Classic Poetry Series

Edwin Muir

- 23 poems -

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Edwin Muir (15 May 1887 – 3 January 1959)

Edwin Muir was an Orcadian poet, novelist and noted translator. Remembered for his deeply felt and vivid poetry in plain, unostentatious language with few stylistic preoccupations, Muir is a significant modern poet.

Biography

Muir was born in Deerness, where his mother was also born, at Hacco, remembered in his autobiography as "Haco". In 1901, when he was 14, his father lost his farm, and the family moved to Glasgow. In quick succession his father, two brothers, and his mother died within the space of a few years. His life as a young man was a depressing experience, and involved a raft of unpleasant jobs in factories and offices, including working in a factory that turned bones into charcoal. "He suffered psychologically in a most destructive way, although perhaps the poet of later years benefited from these experiences as much as from his Orkney 'Eden'." In 1919, Muir married Willa Anderson, and the two moved to London. About this, Muir wrote simply 'My marriage was the most fortunate event in my life'. They would later collaborate on highly acclaimed English translations of such writers as Franz Kafka, Gerhart Hauptmann, Sholem Asch, Heinrich Mann, and Hermann Broch.

Between 1921 and 1923, Muir lived in Prague, Dresden, Italy, Salzburg and Vienna; he returned to the UK in 1924. Between 1925 and 1956, Muir published seven volumes of poetry which were collected after his death and published in 1991 as The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir. From 1927 to 1932 he published three novels, and in 1935 he came to St Andrews, where he produced his controversial Scott and Scotland (1936). From 1946 to 1949 he was Director of the British Council in Prague and Rome. 1950 saw his appointment as Warden of Newbattle Abbey College (a college for working class men) in Midlothian, where he met fellow Orcadian poet, George Mackay Brown. In 1955 he was made Norton Professor of English at Harvard University. He returned to Britain in 1956 but died in 1959 at Swaffham Prior, Cambridge, and was buried there.

A memorial bench was erected in 1962 to Muir in the idyllic village of Swanston, Edinburgh, where he spent time during the 1950s.

Literary Work

His childhood in remote and unspoiled Orkney represented an idyllic Eden to Muir, while his family's move to the city corresponded in his mind to a deeply disturbing encounter with the "fallen" world. The emotional tensions of that dichotomy shaped much of his work and deeply influenced his life. His

psychological distress led him to undergo Jungian analysis in London. A vision in which he witnessed the creation strengthened the Edenic myth in his mind, leading him to see his life and career as the working-out of an archetypal fable. In his Autobiography he wrote, "the life of every man is an endlessly repeated performance of the life of man...". He also expressed his feeling that our deeds on Earth constitute "a myth which we act almost without knowing it." Alienation, paradox, the existential dyads of good and evil, life and death, love and hate, and images of journeys, labyrinths, time and places fill his work.

His Scott and Scotland advanced the claim that Scotland can create a national literature only by writing in English, an opinion that placed him in direct opposition to the Lallans movement of Hugh MacDiarmid. He had little sympathy for Scottish nationalism.

In 1965 a volume of his selected poetry was edited and introduced by T. S. Eliot. Many of Edwin and Willa Muir's translations of German novels are still in print.

The following quotation expresses the basic existential dilemma of Edwin Muir's life:

"I was born before the Industrial Revolution, and am now about two hundred years old. But I have skipped a hundred and fifty of them. I was really born in 1737, and till I was fourteen no time-accidents happened to me. Then in 1751 I set out from Orkney for Glasgow. When I arrived I found that it was not 1751, but 1901, and that a hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two day's journey. But I myself was still in 1751, and remained there for a long time. All my life since I have been trying to overhaul that invisible leeway. No wonder I am obsessed with Time." (Extract from Diary 1937-39.)

