image used both to suggest an actual river flowing through the war-devastated landscape of Europe and as a metaphor for time and history—, Muir traces the course of this "silent stream" and describes the images reflected "in its glass" (1), those "images of universal disaster" which so disturbed him. Although, as Elizabeth Huberman points out, many of the images

9Ibid., p. 153.
presented in the poem "are not sharp enough to be appalling," what does disquiet the reader is the continuous, implacable, and ominously "silent" flow of the stream. For in the "mirror" of the river we see a reflection of the world of appearances we call history, and the relentless, forward movement of the river brings us to the threshold of a vacant, silent, inhuman world. It brings us to the "featureless" Europe described in the final lines of the poem, a Europe invaded by an irresistible, inhuman force—by the numberless ranks of "disciplined soldiers" (32).

In the touching, almost sentimental, scene described in the opening lines of the poem—that of the parting between an old woman and her grandson who is about to go off and join the ranks of the disciplined soldiers who march across a war-torn Europe—Muir presents an image of the individual, simple, and common human life which is overwhelmed by the irrepressible forces of historical process. As the young soldier "looks across" from his "new" soldier's "world" towards the pastoral, peaceful world he is relinquishing, he tries to "share" his grandmother's "sorrow" at their impending separation (8-10). But in donning the gear of the soldier, he has already irrevocably severed himself from that world. In a harsh, biting, alliterative-linked language replete with spluttering s's and forceful b's, the speaker describes how the young man stands there "Bristling with spikes and spits and bolts of steel, Bound in with belts, the rifle's snub-nosed horn Peering above his shoulder. . . ."

The Poetry of Edwin Muir, p. 112.
Although there is something tender and human in this homely scene, there is also something sinister and foreboding in the description of the young soldier and in the speaker's initial description of the "well-practised partings" occasioned by the war (2).

As the stream continues its silent, unremitting forward movement, it mirrors a landscape of death and destruction. In the devastated countryside of "blackened field" and "burning wood," we see the cluttered wreckage of human civilization: a "bridge that stops half-way, a hill split open/With scraps of houses clinging to its sides" and, strewn in the "grass and wild-flowers," a meaningless jumble of "Stones, planks and tiles and chips of glass and china" (12-17). As darkness falls and the river flows through a city landscape, we watch as houses are bombed and vast sections of the city are destroyed by fire (18-26). And here we find the presence of death: we watch as "Living eyes/Glaze instantly in crystal change" (26-27). As the stream "runs on into the day of time and Europe," we watch as the refugees of war take their "dumb migrations" towards "no destination" (27-31). And finally, we watch as

The disciplined soldiers come to conquer nothing,
March' upon emptiness and do not know
Why all is dead and life has hidden itself.
The enormous winding frontier walls fall down,
Leaving anonymous stone and vacant grass.

(32-36)

The journey through time and war and history has brought us to a featureless world, a world of nothingness, of emptiness, of death. Finding these "images of universal disaster" hopeless and inexplicable, the speaker-poet, in the final lines of the poem, questions what the future will hold. Into "what land" will the river of history flow
and "what peace" (37) will be revealed in its mirror in the future? Will it be the peace known before the war? Or will it be a peace enforced, in an empty, featureless world, by the disciplined soldiers?

Having felt the "invisible power of war which tries to reduce us all to a dead level,"¹¹ Muir, in another early poem "The Refugees" (95-96), examines one of the root causes of the evils of war: human indifference. Because the speakers of the poem—once free people but now refugees of the war—"watched the wrong/Last too long" (22-23) without acknowledging or reacting against the "self-evident ill" (29) they witnessed, because they observed "with non-committal faces" (24) the suffering of those made "homeless/Nationless and nameless" (9-10) by the war, they have brought about their own homelessness:

We did not fear
A wrong so dull and old,
So patiently told and retold,
While we sat by the fire or in the window-seat.
Oh what these suffered in dumb animal patience,
That now we suffer,
While the world's brow grows darker and the world's hand rougher.

(13-19)

Although the speakers recognize that evil inevitably emerges in human history because man is fallen, they also realize that evil need not have manifested itself in the wide-scale suffering of a European war: "This stroke was bound to fall,/Though not to fall so" (34-35). Because they lacked an ethic, because they passively accepted human suffering as an inevitable by-product of historical and political process, they, too, have become subject to the workings of history for

¹¹Selected Letters, p. 113.
"Where no counsel is what will be will be" (51). They must, they realize, "shape" a "new philosophy" (52) if man is to survive and if the catastrophes of our history are to be averted.

In "The Good Town" (183-86) Muir explores what can happen to an ideal community when men do not "shape" a "new philosophy" and when they passively tolerate evil in their midst. Written in 1948 in response to Muir's first-hand experience of the Communist takeover in Prague, "The Good Town" describes the "restless" working of evil in human history. In a B.B.C. broadcast, Muir describes some of the circumstances which led to the creation of this poem:

... as I was walking one day in a park near our house in Prague—I had an idea for two poems about towns, one to be called "The Good Town," and the other "The Bad Town"; and I intended the towns to stand as symbols of two ways of life. But as things were then shaping in Prague, I saw that the only way to treat the theme was to describe a good town turning into a bad one. Yet the poem is not really about Prague or any other place, but about something that was happening in Europe. Stories of what was occurring in other countries to whole families, whole communities, became absorbed into the poem, which I tried to make into a symbolical picture of a vast change.12

As Muir shapes a poem out of his experiences of the political changes which occurred in Europe in the late 1940s, he seeks to give, as this account suggests, not an exact picture of recent history, but a "symbolical picture" encompassing the fall of the old, stable social order and the rise of a new, anonymous and brutal public world. Pondering, in this poem, the failure of traditional human values in an

In the simple, euphonious language found in the opening section of the poem, the speaker, acting as a spokesman for the "we" of the poem, later identified as the "old citizens" (76), recalls the town as it "once" existed. "Known everywhere, with streets of friendly neighbors, street friend to street and house to house," it was a "good town," one in which the "doors stood open" in friendly welcome in the summertime, one in which "lock and key" were considered to be "quaint antiquities" (1-5). And it was a town in which people were open and natural and sharing and a town in which human corruption seemed to belong to a remote past for the prison door, from long disuse, was overgrown with ivy and the prison yard was a place "sweet with grass and flowers," a place "where grave philosophers loved to walk" (6-9). In touch with the simple, eternal truths of human life, the citizens of the good town accepted what time "gave and took away" (12) knowing that

Kindness and courage can repair time's faults,  
And serving him breeds patience and courtesy  
In us, light sojourners and passing subjects.  
There is a virtue in tranquillity  
That makes all fitting, childhood and youth and age,  
Each in its place.  

(16-21)

Serenely affirming the tranquil pattern of human life with its unhurried and natural progress from cradle to grave, the inhabitants of the good town lived by the politics of the fable. Their life was an order. And it was a good order.
And yet the old order and its customs and traditions, as the speaker indicates in the harsh, angry language of the second section of the poem, have been all but blotted out by recent historical events. Enjoining the reader to accompany him on a walk through the town and to "Look well" at what is to be seen there now, the speaker points out the physical and spiritual devastation of the town brought about by two wars and the enemy-occupation of the town. Nothing remains of the church with its towering spire and its walls richly decorated with saints and angels—once a manifest symbol of the spiritual aspirations of the inhabitants of the good town—but fragmentary ruins: "mounds of rubble, /And shattered piers, half-windows, broken arches/ And groping arms" (21–23). And the houses—once a symbol of the citizen’s native openness and friendliness—have taken on a new, sinister significance: the newly built concrete houses, which "sit and stare" from their "patch of raw and angry earth" (27–28), reflect the new social and political reality of the town and the citizens' loss of harmony with the natural order. Breaking off his bitter description to indicate the "few things" of the good town which "still remain," the speaker, in sonorous, measured tones recalling his description of the town in its ideality, invites the reader to "walk" by the river and "see" how the poplars still "gather quiet gazing on the stream" and how the "white road" still "winds across the small green hill/And then is lost" (29–32). Some vestige of the tranquil world of the sojourner survives in this primal, universal landscape with its hill and road; the road still beckons the individual, inviting him to penetrate the second mystery of man—"where
we are going"—and to seek his "way" towards integral reality.

