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MEMORY, TIME AND INCARNATION IN THE POETRY OF EDWIN MUIR

CHRISTOPHER MOODY

When Edwin Muir died in 1958, his widow found the poem, "I have been taught" in one of his notebooks. It begins:

I have been taught by dreams and fantasies
Learned from the friendly and darker phantoms
And got great knowledge and courtesy from the dead
Kinsmen and kinswomen, ancestors and friends
But from two mainly
Who gave me birth.[1]

That opening verse shows immediately the importance that memory had for Muir, both in his life and in his verse, and in particular how important to him was the memory of his childhood.

It had not always been so. For though on the surface, Muir's life was comparatively uneventful, intellectually he went through many changes, adopting and discarding various philosophies and ideologies. It was not until he married Willa Muir and turned to psychoanalysis to help him deal with his inner sense of futility and frustration, that memory became important to him. At that point, he began to dream again after years of being unaware of his unconscious life, and to remember the intense dreams and experiences he had had as a child. That marked the first stage in his recovery of a sense of meaning and purpose in his life through memory. The second stage began eighteen or so years later, when he began writing the first version of his autobiography entitled significantly, "The Story and the Fable". That book was written out of personal need, not for self-explosure or confession but, in his words, "to find out what a human being is in this extraordinary age which depersonalises everything".[2]

In his autobiography Muir gives us a most vivid portrayal of his life as a child in the Orkney society which had hardly changed since the middle ages. He remembered how easy it was for him as a child to become absorbed into two parallel realities; the external world of nature and events and the internal world of dreams and stories. He also remembered how easy it was to pass from the one to the other, both because of the flexibility of his own childhood imagination and because, in a society where conditions of life had not changed significantly for centuries, events in the ordinary world still linked in naturally with the ancestral world preserved in ballad and story. He came to realise that his childhood imaginations and the ancestral stories held the clue to a picture of human nature and human destiny which was more profound than the philosophies he had alternately adopted and rejected as a young man. He celebrated this traditional picture of life in his poem "Outside Eden".

Such is the country of this clan
Haunted by guilt and innocence.
There is a sweetness in the air
That blossomed as soon as time began.
But now is dying everywhere.[3]

In particular, he mentions the importance of ancestral memory:

The simple have long memories.
Memory makes simple all that is.[4]

The power of memory as he experienced it as a child both in his own dreams and in the ballads and stories which were told him, lay in the marriage it made between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Muir accepted the Jungian assessment of dreams as messages from the unconscious which balanced and corrected the images and opinions drawn from observations of the external world. Their connection with the collective unconscious and its archetypes meant that in many ways dreams were a more powerful pointer to deeper realities than reasoning from external reality. In his poem, "Day and Night", he contrasts the two forms of consciousness and ways of thinking derived from them and declares his aim:

to fit that world to this,
The hidden to the visible play.[5]

Out of dreams grow myths which touch on the mystery of our existence. Without these myths we lose a sense of our roots and identity. Each man's life has a surface meaning made up of what has happened to him and what he has done – the story – and participates in a deeper meaning which we touch in dreams – the fable. In his autobiography Muir wrote, "If I were recreating my life in an autobiographical novel, I could bring out these correspondences (between dream and reality) freely, and show how our first intuitions of the world expand into vaster and vaster images, *creating a myth we act almost without knowing it.*"[6]

Thus in Muir's thought, two worlds exist side by side in the mind of man, the world of dream and the world of day-time activity; the world of images and emblems and the world of rational thought; the eternal world glimpsed in the innocence and freshness of a child's vision and the adult world of change and decay; the world of story and explanation and the inner world of fable and myth. But these two worlds are, in fact, the same world seen from different vantage points. Thus by bringing the two together one can touch obliquely on the Reality behind them both. Muir was a natural Platonist. In his poetry one can trace the dualities inherent in Platonism between the many and One, the image and reality, time and eternity, good and evil. Through these dualities he glimpsed God as the Eternal Mystery. Both mind and nature were penetrated by a higher reality and source of value which could not be named:

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.