Works:

We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses, under the pseudonym Edward Moore, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1918
Latitudes, New York, B. W. Huebsch, 1924
First Poems, London, Hogarth Press, 1925
Chorus of the Newly Dead, London, Hogarth Press, 1926
Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature, London, Hogarth Press, 1926
The Marionette, London, Hogarth Press, 1927
The Structure of the Novel, London, Hogarth Press, 1928
John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist, London, Jonathan Cape, 1929
The Three Brothers, London, Heinemann, 1931
Poor Tom, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1932
Variations on the Time Theme, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1934
Scottish Journey London, Heinemann in association with Victor Gollancz, 1935
Journeys and Places, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1937
The Present Age from 1914, London, Cresset Press, 1939
The Story and the Fable: An Autobiography, London, Harrap, 1940
The Narrow Place, London, Faber, 1943
The Scots and Their Country, London, published for the British Council by Longman, 1946
The Voyage, and Other Poems, London, Faber, 1946
Essays on Literature and Society, London, Hogarth Press, 1949
The Labyrinth, London, Faber, 1949
Collected Poems, 1921-1951, London, Faber, 1952
An Autobiography, London : Hogarth Press, 1954
Prometheus, illustrated by John Piper, London, Faber, 1954
One Foot in Eden, New York, Grove Press, 1956
New Poets, 1959 (edited), London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1959
The Estate of Poetry, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1962
Collected Poems, London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1965
The Politics of King Lear, New York, Haskell House, 1970

Abraham

The rivulet-loving wanderer Abraham
Through waterless wastes tracing his fields of pasture
Led his Chaldean herds and fattening flocks
With the meandering art of wavering water
That seeks and finds, yet does not know its way.
He came, rested and prospered, and went on,
Scattering behind him little pastoral kingdoms,
And over each one its own particular sky,
Not the great rounded sky through which he journeyed,
That went with him but when he rested changed.
His mind was full of names
Learned from strange peoples speaking alien tongues,
And all that was theirs one day he would inherit.
He died content and full of years, though still
The Promise had not come, and left his bones,
Far from his father's house, in alien Canaan.

Edwin Muir

Circle and Square

‘I give you half of me;
No more, lest I should make
A ground for perjury.
For your sake, for my sake,
Half will you take?’

‘Half I’ll not take nor give,
For he who gives gives all.
By halves you cannot live;
Then let the barrier fall,
In one circle have all.’

“A wise and ancient scorner
Said to me once: Beware
The road that has no corner
Where you can linger and stare.
Choose the square.

‘And let the circle run
Its dull and fevered race.
You, my dear, are one;
Show your soul in your face;
Maintain your place.

‘Give, but have something to give.
No man can want you all.
Live, and learn to live.
When all the barriers fall
You are nothing at all.’

Edwin Muir

Horses

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.

Their conquering hooves which trod the stubble down
Were ritual that turned the field to brown,
And their great hulks were seraphims of gold,
Or mute ecstatic monsters on the mould.

And oh the rapture, 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.

But when at dusk with steaming nostrils home
They came, they seemed gigantic in the gloam,
And warm and glowing with mysterious fire
That lit their smouldering bodies in the mire.

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.

Ah, now it fades! It fades! And I must pine
Again for the dread country crystalline,
Where the blank field and the still-standing tree
Were bright and fearful presences to me.

Edwin Muir

In Love For Long

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 even a name,
Yet is all constancy;
Tried or untried, the same,
It cannot part from me;
A breath, yet as still
As the established hill.

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?

This happy happy love
Is sieged with crying sorrows,
Crushed beneath and above
Between todays and morrows;
A little paradise
Held in the world's vice.

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.

Edwin Muir

Merlin

O Merlin in your crystal cave
Deep in the diamond of the day,
Will there ever be a singer
Whose music will smooth away
The furrow drawn by Adam's finger
Across the memory and the wave?
Or a runner who'll outrun
Man's long shadow driving on,
Break through the gate of memory
And hang the apple on the tree?
Will your magic ever show
The sleeping bride shut in her bower,
The day wreathed in its mound of snow
and Time locked in his tower?

Edwin Muir

Reading in Wartime

Boswell by my bed,
Tolstoy on my table;
Thought the world has bled
For four and a half years,
And wives' and mothers' tears
Collected would be able
To water a little field
Untouched by anger and blood,
A penitential yield
Somewhere in the world;
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,
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.