But only a vestige endures. For the politics of the new age—the politics of interest and force—works not to nurture but to destroy the individual's inner world of potentiality. Existing in a climate of fear and suspicion, the inhabitants of the town have lost vital awareness of the third mystery of man—"how we should live with one another"—and they have lost touch with the memory, custom, and tradition which link man to the fable. Though some of the original houses of the good town remain physically intact, their symbolism has been drained of meaning for there is no social link between the "strangers" who "occupy" the rooms of the houses: "none can find/
The place he knew but settles where he can" (37–38). And family bonds, as the speaker bitterly explains using the cant of the new age, are "out": "No family now sits at the evening table;/Father and son, mother and child are out,/A quaint and obsolete fashion" (39–41). The good town has been utterly corrupted by the enemy-occupation:

In our houses
Invaders speak their foreign tongues, informers
Appeal and disappear, chance whores, officials
Humble or high, frightened, obsequious,
Sit carefully in corners. My old friends
(Friends ere these great disasters) are dispersed
In parties, armies, camps, conspiracies.
We avoid each other. If you see a man
Who smiles good-day or waves a lordly greeting
Be sure he's a policeman or a spy.
We know them by their free and candid air.

(41–51)

Open acts of friendliness no longer betoken a natural and spontaneous cordiality: they betoken treachery, deceit, and betrayal.
In the final two sections of the poem, the speaker reflects on the causes of the radical social and political transformations which have occurred in the town. These changes were not caused by "time," the speaker indicates in the third section, but by the catastrophes of history, by the two wars that "trampled on us twice, Advancing and withdrawing, like a herd of clumsy-footed beasts on a stupid errand/Unknown to them or us" (53-56). When the maimed and crippled men returned from the first war, they were, the speaker recalls, so changed "in body or in mind" (60) that the harmony between man and the natural order was destroyed:

It was a sight to see the cripples come
Out on the fields. The land looked all awry,
The roads ran crooked and the light fell wrong.
(61-63)

As the farmers returned to their fields to play the game of life, their fields like a "pack of cheating cards/Dealt out at random" (64-65), they managed to survive by exercising their "shrewdness" (67). And then the second war "passed and repassed" (68):

And now you see our town, the fine new prison,
The house-doors shut and barred, the frightened faces
Peeping round corners, secret police, informers,
And all afraid of all.
(69-72)

All seems to have happened by "Pure chance, pure malice" (56), i.e., by the accidents of history and the cruelty of those who make history.

And yet, as the following section indicates, there is a deeper source for the "endless" and "inexhaustible" and "incomprehensible" (73-75) disorder manifest in the town. The speaker reports, in a
discursive, reflective passage of probing self-analysis, the "thoughts" of the old citizens as they walk among the "ruins" of their town and ask themselves how and why these changes occurred:

Yet sometimes now
We ask ourselves, we the old citizens:
'Could it have come from us? Was our peace peace?
Our goodness goodness? That old life was easy
And kind and comfortable; but evil is restless
And gives no rest to the cruel or the kind.'

(75-80)

Because evil is restless, because the ordinary man is neither good nor bad but merely apes the goodness or badness of his leaders, a "bare preponderance" (92) of evil can make a town bad. And when evil becomes prominent, it takes more than a "jot" (94) of good to tip the balance and return the good. For

'when evil comes
All things turn adverse, and we must begin
At the beginning, heave the groaning world
Back in its place again, and clamp it there.
Then all is hard and hazardous. We have seen
Good men made evil wrangling with the evil,
Straight minds grown crooked fighting crooked minds.'

(95-101)

If a good social order is to endure in a world of restless evil, men must be perpetually vigilant. For a false sense of security occasioned by an "easy and kind and comfortable" life can lead to the betrayal of the good: "'Our peace betrayed us; we betrayed our peace.'" (102)

And that betrayal costs dearly. For as the politics of the fable becomes overwhelmed by the politics of terror and oppression, the citizens of the good town become subject to the rulings of the new men of policy, men who, as Muir describes them, regard the "sacred order of society" as their "prey" and recognize "only two realities,
interest and force, the gods of the new age.\textsuperscript{13}

And what of the oppressors who wantonly cast aside the "custom, tradition, and memory" which Muir believes men need "to guide them"\textsuperscript{14}? What of the life which is totally cut off from the fable? A life in which there is a "hiatus of memory," in which there is no custom and no tradition, Muir feels, is a life lived in "the shallow present," a life of "permanent emptiness." It is a life underscored by the evil of indifference, the evil which "consists in a hiatus in the soul, a craving blank, a lack of one of the essential threads which bind experience into a coherent whole and give it a consistent meaning."\textsuperscript{15} It is the life lived by the speakers of "The Usurpers" (187-188), spokesmen for the new social order. As Muir probes the barren individuality of the new men of policy in this poem, he indicates that the freedom the usurpers gain by silencing the "ancestral voices"—their link with tradition and the fable—is a freedom revolving around emptiness.

The very first lines of their dramatic speech, in which brief, declarative statements are surrounded by the silence of strong speech pauses, convey the "deepening silence" (4) the usurpers seek to create:

\textsuperscript{13}"The Politics of King Lear," p. 49.

\textsuperscript{14}"Extracts from a Diary, 1937-39," in The Story and the Fable, p. 260.

\textsuperscript{15}"The Politics of King Lear," pp. 43-44.
There is no answer. We do here what we will
And there is no answer.

(1-2)

But as their tone of quiet insistence becomes momentarily undermined
("If there were an answer, how could we be free?" (6)), they ironically
fill the silence they have created by quelling the "garrulous ghosts"
(9) of their ancestors with a stream of thoughtless boasts:

It was not hard to still the ancestral voices:
A careless thought, less than a thought could do it.
And the old garrulous ghosts died easily,
The friendly and unfriendly, and are not missed
That once were such proud masters. In this air
Our thoughts are deeds; we dare do all we think,
Since there's no one to check us, here or elsewhere.

(7-13)

Indifferent to the ancestral voices, they are indifferent to the fable;
indifferent to the fable, they have lost their awareness of the soul
and when men "cease to believe in the existence of the soul," Muir
holds, "it appears to die in them, leaving a vacuum." Celebrating
their inner emptiness, the usurpers, in an insistently repetitive
language, chant the liturgy of the new age, the liturgy of nihilism:

All round us stretches nothing; we move through nothing,
Nothing but nothing world without end. We are
Self-guided, self-impelled and self-sustained,
Archer and bow and burning arrow sped
On its wild flight through nothing to tumble down
At last on nothing, our home and cure for all.

(14-19)

Using the image of a speeding arrow—an image employed in the symbolism
of the fable to convey the headlong descent of the soul into time, a

16From manuscript notes for An Autobiography, cited by Butter
descent impelled and guided by spiritual forces (archer and bow)\textsuperscript{17}, the usurpers create a new myth of the beginning. "Self-guided" and "self-impelled," their precipitous journey, conveyed through the powerful forward motion of these lines, begins and ends in nothingness. The coaxing void of the inauthentic self has lured them into its emptiness. The place they inhabit, the place of "light and darkness" (21), is the place of time: "we are for the day/And for the night alone, at home in both" (26-27). They "never seek" the place of dreams and racial memories, the place where "light meets darkness, place of images,/Forest of ghosts, thicket of muttering voices" (24-26). For they desire, above all else, to be unfettered, liberated from the fable.

Despite their efforts, vestiges of the fable survive in the unconscious. The speakers' increasingly insistent denial of the fable, in the second half of the poem, points to the perseverance of the imaginative faculty in them. Though the usurpers arrogantly deny that they are "credulous" (32) or frightened by the "ghosts" of the racial unconscious—"These we can hold in check, but not forget,/Not quite forget, they're so inconsequent" (35-36)—, they do confess themselves troubled by voices they've heard in their sleep, voices uttering words similar to those Muir once heard upon waking from sleep, words incorporated into an earlier poem, "The Human Fold"\textsuperscript{18}:

\textsuperscript{17}See Variations on a Time Theme, III, p. 42, 11. 8-11; and "The Prize," p. 111, 11. 1-3.

"'I lean my face far out from eternity/For time to work its work on'" (38-39). As the suppressed world of the fable suddenly emerges in their disclosure of the "spells" and "fancies" (40-41) which haunt them, the speakers admit that they have not totally silenced the ancestral voices. Nature, itself, utters judgments against them. For there are times during the day when they momentarily enter an unfamiliar world, a world of time-space dislocation:

We have thought sometimes the rocks looked strangely on us,
Have fancied that the waves were angry with us,
Heard dark runes murmuring in the autumn wind,
Muttering and murmuring like old toothless women
That prophesied against us in ancient tongues.  