It is not anything
And yet all being is;
Being, being, being,
Its burden and its bliss.
How can I ever prove
What it is I love?[7]

The only way these dualities could be brought into relationship with one another in the mind was by the use of memory and reflection. That was why the task of writing his autobiography was so important to Muir. It was while

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writing his autobiography at the age of 52 that he first became consciously aware of the presence of God.[8]

At the same time that he was finishing his autobiography, Muir was reading Augustine's "Confessions" and became particularly impressed by Augustine's discussion of time in Book XI. There Augustine argues that time does not exist outside the mind. There is no past, present and future; only a present of things past, a present of things present and a present of things future, existing in the mind in the mode of memory, sight and expectation.

"Time is certainly extendedness", argues Augustine, "but extendedness of the mind itself." As our minds are created and upheld by God whose mind is eternally present, so time is but one mode of eternity. "Past and present alike are wholly created and upheld in their passage by that which is always present." Thus it became possible, in time, to use myth and story in order to reveal "Eternity's secret script, the saving proof".[9] One's view of the world is capable of transformation at any moment by the use of sight, memory and expectation.

Time shall cancel time's deceits,
And you shall weep for grief and joy
To see the whole world perishing
Into everlasting spring.[10]

Armed with this notion of the relation between time and eternity Muir was able to come to a positive evaluation of the moral struggle between good and evil inherent in man's nature. In time this struggle may seem endless. But time is only one mode of eternity, and in eternity there exists a mysterious reconciliation between the two. This reconciliation – "All things shall be well and all manner of things shall be well" – can be dimly anticipated by the man who strives to cling to the good. Thus time can be conquered through time. On this basis Muir moved on in late life to an acceptance of the Incarnation as the embodiment of man's predicament and his salvation through time. Time runs on and all things alone, good or bad, are lost eventually, unless in some way everything is retrieved in the eternal pattern of which Christ is the symbol. Christ in Muir's late poems would become the "Image of man, from whom all have diverged".

The decisive move into belief in the Incarnation occurred for Muir when he stopped looking for the meaning of life in terms of his own autobiography and began to look for it in the life of Christ seen as including the life of every man. In his autobiography Muir speaks of the life of every individual as participating in some way in a universal fable endlessly repeated which included a primal innocence and a sense of fallenness. He goes on to say, "I should like to write that fable but I cannot even live it; and all I could do if I related the outward part of my life would be to show how far I had deviated from it."[11] For a long time Muir sought for the meaning of the fable in his own unconscious, his dreams and guesses, and intimations of immortality. These, through the action of memory and reflection, mediated to him a sense of the presence of God in the world, but they could not embody it. But when in Italy Muir encountered a religion which dared to show the Incarnation in images and works of art so plentiful and so commonplace that they were accepted as part of everyday life, he began to accept it as the full embodiment of "what we are not and can never be, our fable."[12]

Muir describes in his autobiography how he came across a plaque representing the Annunciation in a Roman street. The attitudes of the girl and the angel bending towards each other seemed to him as "the representation of a human love so intense that it could not reach farther . . . the perfect earthly symbol of the love that passes understanding."[13] In the poem inspired by this experience the angel comes "feathered through time" to meet the girl.

The angel and the girl are met.
Earth was the only meeting place.[14]

No longer is Muir looking for the fulfilment of hints and guesses in a life beyond this one. He sees it embodied in

life *now,* in the story of the Incarnation and in all human life of which it is the Image.