Edwin Muir

Robert the Bruce (To Douglas in Dying)

'MY life is done, yet all remains,
The breath has gone, the image not,
The furious shapes once forged in heat
Live on though now no longer hot.
'Steadily the shining swords
In order rise, in order fall,
In order on the beaten field
The faithful trumpets call.
'The women weeping for the dead
Are not sad now but dutiful,
The dead men stiffening in their place
Proclaim the ancient rule.
'Great Wallace's body hewn in four,
So altered, stays as it must be.
0 Douglas do not leave me now,
For past your head I see
'My dagger sheathed in Comyn's heart
And nothing there to praise or blame,
Nothing but order which must be
Itself and still the same.
'But that Christ hung upon the Cross,
Comyn would rot until time's end
And bury my sin in boundless dust,
For there is no amend.
'In order; yet in order run
All things by unreturning ways,
If Christ live not, nothing is there
For sorrow or for praise.'
So the king spoke to Douglas once
A little while before his death,
Having outfaced three English kings
And kept a people's faith.

Edwin Muir

Scotland 1941

We were a tribe, a family, a people.
Wallace and Bruce guard now a painted field,
And all may read the folio of our fable,
Peruse the sword, the sceptre and the shield.
A simple sky roofed in that rustic day,
The busy corn-fields and the haunted holms,
The green road winding up the ferny brae.
But Knox and Melville clapped their preaching palms
And bundled all the harvesters away,
Hoodicrow Peden in the blighted corn
Hacked with his rusty beak the starving haulms.
Out of that desolation we were born.

Courage beyond the point and obdurate pride
Made us a nation, robbed us of a nation.
Defiance absolute and myriad-eyed
That could not pluck the palm plucked our damnation.
We with such courage and the bitter wit
To fell the ancient oak of loyalty,
And strip the peopled hill and altar bare,
And crush the poet with an iron text,
How could we read our souls and learn to be?
Here a dull drove of faces harsh and vexed,
We watch our cities burning in their pit,
To salve our souls grinding dull lucre out,
We, fanatics of the frustrate and the half,
Who once set Purgatory Hill in doubt.

Now smoke and dearth and money everywhere,
Mean heirlooms of each fainter generation,
And mummied housegods in their musty niches,
Burns and Scott, sham bards of a sham nation,
And spiritual defeat wrapped warm in riches,
No pride but pride of pelf. Long since the young
Fought in great bloody battles to carve out
This towering pulpit of the Golden Calf,
Montrose, Mackail, Argyle, perverse and brave,
Twisted the stream, unhooped the ancestral hill.
Never had Dee or Don or Yarrow or Till
Huddled such thriftless honour in a grave.
Such wasted bravery idle as a song,
Such hard-won ill might prove Time's verdict wrong,
And melt to pity the annalist's iron tongue.

Edwin Muir

Scotland's Winter

Now the ice lays its smooth claws on the sill,
The sun looks from the hill
Helmed in his winter casket,
And sweeps his arctic sword across the sky.
The water at the mill
Sounds more hoarse and dull.
The miller's daughter walking by
With frozen fingers soldered to her basket
Seems to be knocking
Upon a hundred leagues of floor
With her light heels, and mocking
Percy and Douglas dead,
And Bruce on his burial bed,
Where he lies white as may
With wars and leprosy,
And all the kings before
This land was kingless,
And all the singers before
This land was songless,
This land that with its dead and living waits the Judgement Day.
But they, the powerless dead,
Listening can hear no more
Than a hard tapping on the floor
A little overhead
Of common heels that do not know
Whence they come or where they go
And are content
With their poor frozen life and shallow banishment.

Edwin Muir

The Angel and the Girl

The angel and the girl are met
Earth was the only meeting place.
For the embodied never yet
Travelled beyond the shore of space.
The eternal spirits in freedom go.