These are imaginations. We are free.

(45-50)

A hiatus, indicated by a visual pause, is interjected in the poem as the speakers suddenly recover themselves and hold in check the unconscious world of the fable conveyed in these fluent, flowing lines. There is a bitter irony underlying the usurpers' final, insistent claim: "We are free." For true freedom, Muir believes, is found during those moments when man enters the timeless world of the fable, the very world the usurpers find threatening and ominous, the world they so persistently suppress and deny. In the name of "liberty" they seek to destroy what gives true liberty. They seek emptiness, not fulfillment. They seek a life of vacancy, a life of nothingness.

In "The Usurpers" we are made privy to the inner state—the inner vacancy—of the new man of power. In "The Helmet" (177) we are given a terrifying vision of how the usurper can be molded into an instrument of war and terror as Muir creates a portrait of the
Nazi soldier who, as he tells us in his autobiography, evoked in his
imagination an "image of impersonal power, the fearful shape of our
modern inhumanity." Written in response to the poet's close contact
in Prague with the horrors of modern history—for in Prague he heard
first-hand accounts of Nazi war atrocities committed during the
occupation—, "The Helmet" describes an imagined confrontation with a
totalitarian soldier who roams the streets of an occupied city
seeking to root out enemies of the state:

The helmet on his head
Has melted flesh and bone
And forged a mask instead
That always is alone.

... ... ...
Its space-devouring eyes
Pass me and hurry on,
Quick as the bullet flies
Until the target's won.

Just now I do not know
What worlds its musings kill...

(1-4; 9-14)

In the hypnotic regularity of these compressed trimeter lines with
their tight a, b, a, b rhyme scheme, their unobtrusive but effective
use of assonance (e.g., helmet...head...melted...instead) and alli-
teration (e.g., helmet...head...Has/flesh...forged/always...alone),
their monosyllabically spare but incisive diction, Muir creates a
highly focused poetry—a poetry of restrained nightmare. As the
speaker-poet momentarily comes face-to-face with the soldier in the
street, he is struck by his "space-devouring eyes" which efficiently
search out his prey, with a bullet-like glance, until the "target" (i.e., a political enemy) has been "won." A soulless, faceless spectre, the soldier is a symbol of human evil—the evil which results when the soul is destroyed leaving an inner blankness, an inner vacuum. He is despiritualized, depersonalized, dehumanized. Reduced to the status of a thing, an "it," he is a perfectly integrated part of a regimented and coercive political machine. Vested with anonymous authority and power, he is a destroyer—even in his "musings," i.e., his inner world of thought and memory.

And yet, despite the soldier's world of cruelty and impersonal power, there is another world perceived by the speaker of the poem as he walks, with a companion, through the city:

Rivers of sweetness flow
From every little hill;
And we are walking there,
And we are sitting here,
Waiting for what we were
To speak and to appear.

(15-20)

In the midst of political violence, the speaker celebrates his spontaneous love of life. He has found the "spring of happiness" which Muir believes men can find even under a dictatorship "where apprehension is a daily part of life" for he has found the happiness which comes from "the impulses of the heart," from a warm and loving human relationship. 20 Inspired by hope, the speaker and his companion wait for the end of the occupation: they wait for the re-

20Ibid., p. 236.
appearance of the world they knew before the war. But the soldier, in his ruthless, impersonal hatred, is and will remain spiritually and socially empty: he will remain homeless. As a persecutor, he lives out, as Muir describes it in his autobiography, his "daily waking nightmare":

But he can never come home,  
Nor I get to the place  
Where, tame, the terrors roam  
Whose shadows fill his face.  

(21-24)

An immeasurable, unbridgeable distance separates the world of the oppressor and that of the speaker—the distance between a spontaneous, heart-felt love for life and a cold, impersonal hatred.

In another poetic record of our age of catastrophe, "The Interrogation" (182), Muir describes the kind of political oppression which he witnessed daily in Czechoslovakia after the Communist Putsch in 1948. Told from the point of view of those directly victimized by what Muir describes as the "terrible impersonality" of the totalitarian system, "The Interrogation" describes a thwarted attempt to escape political oppression:

We could have crossed the road but hesitated,  
And then came the patrol;  

(1-2)

A hairsbreadth away from freedom, the speakers fatally "hesitate"—as does the reader on the prolonged syllables and feminine ending of the word "hesitated"—and so become victims of a brutal political

21Ibid., p. 262.

22Ibid., p. 196.
system which treats individuals not as human beings but as categories. The unremitting, unwavering nature of their interrogation is captured in the relentless, drumming beat of the lines which tell how the speakers are asked "question on question" (10) by the "conscientious and intent" (3) leader of the border patrol: "who, what we are,/ Where we have come from, with what purpose, whose/Country or camp we plot for or betray" (7-9). Victims of a cruel, authoritarian society, the speakers' privacy is sacrificed to an impersonal system of government which categorizes people in an either-or fashion: as either a friend or a foe of the state.

As they are mercilessly subjected, through "the standing day" (11) to an endless barrage of questions, the speakers look with longing towards the world they have forfeited through their momentary hesitation at the border. In dulcet tones and a soft flowing music, they describe the boundless world of liberty and love which exists a mere stone's throw away, "beyond the hedge" (12):

The careless lovers in pairs go by.  
Hand linked in hand, wandering another star,  
So near we could shout to them.  

(13-15)

Remote and inaccessible and yet close at hand, the world of freedom and fulfillment exists just beyond the border of the coercive world known to the speakers. Both celebrating and criticizing the life lived by the inhabitants of that world, the speakers ambiguously describe the lovers as "careless." Careless—i.e. free of care—because they exist in a world of innocence, a world free of oppression, the lovers, as they "saunter" through the "thoughtless field" (18) of
their world, are carelessly indifferent to the human suffering which exists just beyond the boundary of their world. Unaware of their own peril, they are also "careless" in not safeguarding the freedom they possess. While the lovers enjoy their world of liberty, the speakers remain victims of intimidation. The detached, lifeless tone found in the concluding lines of the poem conveys the exhaustion of the speakers who have been questioned almost to the breaking-point:

We are on the very edge,
Endurance almost done,
And still the interrogation is going on.
(19-21)

Trapped in a perpetual nightmare of political oppression, the pattern of their destiny is fixed. They have entered a frightening, inscrutable zone of human history. They have become victims of "impersonal power, the fearful shape of our modern inhumanity."23

In the frightening contempt for humanity exemplified by modern totalitarianism, Muir finds a warning signal for Western man. The historical pressures of our contemporary age, he fears, may be moving us towards a "new impersonal age," an age in which "History takes its final turn/Where all's to mourn for, none to mourn" (242, 4, 7-8).

For the totalitarian's treatment of the individual not as a human being but as the "subject-matter of history,"24 Muir believes, is merely a logical extension of the contemporary reduction of human life to nothing more than historical process. In the "last resort we

23Ibid., p. 271.
24Ibid., p. 196.
live by immaterial realities; that is our real life," Muir believes. And yet the "capacity to recognize immaterial realities is almost dead"\(^{25}\) in the political sphere of action. And the lives of increasing numbers of people--people like those who once lived in the "good town" until they came under the sway of totalitarianism--have become ruled by politics, a politics which denies the existence of God. Muir finds the modern conception of history "where there is no God, no divine Spirit, either immanent or transcendent" to be "mutilated, a monstrosity": "if God does exist," he feels, "that must be the most important truth of all, taking precedence of all other truths."\(^{26}\) But the conception of history increasingly predominant today, rather than providing a nexus between historical and metahistorical truth, denies the existence of such a link and denies the existence of anything outside of human history. Once we live in a world in which "God is dead," as Gabriel Marcel claims, we also live in a world in which "man is in his death-throes."\(^{27}\) For when historical process becomes the "sole significant embodiment of human life," Muir realizes, the "individual human existence is not of the slightest consequence"\(^{28}\); and when man "ceases to be immortal, there is no obligation to treat him with respect."\(^{29}\)

\(^{25}\)Selected Letters, p. 108.

\(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 116.

\(^{27}\)Man Against Mass Society, pp. 13-35; 258.