See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there.[15]

The same sense of God and man meeting in time through the mystery of the Incarnation is expressed again in the poem, "The Killing", albeit in a more tentative form. There while "the sun revolved, the shadows wheeled" Christ on the cross is seen as accomplishing a journey which we all must take in our own way. The poem ends:

. . . . . Did a God
Indeed in dying cross my life that day
By chance, he on his road and I on mine?[16]

With this growing belief in the Incarnation as the focus of meaning for human life came a new confidence that the moral and spiritual struggle against evil was worthwhile and that something was actually achieved in the process of man's journey through time. This is expressed in the poems in the collection 'One Foot in Eden' – concerning Adam and the Fall, Abraham and the journey in faith. Like the patriarchs we tread a road full of pitfalls, but:

. . . our songs and legends call
The hazard and the danger good;
For our fathers understood
That danger was by hope begot . . .[17]

Muir saw the Fall and the Incarnation as part of the same mystery because with his view of time, he did not see them in order of succession, but as simultaneous events potentially present to the memory of man. "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam that won for us so great a Redeemer." This becomes Muir's song too in poems like 'One Foot in Eden' and 'Adam's Dream'. In both poems time plays an important part. In 'One Foot in Eden':

Time's handiworks by time are haunted,
And nothing now can separate
The corn and tares compactly grown . . .
. . . Evil and good stand thick around
In the fields of charity and sin
Where we shall lead our harvest in.[18]

Time destroys the beauty of Eden, the innocence of childhood, but in this destruction produces "flowers in Eden never known" which man's memory makes permanent.

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.

No longer in these poems is Muir's poetry dominated by ideas of return and eternal recurrence. Instead there is some positive progress made through time, even though "the road is scarce begun".[19] In 'Adam's Dream', the first man dreams of the generations yet to come as a rabble moving without apparent order:

. . . 'This is time'
Thought Adam in his dream, and time was strange
To one lately in Eden.[20]

But as the dream changes he sees that all the frenzied movement has a form and sequence past the knowledge of the participants. This is the stage of understanding Muir had reached when he began his autobiography, the stage of 'fable'. But:

. . . Adam longed
For more, not this mere moving pattern, not
This illustrated storybook of mankind
Always a-making, improvised on nothing.
At that he was among them, and saw each face
Was like his face, so that he would have hailed them
As sons of God but that something restrained him.
And he remembered all, Eden, the Fall,
The Promise, and his place, and took their hands . . .[21]

The spell of innocence had to be broken if the greater reality, the promise of the Incarnation, which Adam *remembers* as something already there (just as before he had half-remembered time as something which was not just a consequence of his Fall) is to break through.

What weight are we to give to the view of the Incarnation which emerges from these poems of Muir's late maturity? It is clear from tracing the emergence of the idea that it owes as much to his reflection on his own life, his dreams as well as his everyday experience, his meditations on time and memory, as it does to a direct response to the Christ of the New Testament. In a letter written to George Barker before his last conversion, he had written: "In a way it may be argued that religion has been destroyed by being turned into poetry". Is that what has happened to the doctrine of the Incarnation as it emerges in this very personal form in his late poetry? For as, he remarked in this letter, there is a 'difference between the kind of belief on which religion is founded, and the kind of imaginative assent we give to poetry . . . For poetry the actual Christ is not necessary, but for religion he is. The religious Christ, theoretically at any rate, can be taken away by historical research, science etc; or if not taken away can at any rate be modified. But it is hard to see what can be done with the imaginative Christ, since he is quite inside the mind.'[22] How far did this remain Muir's view and how far can we agree with the original distinction here laid down?