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. He's come to her
From far beyond the farthest star,
Feathered through time. Immediacy
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss
That from their limbs all movement takes.
Yet the increasing rapture brings
So great a wonder that it makess
Each feather tremble on his wings

Outside the window footsteps fall
Into the ordinary day
And with the sun along the wall
Pursue their unreturning way
Sound's perpetual roundabout
Rolls its numbered octaves out
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune

But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make.
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their grace would never break.

Edwin Muir

The Animals

They do not live in the world,
Are not in time and space.
From birth to death hurled
No word do they have, not one
To plant a foot upon,
Were never in any place.

For with names the world was called
Out of the empty air,
With names was built and walled,
Line and circle and square,
Dust and emerald;
Snatched from deceiving death
By the articulate breath.

But these have never trod
Twice the familiar track,
Never never turned back
Into the memoried day.
All is new and near
In the unchanging Here
Of the fifth great day of God,
That shall remain the same,
Never shall pass away.

Edwin Muir

The Castle

All through that summer at ease we lay,
And daily from the turret wall
We watched the mowers in the hay
And the enemy half a mile away
They seemed no threat to us at all.

For what, we thought, had we to fear
With our arms and provender, load on load,
Our towering battlements, tier on tier,
And friendly allies drawing near
On every leafy summer road.

Our gates were strong, our walls were thick,
So smooth and high, no man could win
A foothold there, no clever trick
Could take us, have us dead or quick.
Only a bird could have got in.

What could they offer us for bait?
Our captain was brave and we were true....
There was a little private gate,
A little wicked wicket gate.
The wizened warder let them through.

Oh then our maze of tunneled stone
Grew thin and treacherous as air.
The cause was lost without a groan,
The famous citadel overthrown,
And all its secret galleries bare.

How can this shameful tale be told?
I will maintain until my death
We could do nothing, being sold;
Our only enemy was gold,
And we had no arms to fight it with.

Edwin Muir

The Child Dying

Unfriendly friendly universe,
I pack your stars into my purse,
And bid you so farewell.
That I can leave you, quite go out,
Go out, go out beyond all doubt,
My father says, is the miracle.

You are so great, and I so small:
I am nothing, you are all:
Being nothing, I can take this way.
Oh I need neither rise nor fall,
For when I do not move at all
I shall be out of all your day.

It's said some memory will remain
In the other place, grass in the rain,
Light on the land, sun on the sea,
A flitting grace, a phantom face,
But the world is out. There is not place
Where it and its ghost can ever be.

Father, father, I dread this air
Blown from the far side of despair
The cold cold corner. What house, what hold,
What hand is there? I look and see
Nothing-filled eternity,
And the great round world grows weak and old.

Hold my hand, oh hold it fast-
I am changing! - until at last
My hand in yours no more will change,
Though yours change on. You here, I there,
So hand in hand, twin-leafed despair -
I did not know death was so strange.

Edwin Muir

The Combat

It was not meant for human eyes,
That combat on the shabby patch
Of clods and trampled turf that lies
Somewhere beneath the sodden skies
For eye of toad or adder to catch.

And having seen it I accuse
The crested animal in his pride,
Arrayed in all the royal hues
Which hide the claws he well can use
To tear the heart out of the side.

Body of leopard, eagle's head
And whetted beak, and lion's mane,
And frost-grey hedge of feathers spread
Behind -- he seemed of all things bred.
I shall not see his like again.

As for his enemy there came in
A soft round beast as brown as clay;
All rent and patched his wretched skin;
A battered bag he might have been,
Some old used thing to throw away.

Yet he awaited face to face
The furious beast and the swift attack.
Soon over and done. That was no place
Or time for chivalry or for grace.
The fury had him on his back.

And two small paws like hands flew out
To right and left as the trees stood by.
One would have said beyond a doubt
That was the very end of the bout,
But that the creature would not die.

For ere the death-stroke he was gone,
Writhed, whirled, into his den,
Safe somehow there. The fight was done,
And he had lost who had all but won.
But oh his deadly fury then.