\(^{29}\)From manuscript notes for An Autobiography, cited by Butter in Edwin Muir: Man and Poet, p. 225.
believe," Muir states in his autobiography, "in the inevitable and the impersonal, these twins which always go together; yet they have come so powerfully into our lives that we have to make a conscious effort now to resist them."30 The belief in the inevitability of historical process, he feels, "if we were to submit to it, would make our life perfectly empty; we should become conscious ciphers in a historical process whose intentions are not ours but its own...."31 "Nothing," as Muir puts it in an early poem, "can come of history but history" (105, 16).

In "After 1984" (267-268) Muir explores the possible social and spiritual consequences of the modern historical view of life and provides a hopeful vision of the return of future generations--those living "after 1984"--to a simple, good, human life. As the speakers of the poem celebrate their deliverance from the "murdering lies" (6) of the Orwellian nightmare and the re-emergence of the good human order "that was before" (38), they ask themselves how from the "nothing" of their Orwellian lives "could come so much":

We the deprived and uncommitted,
Nothing being left us to commit,

. . . . . .
We who had been so carefully bred
Not to feel sorrow or be pleased--
How could we ever be released?

(14-15; 20-22)

Although the young believe that "Men did not act but history," that historical necessity determined that "all should happen so" (7-9),


31 Ibid.
the speakers remain unconvinced: "We who remember do not know,/And still to us the event is strange" (10-11). The life the speakers knew was empty, soulless, meaningless:

The secret universe of the blind
Cannot be known. Just so we were
Shut from ourselves even in our mind;
Only a twisting chaos within
Turned on itself, not knowing where
The exit was, salvation gate.

(26-31)

Trapped in a vacant, chaotic, inner world, they, through "Accident" or "Miracle" (37), determined to find an escape. And so they "fought/On to this life that was before,/Only that, no less, no more,/Strangely familiar" (37-40). The world they fought for is the "familiar" world of ordinary life, the world of custom, tradition, and memory and the world in which "children play/Their games again..." (3-4).

Although "After 1984" affirms Muir's belief that the essential qualities of a good human order ultimately cannot be destroyed, it also conveys a dark revelation of what can happen to a generation of men who are indifferent, who are "uncommitted" and "carefully bred/Not to feel sorrow." Fully cognizant of the dangers of human indifference and the "terrible impersonality"32 of our age, Muir is also sensitive to its underlying causes. How, he asks in "Impersonal Calamity" (280-81), can we "feel" or "ever express" (27) our grief in a blood-soaked age of crime and violence, an age of technically-perfected mass slaughter. "How," as the speaker-poet of this poem asks, "can an eye or brow/Disclose the gutted towns and the millions

32Ibid., p. 196.
dead?" (9-10). Although "respectable" and "ordinary" men have wit-
nessed "terrible things" in these "murder-haunted years" (1, 3), yet

Respectable men seem still respectable,
The ordinary no less ordinary,
For our inherited features cannot show
More than traditional grief and happiness
That rise from old and worn and simple springs.

(4-8)

A personal and "single" (15) grief--the death of a son or a daughter--
can "bend the back or whiten the head, /Break and remould the heart"
(19-20). But

The impersonal calamities estrange us
From our own selves, send us abroad
In desolate thoughtlessness,
While far behind our hearts know what they know,
Yet cannot feel, nor ever express.

(23-27)

The fact that we respond in a traditional way to personal loss shows
that the heart of modern man has not turned to stone. If we seem
indifferent to the tragedies of our history, it is because the heart
and mind are overwhelmed by the magnitude of human suffering recorded
in our age of calamity. But deep within "our hearts know" of the
senseless suffering of innocent victims caught in the impersonal
machinery of a history which reveals the triumph of brute force and
the immoral use of power. Because there has been so much human loss,
our grief is so profound that we cannot "feel" or "express" our
sorrow. For knowing of the greatness of the individual human life,
we can only despair at the misery of our history.

Living as we do in an age of impersonal calamity, an age in
which men and women are treated "quite impersonally, as the subject-
matter of history," we need, more than any other generation, to keep alive the artistic imagination. For the imagination, Muir believes, puts us in relationship with our inner mystery and reveals to us the ancestral pattern of human life: "Imagination tells us that we become human by repetition, that our life is a rehearsal of lives that have been lived over and over, and that this act, with all that is good and evil in it, is a theme for delighted and awed contemplation." Through our imaginative response to literature, as Muir indicates in "Reading in Wartime" (148-149), we can pierce through the shadows cast over the image of man by the terrors of history and so re-affirm our belief in the absolute value of human life. In the single sentence of this thirty-nine line poem—a single sentence which uses an unresolved but skillfully balanced syntax to generate a powerful forward movement to the compactly meaningful three-stress lines of the poem—the speaker-poet affirms that literature tells us more about life than the senseless events of our blood-drenched history:

Though in each latitude
Armies like forest fall,
The iniquitous and the good
Head over heels hurled,
And confusion over all:
Boswell's turbulent friend
And his deafening verbal strife,
Ivan Ilych's death
Tell me more about life,

Ibid.


The meaning and the end
Of our familiar breath,
Both being personal,
Than all the carnage can,
Retrieve the shape of man,
Lost and anonymous,
Tell me wherever I look
That not one soul can die
Of this or any clan
Who is not one of us
And has a personal tie
Perhaps to someone now
Searching an ancient book,
Folk-tale or country song
In many and many a tongue,
To find the original face,
The individual soul,
The eye, the lip, the brow
For ever gone from their place,
And gather an image whole.

(11-39)

Using brief, emphatic lines to generate a feeling of rapt discovery, the speaker-poet recovers, from the chaos and confusion of war, an image of man. Despite the historical forces which threaten to annihilate man, the human spirit, as captured in and conveyed by imaginative literature, rises superior to the historical moment. Through imaginative literature we are redeemed from our age of impersonal calamity as we gain a living experience of other human lives. For imagination, Muir believes, "takes us into the feelings and thoughts" of legendary and literary figures "and makes us feel the full weight and the uniqueness of their lives"; and "it makes us understand human life vividly and intimately in ourselves because we have felt it in others."36 As we re-discover the "shape of man/Lost and anonymous" from the carnage and violence of war, as we re-

36 The Estate of Poetry, p. 81.
discover our spiritual link with all human beings, so we re-discover the meaning and significance and the greatness of the individual human life. We recover, from the dehumanized image of man reflected by our history, a vision of the "whole" man. Imaginative literature redeems us from the spiritual lostness of our age.

Because we live in an age of crisis, an age in which it seems that the "ordinary human being may not be able to survive," that man, as we know him, may be superseded by a "species" of men who are desensitized and depersonalized, we must cherish the ancestral image of man and recognize the portentousness of the individual human life from birth to death. If we wish to live a life of meaning and significance within our brief, historical moment, we must live by the politics of the fable. We must nurture, like the speakers of "The Difficult Land" (237-38), the customs, memories, and traditional lore which link us to our fable:

We are a people; race and speech support us, Ancestral rite and custom, roof and tree, Our songs that tell of our triumphs and disasters (Fleeting alike), continuance of fold and hearth, Our names and callings, work and rest and sleep, And something that, defeated, still endures— These things sustain us. (24-30)

Although the inhabitants of "the difficult land" of history know moments of despair when they would cast off the burdens of life, yet they are "drawn back again" (39) by things transitory and good: by their fields, their homes, their remembered dead, and by "faces of

37 Ibid., p. 86.
goodness, faithful masks of sorrow, / Honesty, kindness, courage, fidelity, / The love that lasts a life's time" (40-42). Although the land of history is a difficult land in which "things miscarry" (1), it is also a land where those who live by the politics of the fable can live a life of dignity and virtue. The ideal society, for Muir, is that he knew as a child in Orkney. "I was brought up," he writes, "in the midst of a life which was still co-operative, which had still the medieval communal feeling. . . . Our life was an order."38 It is from his memories of Orkney that Muir derives his conception of how we should live with one another:

What I believe in is a modest, peaceable life in this world, a faulty, forgiving, on the whole happy life, where no man can exploit his neighbour and people work together in a friendly way and die when their time comes; a life which cannot be right unless its relation to the heavens is right. It is the universal frame overarching and embracing everything that gives proportion and meaning to the whole. This seems incontestable. I don't want a heaven on earth, but simply this.39

Centered on a belief in the spiritual significance of life, the politics of the fable seeks to create a social order in which men live in freedom and harmony.