This is a very difficult area to which Edwin Muir gives us very little clue directly. He was frightened of turning the Incarnation from a mystery mediated and experienced in our daily lives into a bloodless concept, the property of theologians. In his poem 'The Incarnate One' he wrote:

The Word made flesh here is made word again,
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,
And God three angry letters in a book,
And there the logical hook
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological instrument.[23]

Edwin Muir's whole life and work was a protest against the prevailing trend of his times towards ideology. In so far as doctrine became a means of manipulation and control, cutting men off from the roots of their existence in

tradition, myth and moral choice, he saw it as being essentially no different from the totalitarian ideologies he had attacked in poems like 'The Usurpers'. He drew the inspiration for his approach to the Incarnation more from works of art than the direct teaching of the Church. His own poems are not didactic, but at best become icons in words, to which one makes an immediate response of the imagination. His approach to the Incarnation, therefore, was entirely open. He saw the story of the Incarnation opening out to history in the story of his own life and the whole history of mankind as it moved on into the future. He accepted Christ's divine status only as the image of wholeness for all mankind as it would be revealed when time and history were brought to a close in God, the eternal present.

So far therefore Muir seems to come down on the side of the 'imaginative Christ'. On the other hand there can be no doubt that in his late poetry the Incarnation had become a controlling concept which gave him renewed inspiration and confidence in grappling with the themes which had dominated his poetry for years. There had been a decisive shift away from dream images drawn from his own unconscious towards a more public form of utterance. In these poems, even when he uses images drawn from classical mythology, these images are shaped by Christian belief.

There seem to me to be close parallels between Muir's thought as revealed in late poetry and his autobiography and Austin Farrer's in the *Glass of Vision.* In that book, Farrer asserts, "The martyrdom of a virtuous rabbi and his miraculous return are not in themselves the redemption of the world." The Incarnation can only be understood *in toto,* as a divine process within the Godhead, the manhood of Christ and the whole mystical Body which includes the history of all mankind. This mystery is apprehended by us in Scripture, in the doctrine of the Church and in our own lives as individuals. Through the sacred images and symbols we receive a foretaste of the whole substance of the saving mystery. In his letter to George Barker, Muir could find no deeper source for the images which he used in his poetry than his own unconscious and the communal memory of his ancestors. But in his autobiography he calls the works of art which provoked his assent to the Incarnation as "new incarnations sprung from the inexhaustible source of metaphysical felicity."[24] In other words he had become aware of an agency at work in them other than the free play of the artist's imagination. By implication he had begun to realise that the same agency was at work in his own poetry. With this realisation the rigid distinction between the imaginative Christ of poetry and the Christ of religion began to break down. It became harder for him to draw a line between the imaginative assent he had given to these works of art and faith in the mystery which lay behind them. He ended his autobiography with the words: "As I look back on the part of the mystery which is my own life, 'my own fable', what I am most aware of is that we receive more than we can ever give; we receive from the past, on which we draw every breath, but also – and this is a point of faith – from the Source of the mystery itself, by means which religious people call Grace". And, writing about his parents in a rough draft for a poem found after his death, he confesses:

How could they have been what they were
but for Incarnation?[26]

FOOTNOTES

1. *Collected Poems,* p. 301.
2. Letter to Sydney Schiff, 17 May 1938, *Selected Poems of Edwin Muir,* ed. by P. H. Butler, p. 100.
3. *Collected Poems,* pp. 212-3.
4. Ibid.
5. *Collected Poems,* p. 240.
6. Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography,* p. 48.
7. 'In Love for Long', *Collected Poems,* p. 159.
8. Letter to David Peat, 28 February 1940, *Selected Letters,* p. 117.
9. 'To Franz Kafka', *Collected Poems,* p. 233.
10. 'Into Thirty Centuries Born', *Collected Poems,* p. 249.
11. *Autobiography,* p. 49.
12. *Autobiography,* p. 49.
13. *Autobiography,* p. 278.
14. *Collected Poems,* p. 223.
15. Ibid.
16. *Collected Poems,* p. 224.
17. 'The Succession', *Collected Poems,* p. 221.
18. *Collected Poems,* p. 227.
19. 'The Succession', *Collected Poems,* p. 221.
20 *Collected Poems,* p. 210.
21. Ibid.
22. *Selected Letters,* pp. 94-5.
23. *Collected Poems,* p. 228.
24. p. 279.
25. p. 281.
26. *Selected Letters,* p. 210.