A while the place lay blank, forlorn,
Drowsing as in relief from pain.
The cricket chirped, the grating thorn
Stirred, and a little sound was born.
The champions took their posts again.

And all began. The stealthy paw
Slashed out and in. Could nothing save
These rags and tatters from the claw?
Nothing. And yet I never saw

A beast so helpless and so brave.

And now, while the trees stand watching, still
The unequal battle rages there.
The killing beast that cannot kill
Swells and swells in his fury till
You'd almost think it was despair.

Edwin Muir

The Confirmation

Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face.
I in my mind had waited for this long,
Seeing the false and searching for the true,
Then found you as a traveller finds a place
Of welcome suddenly amid the wrong
Valleys and rocks and twisting roads. But you,
What shall I call you? A fountain in a waste,
A well of water in a country dry,
Or anything that's honest and good, an eye
That makes the whole world seem bright. Your open heart,
Simple with giving, gives the primal deed,
The first good world, the blossom, the blowing seed,
The hearth, the steadfast land, the wandering sea.
Not beautiful or rare in every part.
But like yourself, as they were meant to be.

Edwin Muir

The Days

Issuing from the Word
The seven days came,
Each in its own place,
Its own name.
And the first long days
A hard and rocky spring,
Inhuman burgeoning,
And nothing there for claw or hand,
Vast loneliness ere loneliness began,
Where the blank seasons in their journeying
Saw water at play with water and sand with sand.
The waters stirred
And from the doors were cast
Wild lights and shadows on the formless face
Of the flood of chaos, vast
Lengthening and dwindling image of earth and heaven.
The forest's green shadow
Softly over the water driven,
As if the earth's green wonder, endless meadow
Floated and sank within its own green light.
In water and night
Sudden appeared the lion's violent head,
Raging and burning in its watery cave.
The stallion's tread
Soundless fell on the flood, and the animals poured
Onward, flowing across the flowing wave.
Then on the waters fell
The shadow of man, and earth and the heavens scrawled
With names, as if each pebble and leaf would tell
The tale untellable. And the Lord called
The seventh day forth and the glory of the Lord.

And now we see in the sun
The mountains standing clear in the third day
(Where they shall always stay)
And thence a river run,
Threading, clear cord of water, all to all:
The wooded hill and the cattle in the meadow,
The tall wave breaking on the high sea-wall,
The people at evening walking,
The crescent shadow
Of the light built bridge, the hunter stalking
The flying quarry, each in a different morning,
The fish in the billow's heart, the man with the net,
The hungry swords crossed in the cross of warning,
The lion set
High on the banner, leaping into the sky,
The seasons playing
Their game of sun and moon and east and west,
The animal watching man and bird go by,
The women praying
For the passing of this fragmentary day

Into the day where all are gathered together,
Things and their names, in the storm's and the lightning's nest,
The seventh great day and the clear eternal weather.

Edwin Muir

The Fathers

Our fathers all were poor,
Poorer our fathers' fathers;
Beyond, we dare not look.
We, the sons, keep store
Of tarnished gold that gathers
Around us from the night,
Record it in this book
That, when the line is drawn,
Credit and creditor gone,
Column and figure flown,
Will open into light.

Archaic fevers shake
Our healthy flesh and blood
Plumped in the passing day
And fed with pleasant food.
The fathers' anger and ache
Will not, will not away
And leave the living alone,
But on our careless brows
Faintly their furrows engrave
Like veinings in a stone,
Breathe in the sunny house
Nightmare of blackened bone,
Cellar and choking cave.

Panics and furies fly
Through our unhurried veins,
Heavenly lights and rains
Purify heart and eye,
Past agonies purify
And lay the sullen dust.
The angers will not away.
We hold our fathers' trust,
Wrong, riches, sorrow and all
Until they topple and fall,
And fallen let in the day.