And yet, as Muir realizes, the politics of the fable has only a slim chance of surviving in a modern age in which man has but a precarious foothold on his humanity. For contemporary historical pres-

39 Ibid., p. 245.
sures—the growth of a mass society, the development of a philosophy of determinism, and the emergence of vast, impersonal social, political, and technological forces beyond the comprehension or control of the individual—threaten to obliterate what is uniquely human in man: his belief in his spiritual destiny. With his loss of faith in spiritual values and a consequent loss of reverence for the individual human life, contemporary man faces an uncertain future in a world in which the politics of war and violence and political oppression conceives of and treats the individual as an expendable unit in a political and social machine. The tragic course of history, as Muir reflects on it in his final poems, may be moving man towards a new nightmare, towards the global disaster of an atomic war:

Shall we all die together?
Perhaps nothing at all will be but pain,
A choking and floundering, or gigantic stupor
Of a world-wide deserted, hospital ward.

(283, III, 1-4)

There will be "No place at all for bravery" in that "last war," nor any way "to attempt, to save/By our own death the young that they might die/Sometime a different death" (282, I, 1, 6-8). In a mere day or a week, we may destroy ourselves and "murder" and "destroy" all

That ever has been, all species and forms,
Man and woman and child, beast and bird,
Tree, flower and herb, and that by which they were known,
Sight and hearing and touch, feeling and thought,
And memory of our friends among the dead.

(300, 5-9)

If we wish to avert such a disaster, we must uncover the principle of harmony and order manifest in nature and art and apply it to the
social order:

our help is in all that is full-grown
In nature, and all that is with hands well-made,
Carved in verse or stone
Or a harvest yield. There is the harmony
By which we know our own and the world's health,
The simply good, great counterpoise
To blind nonentity,
Ever renewed and squandered wealth.
(284, IV, 23-30)

But if we deny our responsibility for our human history, if we remain
indifferent to our own sickness, if we stay "wrapped so warm in
foolish joys" and so do not take time to "heal and remake our city"
(284, IV, 34, 36), then we may be impaled on our own indifference. We
may fall prey to the ultimate terror of human history: atomic war.
As Muir envisions the "day before the last day" of human history, he
imagines each man locked within the prison of his own indifference:
all "Think only of themselves and curse the faithless earth" (301, 49).
And as the last day arrives, all stare in silence at the sun, thinking:

'Choose! Choose again, you who have chosen this!
Too late! Too late!'

(56-57)

If we refuse to follow the socio-ethical imperative which commits us
to human life and to the politics of the fable, we may realize, only
when it is too late, the consequences of our choice: annihilation.

And what of the aftermath of such a global catastrophe? What
of the quality of life of those who survive a nuclear war? Muir pre-
sents two visions of the possible outcome of such a ruinous war: one
despairing and one hopeful. In "After a Hypothetical War" (265), he
envisions the destruction, by such a war, of everything of human value
as he describes the disjointed, poisoned world of the survivors, a world of chaos and evil and death. There where "Soil and air breed crookedly" and men are "dumb and twisted as the envious scrub/That spreads in silent malice on the fields" (16-18), the survivors exist in a state of anarchy. Without "rule" or "ruler," the "purblind peasant" squats with elbows extended as he attempts to "nudge his neighbor from his inch of ground/Clutched fast through flood and drought but never loved./Avarice without meaning." (2-5). As the perversity of evil goes unchecked and humankind regresses into barbarism, the fragile, vulnerable spirit of man is destroyed. The fable of life is forever lost.

But in another vision of life in a post-atomic war age, "The Horses" (246-247), Muir proclaims his faith in the endurance of the fable in the lives of those who survive the apocalypse of a global war. As human history follows a deathward course into oblivion, that which was lovingly created in seven days is senselessly destroyed as the evil of a nihilistic hatred erupts into a "seven days war" which puts the "world to sleep" (2). The few remaining survivors, existing in a remote, agricultural community suggestive of Orkney, quietly recall the war as they experienced it, less than a year before, from their isolated corner of the civilized world:

On the second day
The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer.
On the third day a warship passed us, heading north,
Dead bodies piled on the deck. On the sixth day
A plane plunged over us into the sea. Thereafter
Nothing.

(7-12)
Having made their "covenant with silence" (4) since the seven days war, the speakers welcome their release from the poisoned talk of civilization once transmitted via the radio. If the radio were to "speak again," they would refuse to listen: "we would not let it bring/That old bad world that swallowed its children quick/At one great gulp. We would not have it again" (18-20). As they reject the "old bad world" that, monster-like consumed its children, they also renounce the technological by-products of that modern age. They allow their tractors to lie in ruin and turn to rust as they revert to a simple, pre-industrial order: "We make our oxen drag our rusty ploughs,/Long laid aside. We have gone back/Far past our fathers' land" (28-30). As the few survivors of a modern world of war and machinery return to the traditional world of their ancestors, they hold themselves in readiness for a new beginning. They must create a new social order.

They find that new beginning when the "strange" horses miraculously appear, horses like those sold in their fathers' time to buy tractors. Arriving late one summer evening, the horses thunder into the settlement, their heads "Like a wild wave charging" (36) and then quietly wait, as if under command to renew their "long-lost archaic companionship" (44) with mankind. Among them are colts "Dropped in some wilderness of the broken world,/Yet new as if they had come from their own Eden" (48-49). Though the world is devastated and broken, trampled underfoot by evil, the horses bring back the world of innocence, the world of the fable. As the horses freely render service to man, they help him to begin a new world:
Since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our loads
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.
Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

(50–52)

As the survivors of a nuclear catastrophe begin a new age of man, they
institute a new politics: the politics of the fable. They have left
the "bad old world"—the world of war and mass slaughter—behind them.

As Muir shapes an affirmative vision out of the terrors of our
history, he celebrates the survival of the human spirit in an age of
crisis and global catastrophe. If we are to survive in an age of
impersonal calamity, Muir believes, we must create a new politics,
one committed to life, not death. If we are to penetrate the third
mystery of man—"how we should live with one another"—in our
modern age of depersonalization and dehumanization, we must nourish
the imagination. "It is easy for the false imagination to hate a
whole class," Muir writes, and such hatred breeds our impersonal and
inhuman treatment of our fellow human beings; but "it is hard for
the true imagination to hate a single human being." For the true
imagination recognizes the dignity and sanctity of the individual
human life. The true imagination cherishes that which is uniquely
human in man: his belief in his spiritual destiny, his portentous
confrontation with the mysteries of life and death and good and
evil, and his unique and universal journey in quest of the true

\[40\text{An Autobiography, p. 56.}\]

\[41\text{Ibid., p. 235.}\]
self. If we are to live a life of meaning and significance in our age of catastrophe, we must re-dedicate ourselves to a belief in the sacredness of human life. Only then can we awaken from the nightmare of history. And only then can we hope to pass on our inheritance—the fable of life—to future generations of men.
CHAPTER VIII

THE POETIC JOURNEY INTO SILENCE

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.
- Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

Speech is of Time, silence is of Eternity.
- Carlyle, Sartor Resartus

A poet who would fit the "hidden" world to the "visible," who would "have them both, would nothing miss" (240, 30-33), Muir is dedicated to the artistic imagination and to the perfected, symbolic world of art. Poetry, the speech grown from the darkness of the unconscious, offers him a way of knowing, a way of perceiving, and a way of penetrating the mysterious essence of life. Poetic art, as a nexus of verbal energy and imaginative insight, empowers him to give shape and intensity to the visionary and the ethereal. Although time takes from him the "story that never can be told,/The unfading light and the unbreaking wave" (189, 11-12), poetry enables him to capture and preserve his momentary glimpses of that lost radiance. In the timeless, ordered world of art, he momentarily triumphs over time and
chaos; in the self-enclosed, gemlike world of poetic contemplation, he uncovers a world of vastness and a world of unfathomable preciousness. The poetic imagination redeems him from the fragmentary day of time and history as it discloses to him the hidden mysteries of life and as it brings him to the threshold of the "story that never can be told," the irreducibly simple and utterly unsayable story of silent immortality.

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" (230-31), we pass beyond the horizon 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.

Drawing an analogy between the toy, the emblem, and the poem—for "toys," as Muir states in an article published in 1956, the same year as this poem, "are the first works of art in our experience" and help us to "recapture the feelings of the first artist and the first
spectator"¹--the speaker-poet discloses the child-like wonder he feels both as a creator and a spectator of the artistic object. Though the artist may seem nothing more than an "antiquary" and his fashioned world of myths and symbols nothing more than a shrunken, trivial, toy world, the world of the artistic imagination is a world of "space and order magistral." Although the world of the imagination may seem remote and elusive, it is both accessible 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 and succumb to its formalized magic, we enter a place so vast and ordered that our daily world of time appears, by comparison, 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 honor, 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" (144-45), can reveal the pattern and meaning of the individual existence as it links us to the timeless world of the fable, the world known in childhood and then 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. As he looks

back, in the first stanza of the poem, to his childhood on Wyre, he sees it as something fabulous, as 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 youth, a war of "dreams and shames" (14), is "Waged for a Pyrrhic victory/Of reveries and names" (15-16)—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," i.e., the elusive memories, flares of revelation, and fleeting dream images which link him to his timeless childhood world. As the reverie and the name are hurled against the ever-encroaching reality of "flesh and blood" (18), the poet, in his manhood, shapes his art by interweaving strands of the transitory and the ethereal:

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

(21-23)
And it is the poetic imagination and that mysteriously present but elusive world of the spirit which survive "past the prime" (25) of manhood, Muir indicates in the final stanza. For as 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.

(31-36)

The poet, faithful to the world of the poetic imagination—the world of the reverie and the name—, travels back to the timeless world of his first childhood, the world of the unearthly watchers. As 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.

Committed to the intangible world of the reverie and the name, Muir is also a poet committed to the deep and potent magic of the racial unconscious. He is a poet who has been "taught," as he tells us in the last poem he wrote, "by dreams and fantasies" and by the "friendly and darker phantoms" (302, 1-2) of the imagination. In "The Song" (257-59), 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 inaccessible—"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 space is suspended as one enters the world of the fable, "These meetings are renewed, dead dialogues/ Utter their antique speech" (13-14). For in the world of dreams where "fables turn to beasts and beasts to fables," anything "can be a natural wonder" (11-12).

And so it is in a dream that the speaker passes beyond the borderline 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 as the speaker, in his dream, returns home from a "long day's work" and crosses a park, a "Utilitarian strip of grass and trees—/A short-cut for poor clerks to unhallowed rooms" (22-23), 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). As the dreamer is brought within sight of this "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" (28-29)—, 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) then breaking out in thundrous sound as the "wild thing" charges at the park gate but is unable to pass that "simple barrier" (53-54). And then, as 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" (61-63). 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 mys-
terious 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?
(64-68)

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\(^2\)—, the experience holds
the speaker in its peculiar power. The "disused, deaf, dead" door
of the unconscious has been opened. The experience has stimulated
the poetic imagination:

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

The speaker-poet retains, upon awakening, a memory of the beast's
song. It is this song—a song of pain and a song of beauty—that he

\(^2\)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 under-
standing of a wider purpose and pattern is seen 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 that the image of the "wound in the world's side" adds to the
"subdued" Christian element found in "The Song."
will attempt to recapture through the formalized cadence of poetic speech.

A poet inspired by dreams in which "fables turn to beasts and beasts to fables" and in which "dead dialogues/Uutter their antique speech," Muir is also a poet who knows the "delicacy/Of bringing shape to birth" (158, 7-8), and the difficulty of sustaining the moment of poetic inspiration. He is a poet who must find the "right moment"\(^3\) if he is to create a poetry that is "both simple and un-expected"\(^4\) 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."\(^5\) There is "no knowing," Muir explains as he describes how lines sometimes occurred spontaneously in his mind," when such things will come, or where."\(^6\) 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 poetry. In the abrupt opening statement of the poem, the speaker-poet asks to be left in privacy so he can receive his "delicate," ghost-like muse who stands

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\(^2\) Selected Letters, p. 146.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 143.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 89.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 179.
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 free verse lines, Muir creates an intensely personal poetry, a 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.

(15-18)
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 to produce an "easy utterance of harmonious words, /Spontaneous syllables bodying forth a world" (p. 165, 63-64).

A poet inspired by a ghostly muse and by those moments of poetic creation in which "spontaneous syllables" body forth the world of the fable and the patterned, perfected world of "space and order magisterial," Muir is also inspired by those "transformations of reality which the imagination itself creates," those transformations of reality which bring one towards the limits of language. "I have always had a particular feeling," he states in a letter, "for that transmutation of life" found "occasionally in poetry" and "sometimes in one's own thoughts when they are still." In the Shakespearean sonnet "The Transmutation" (154-155), a poem which Muir liked "best" of all his sonnets, he gives formal expression to his enigmatic experience of the imaginative transmutation of life. Poising the first quatrain on an unfulfilled expectation, Muir employs an unresolved syntax in the first three and one-half lines to convey a feeling of rapt discovery as he describes a moment of value redeemed from time:


8Selected Letters, p. 148.

9Ibid., p. 157. As Muir states: "Among the sonnets I like best 'Transmutation'."
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
(1-4)

As the speaker-poet celebrates the transforming vision which so
"changes" things to reveal their unchanging core—a vision which pares
away the inessential to reveal the essence of "all" things—so he
celebrates that which is inaccessible and ungraspable: the elusive
"ghost," the fleeting, momentary "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. Con-
veying the haunting, elusive quality of this world through the muted
sounds of these iambic pentameter lines, Muir creates a lingering
music through a careful balancing of vowels and consonants: by
combining whispering s-sounds (e.g., should..ghost..glance..transmuted
..sole..strange) and resonant nasals (e.g., change..gleam..unmoving..
dream..moment) with sequences of prolonged vowel sounds (as in ghost
(ɔ)..glance (ə)..gleam(ə) and sole(ə)..moving(ə)..moment(ə)). Alter-
ing the soft, metrically regular flow of music found in the first two
and one-half lines through foot substitutions (substituting trochees
and anapests for iambics), Muir rhythmically conveys the speaker's
sense of being suspended between dream and reality by using first a
rising (the unmoving dream / And the sole) and then falling (moving/
moment) rhythm.

As the speaker-poet suspends consciousness of self as a being
in time and place and enters the realm of poetic contemplation, he
finds the existence of that self-enclosed world unutterably "strange":
"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.

(4-8)

Envisioning life in time as a protracted "fall" into and through the flawed (i.e. ruined) world of time and place and towards the final "ruin" of decay and dissolution, Muir verbally conveys this extended process by using prolonged vowel sounds in combination with liquids and nasals (time's (l)\_long(\o)\_ruin(\o\o)) to create a lingering effect and by using a spondee in the second foot (Through time's / long ru\_in) to appropriately slow down the pace of the line. Though time's process is irrevocable and irreversible, poetic art can hold intact, within its intangible "borders," an isolated and framed moment of contemplation; and it can encompass the "all"--i.e. the essence--of reality and "weave" from these ethereal strands a patterned world which is not subject to "time's long ruin." Interwoven in this contemplative world, the speaker-poet uncovers a world of utter simplicity and of human significance: he uncovers the innocent realm of first childhood where "the child plays still," the world in which the lover "waits beside the trysting tree," and the self-contained world in which the "good hour spans its heaven, and the ill" (9-11), i.e., the world in which good and evil have their place legitimately. In this iconic realm of epiphanic fixation, the worlds of innocence, love, and good and evil remain "Rapt in their silent immortality (12), i.e., 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—"As in commemoration of a day/That having been can never pass away" (13-14, my italics)—, and although, as 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 the moment of transmutation, a moment "poised between the unmoving dream/And the sole moving moment"; he has reverentially held in memory and celebrated the elusive 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 the "story that never can be told."

Paradoxically, it is at the point in which Muir has everything to say that he discovers his inability to say anything. The poetic journey which begins in the poet's desire to disclose the essential and eternal mystery of life also ends there. For as Muir 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 an instrument of cognition, poetic language is at once powerful and limited, as Muir indi-
cates in a late poem, "Images I" (260), as he gives poetic utterance to a dream which he had and subsequently related to Kathleen Raine, a dream which 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.10

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 nor 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 epiphanic fixation, this face provides a direct awareness of a mystery deeper than life, a mystery that resides in paradox. Although the cares and

10Kathleen Raine, "Edwin Muir: An Appreciation," Texas Quarterly 4 (Autumn 1961): 234. Although the poem is about a colon not a semicolon, this dream is undoubtedly the source of "Images I".
burdens of time have left their mark in the "lines" of this face, the "yearning" evident in these features, with their "lines of motion-less desire/Perpetually assuaged yet unappeased" (2-3), 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 poetry that follows, a poetry that, as Christopher Wiseman puts it, uses syntax as an "expressive agent" as it describes and comments on itself: 11

Look once. But do not hope to find a sentence
To tell what you have been. 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).

As a writer who turned to poetry at the age of thirty-five because he realized that what he wanted to say could not be said in prose, Muir came to discover, near the end of his poetic career, that the utterly simple and pure mystery of human life which he apprehended could not be uttered in poetry either. And although he could tell the story of the Fall and our journey through time, though he could create a poetic world of "space and order magistral," and though he could verbally commemorate his momentary glimpses of a transmuted, transfigured world, he could never truly tell the story he had been trying to tell through his long, poetic exploration of the fable of life. He could not tell the first and original story of man: the story of Eden.

"Stories we know. There is another story" (29), as the
speaker-poet states in "The Other Story" (241). But that story—the story of our innocence—is untellable. For we have no words to describe the "new thing"; we cannot know "The act, the form itself, unnamed, unheard"; we cannot go "again" for the "first time" on the "road that runs ere memory/Snares it in syllables/And rings its burial bells/In gossip or music or poetry" (1-8). Though we can commemorate our innocence after it has been lost and attach a "name" to it and speak about it in poetry, we can not regain the real presence of that timeless, eternal world through language. For language, the poet's tool, as Muir indicates in other poems, belongs to the "fragmentary day" of time and history—to the world of "things and their names" ("The Days," 210, 51, 53). Language names and gives shape to the world of our fallen perception:

For with names the world was called
Out of the empty air,
With names was built and walled,
Line and circle and square,
("The Animals," 208, 7-10)

Although memory and language link us to the timeless world of innocence, they still, as Muir indicates in "The Other Story" belong to time. And we "would not remember, but would be" (9): we would not "muse" on that lost world, or wait to hear the "great lost news" but "would be where we were bred,/In Eden an hour away" (10-12; 14-15). We would be innocent rather than have knowledge of innocence for "We learned it from the sad memorial name/First uttered by the offence" (23-24). But we are fallen. And yet, though language and memory are imperfect, they do provide a source of knowledge. The "two worlds"—Innocence and the Fall—remain potent symbols of our
fable:

And now the two words seem
A single, fabulous, reciprocal glory,
A dream re-enacted in another dream,
And all accomplished as we plucked the bough.

(25-28)

Although the poet cannot tell the "other story," the utterly simple
and pure story of our innocence—for the world of innocence cannot be
repossessed through language or memory—, he can tell a story of pro-
found significance: the story of human life. And this story, as
Muir heard it spoken by a "woman, or muse, or sibyl" in a dream which
he had near the end of his life, is a "great and elevated" story, a
story "with nothing small or mean" in it.12 With his deep faith in
the sacred and spiritual story of "silent immortality," Muir finds
human life to be "infinitely serious and real, and a great event."13

A poet committed both to things "transitory and good" ("All We,"
158, 2) and to the intangible world of the spirit, Muir confirms,
through his art, the greatness of the human adventure. Aware of the
inexhaustible and elusive mystery of human life, he 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

12 From the notebook "Dreams and Diary Items," cited by Butter

13 Ibid.
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 as he embodies it in language for he stammers the deep truth he has apprehended. He does not force his visionary experience into the predetermined structures of rational thought for "If thought should thieve/One word of the mystery/All would be wrong" (18-20). In moments of poetic inspiration, as 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 as he 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.

(11-16)

Muir has come, in his long poetic journey, full circle. He has returned to the starting place of his journey—he has returned to the "sufficient place" (86-87), the place where "all" the world "comes, and goes out again, and comes again," and the place where one beholds "the Pattern" and the "Archetypes" of human life (17-19). As the poet stammers the words of mystery, as he tells the untellable tale through the "limping sentence" with its missing word, he tells more than he can ever know through the conscious mind. "What I shall never know," as Muir states in "The Poet," "I must make known" (9-10). As
he creates his song out of his deep spiritual awareness, as he commemorates his momentary glimpses of a transmuted, perfected world, he communicates, however imperfectly, a knowledge that transcends and fulfills us. He communicates a deep truth which exists beyond systems, beyond discourse, beyond the words of poetry.
"A great theme greatly treated," as Muir suggests in the Norton lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955-1956 and published posthumously as The Estate of Poetry, "might still put poetry back in its old place."\(^1\) Concerned that the "estate of poetry"—i.e., its "effective range and influence"—has "greatly shrunk,"\(^2\) Muir holds that if we were to "modify our contemporary notion of poetry as a rarified and special and often difficult thing, it might have a salutary effect on our criticism and our practice of poetry as well."\(^3\) Eschewing the New Criticism—the kind of criticism that "shuts the poem in upon itself as an object, not of enjoyment but of scrutiny"\(^4\)

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\(^1\) The Estate of Poetry, p. 93.

\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 1-2.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 94.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 69. The function of the critic is not to replace the poem with an analysis of it, as occurs in the New Criticism, but to act as a "helpful intermediary between literature and the reader" (p. 61). As Muir says in "A View of Poetry," in Essays on Literature and Society, pp. 231-32: Although the New Critic "may discover new sources of delight" in a poem with his "painstaking and conscientious" analysis of lines, phrases, and words, what he is more likely to discover "is delight in the fascinating workings of his own mind." And when the analytic critic lacks imagination," he is thrown back upon a mere method, a sort of machine through which poems have to be passed . . ." "I cannot read" the New Criticism, as Muir states in a much—
—Muir feels that poets should resist the "temptation" to "turn inward into poetry" and thus "lock themselves into a hygienic prison where they speak only to one another, and to the critic, their stern war­
der."5 For since "the audience is part of the business,"6 the "smaller and more select the audience for poetry, the more the poet will be confined": and, conversely, "the more wide-reaching the imaginative world of poetry is, the greater will be the audience it wins.‖7 Poetry should, once again, let in "the ordinary unanalytical reader, and with him human nature."8 And "those who write and those who criticize poetry," should never forget "that great poetry can, or once could, be a general possession. . . ."9

The "first allegiance of any poet," Muir believes, "is to imaginative truth": only by serving the imagination can the poet hope to "serve" mankind.10 Fearful that the diminished scope of poetry in the contemporary world and the assault, in modern litera-
ture, on humanistic values are aiding in the destruction of the tra-
ditional beliefs which give life meaning, Muir cherishes, in his quoted line, "without a slight onset of claustrophobia and a feeling that I am being shut in with the critic and the poem. . . knowing that I shall not get away until all three of us are quite exhausted."

5The Estate of Poetry, p. 109.
6Ibid., p. 28.
7Ibid., p. 23.
8Ibid., p. 77.
9Ibid., p. 22.
10Ibid., p. 108.
poetry, our common humanity and our spiritual heritage. For he tells a story which, "although it is our story, is disappearing from poetry"; the story of our existence in time and place.\textsuperscript{11} And because, in his view, the "object" of poetry is to create a "true image" of human life from birth to death,\textsuperscript{12} Muir conveys, in his art, a vision not unlike that found in the ballads—an "ancestral vision simplified to the last degree"\textsuperscript{13}—as he explores the mysteries of life, the mysteries of where we came from, where we are going, and how we should live with each other.

Taught by dreams and fantasies, Muir is a poet who feels a deep-seated urge to create a comprehensive vision of life as he bears witness to the truths of the imagination, truths which he first apprehended during his waking visions. In his poetry and in his autobiography, we find a chronicle of his obsessive need to make "clear" the "pattern" of his life "as a human being existing in space and moving through time, environed by mystery."\textsuperscript{14} Finding the "archetypal image"\textsuperscript{15} of the journey a total myth, one that encapsulates and conveys the essential facts of our existence in time and place, Muir, through his ritual of repeated journeyings, shapes an affirmative

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 29.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 107.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 13-14.
\textsuperscript{14}"Yesterday's Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography,"
p. 404.
\textsuperscript{15}An Autobiography, p. 217.
poetic vision as he discovers in the fable of Innocence, the Fall, and the Promise, the pattern of human life.

Although the journey begins, in the more subjective poetry of the 1920s and 1930s, with the poet's desire to escape time's domain and find his way back to the timeless world of childhood memories and mythic dreams, the urgent desire to escape time, as we have seen, fades in the poetry of the mid-1940s and 1950s as Muir discovers that he can find a "way" through life's labyrinthine by-ways, and that he can find the meaning of what time gives him in those framed moments of contemplation, moments which he can record in poetry. And near the end of his long poetic journey—a journey which takes him into the remote, inaccessible world of childhood, the fabulous world of organic heraldry, and the redundant world of the maze—he returns to his source as he discovers his vital link to the sacred, timeless world of vision. As he discovers that he "still" has "one foot in Eden," he becomes fully reconciled to time. For though he is within time, he is able, through the artistic imagination, to see life timelessly and to see it whole.

As Muir affirms, in the poetry of the 1940s and 1950s, the fundamental unity of mankind's spiritual journey through time and place, he also turns outward to confront the terrors of our history as he seeks to reveal how we can live meaningfully in our new age of impersonal calamities, an age in which the individual is conceived to be nothing more than "the subject-matter of history."16 Seeking to

16 Ibid., p. 196.
retrieve the "shape of man/Lost and anonymous" from the contemporary political and social forces which threaten to annihilate him, Muir calls for the restitution of humanistic values in the contemporary world. For it is the task of the poet, he feels, to create an image of our life and so reveal to us the fundamental sacredness and dignity --the portentousness--of the individual human life. In the perfected, symbolic world of poetry, he believes, as we are momentarily redeemed from our fragmentary day of time and history, we are put in touch with our inner mystery. For poetry not only reveals to us the pattern of human life, but it can bring us to the threshold of the contemplative's vision: the vision of silent immortality. And in that vision and its silence, we find a revelation of the deep meaning and significance of human life.

Although a solitary figure among modern poets, Muir, as Kathleen Raine states, has given "more permanent expression to his world than other poets who deliberately set out to be the mouthpieces of their generation" for he is, in the "traditional sense of the word, a true poet," a poet who is "inspired."17 Most frequently placed in the company of the great visionary poets of the English tradition, poets such as Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge,18 Muir is a poet, his admirers agree, of great integrity.


18See, for example, J.C. Hall, Edwin Muir, British Council Writers and Their Work Series, No. 71 (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1956), p. 31; Elizabeth Huberman, The Poetry of Edwin Muir, pp. 7-9; Thomas Merton, "The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and
and imaginative force. For Helen Gardner, for example, Muir's poetry gives evidence not only to an "integrity of mind and feeling" but to a "great power to communicate, through the verbal recreation of visible and tangible experiences, invisible truths." \(^{19}\); John Holloway considers the "foundation of Muir's achievement as a poet" to be "the embodiment in verse of a deep and true apprehension of life" \(^{20}\); J.C. Hall, the editor of Muir's Collected Poems, views him as a poet of "fundamental realities" and feels that the "transfiguring power" of Muir's imagination gives his poetry its "unique significance" \(^{21}\); P.H. Butter, author of a critical biography of Muir and a brief, general survey of his work, finds Muir to be a "genuine poet," a poet of "major importance because of the depth and comprehensiveness of the vision which his poems collectively contain" \(^{22}\); and Elizabeth Huberman, author of an important critical study of Muir's poetry, contends that Muir's accomplishment is a "major one" and that his work is "serious, strong, humane, and above all informed with that mysterious quality


\(^{21}\)Hall, pp. 8, 33.

of imaginative vision which is the final and essential mark of true poetry."23

It is, then, the visionary force of Muir's poetry that draws and holds readers: he is a poet who wrote under necessity and compulsion as he sought to reveal his inner world of vision and the imagination. But Muir's art is not without fault. His early poems, as he himself admits, are marred by his lack of experience in the technical aspects of poetry-making. For when he began writing verse at the age of thirty-five, he had to "force" his vision, as he puts it, "creaking and complaining" into the "mould" of the "rhythms of English poetry."24

And it is true, as Elizabeth Huberman states, that "an occasional stilted phrase, an oddly chosen word, a strange flatness, creeps into some of his poems to the very last. . . ."25 But in the vast majority of his later poetry—in The Voyage (1946), The Labyrinth (1949), his greatest volume of poetry, and One Foot in Eden (1956)—form and language and vision merge to produce that "simple and unexpected" quality which Muir believed to be the hallmark of great poetry. For, as T.S. Eliot puts it, "under the pressure of emotional intensity, and possessed by his vision," Muir found "almost unconsciously, the right, the inevitable way of saying what he wanted to say."26

23 Huberman, p. 10.
25 Huberman, p. 53.
though Muir is a poet who chose to use traditional verse forms, a limited tonal range, and a simple language devoid of irony or ambiguity or subtle allusions in an age of great experimentation in poetic language and technique, he "will remain," as Eliot states, "among the poets who have added glory to the English language."27

A poet of major importance and a poet whose reputation has grown steadily since his death in 1959, Muir speaks to us, in his utterly simple and serious voice, of the ageless truths of the human experience. But his vision of life is not blindly optimistic. Muir faces, unflinchingly, the doubts and uncertainties which plague man in a modern age of skepticism; and he confronts, with open eyes, the terrors of our history in an age of mindless violence and impersonal mass slaughter. Though he finds meaning and significant order in human life and history, that vision is hard-earned. For Muir realizes that the contemporary world in which we live is like a "cage," a cage which provides no outlet "except into a future very like but worse than the present."28 He realizes that the contemporary world view, which envisions man as an expendable unit in a vast historical and social machine, has devalued and despiritualized human life.

Deeply aware of the crisis of values in our age of chaos and catastrophe and belittlement, and fearful that contemporary historical pressures are threatening to obliterate what is uniquely human in man --his belief in his spiritual destiny--, Muir provides a humanistic

27Ibid.

28*The Estate of Poetry*, p. 89.
affirmation of life. His art, with its celebration of the grandeur and mystery of the human condition, provides an alternate vision to the "reduction of the image of man" in contemporary literature to something "simpler, more temporal, more realistic, and more insignificant." As he tells, in his quiet, simple voice, the fable of human life, he seeks to free us from the "cage" we inhabit and to put us in touch with the deep truths of life. In his poetry, a poetry that lets in the "ordinary, unanalytical reader and with him human nature," we find a justification for his claim that "a great theme, greatly treated might still put poetry back in its old place." As Muir conveys a great theme of poetry—the theme of our spiritual journey through time and place and history—he charts the deep inner journey we must take if we are to emerge from the "cage" of the contemporary world into a life of wholeness. For through his song and its deep inwardness, we are given a glimpse of the inexhaustible and elusive mystery which exists at the core of our experience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. WORKS BY EDWIN MUIR

For a complete listing of Muir's works, see Elgin W. Mellown's Bibliography of the Writings of Edwin Muir and Supplement to Bibliography of the Writings of Edwin Muir (listed below under II, 1). This list will include Muir's verse, prose, collected articles, and important uncollected articles. The translations (of which Mellown lists thirty eight) and reviews (of which Mellown lists over eight hundred and fifty) will not be included here.

1. Verse


The Narrow Place. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1943.

The Voyage and Other Poems. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1946.


2. Prose


3. Uncollected Essays

The following is a list of important uncollected essays. For a complete list of Muir's essays see Elgin W. Mellow's Bibliography of the Writings of Edwin Muir and Supplement to Bibliography of the Writings of Edwin Muir (listed below under II, I).

"The Assault on Humanism." Freeman 7 (June 27, 1923): 369-71.

"A Note on Friedrich Hölderlin." Freeman 7 (August 1, 1923): 488-90.


II. WORKS ABOUT EDWIN MUIR

1. Bibliographies


2. Books


3. Chapters and Parts of Books

For a more exhaustive listing see A Checklist of Writings About Edwin Muir, pp. 6-16. Listed above, II, 1.


4. Articles

The following is a list of important articles on Muir's poetry. For a complete list of articles and reviews see A Checklist of Writings


5. Unpublished Dissertations


III. OTHER BOOKS CITED IN THE TEXT


The dissertation submitted by J. Brooks Bouson has been read and approved by the following Committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date: 12/11/78

[Director's Signature]