Edwin Muir

The Good Man in Hell

If a good man were ever housed in Hell
By needful error of the qualities,
Perhaps to prove the rule or shame the devil,
Or speak the truth only a stranger sees,

Would he, surrendering quick to obvious hate,
Fill half eternity with cries and tears,
Or watch beside Hell's little wicket gate
In patience for the first ten thousand years,

Feeling the curse climb slowly to his throat
That, uttered, dooms him to rescindless ill,
Forcing his praying tongue to run by rote,
Eternity entire before him still?

Would he at last, grown faithful in his station,
Kindle a little hope in hopeless Hell,
And sow among the damned doubts of damnation,
Since here someone could live, and live well?

One doubt of evil would bring down such a grace,
Open such a gate, and Eden could enter in,
Hell be a place like any other place,
And love and hate and life and death begin.

Edwin Muir

The Horses

Barely a twelvemonth after
The seven days war that put the world to sleep,
Late in the evening the strange horses came.
By then we had made our covenant with silence,
But in the first few days it was so still
We listened to our breathing and were afraid.
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. The radios dumb;
And still they stand in corners of our kitchens,
And stand, perhaps, turned on, in a million rooms
All over the world. But now if they should speak,
If on a sudden they should speak again,
If on the stroke of noon a voice should speak,
We would not 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.
Sometimes we think of the nations lying asleep,
Curled blindly in impenetrable sorrow,
And then the thought confounds us with its strangeness.
The tractors lie about our fields; at evening
They look like dank sea-monsters couched and waiting.
We leave them where they are and let them rust:
'They'll molder away and be like other loam.'
We make our oxen drag our rusty plows,
Long laid aside. We have gone back
Far past our fathers' land.
And then, that evening
Late in the summer the strange horses came.
We heard a distant tapping on the road,
A deepening drumming; it stopped, went on again
And at the corner changed to hollow thunder.
We saw the heads
Like a wild wave charging and were afraid.
We had sold our horses in our fathers' time
To buy new tractors. Now they were strange to us
As fabulous steeds set on an ancient shield.
Or illustrations in a book of knights.
We did not dare go near them. Yet they waited,
Stubborn and shy, as if they had been sent
By an old command to find our whereabouts
And that long-lost archaic companionship.
In the first moment we had never a thought
That they were creatures to be owned and used.
Among them were some half a dozen colts
Dropped in some wilderness of the broken world,
Yet new as if they had come from their own Eden.
Since then they have pulled our plows and borne our loads
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.

Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

Edwin Muir

The Incarnate One

The windless northern surge, the sea-gull's scream,
And Calvin's kirk crowning the barren brae.
I think of Giotto the Tuscan shepherd's dream,
Christ, man and creature in their inner day.
How could our race betray
The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake
Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?

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 argument.

There's better gospel in man's natural tongue,
And truer sight was theirs outside the Law
Who saw the far side of the Cross among
The archaic peoples in their ancient awe,
In ignorant wonder saw
The wooden cross-tree on the bare hillside,
Not knowing that there a God suffered and died.

The fleshless word, growing, will bring us down,
Pagan and Christian man alike will fall,
The auguries say, the white and black and brown,
The merry and the sad, theorist, lover, all
Invisibly will fall:
Abstract calamity, save for those who can
Build their cold empire on the abstract man.

A soft breeze stirs and all my thoughts are blown
Far out to sea and lost. Yet I know well
The bloodless word will battle for its own
Invisibly in brain and nerve and cell.
The generations tell
Their personal tale: the One has far to go
Past the mirages and the murdering snow.

Edwin Muir

The Killing

That was the day they killed the Son of God
On a squat hill-top by Jerusalem.
Zion was bare, her children from their maze
Sucked by the dream of curiosity
Clean through the gates. The very halt and blind
Had somehow got themselves up to the hill.
After the ceremonial preparation,
The scourging, nailing, nailing against the wood,
Erection of the main-trees with their burden,
While from the hill rose an orchestral wailing,
They were there at last, high up in the soft spring day.
We watched the writhings, heard the moanings, saw
The three heads turning on their separate axles
Like broken wheels left spinning. Round his head
Was loosely bound a crown of plaited thorn
That hurt at random, stinging temple and brow
As the pain swung into its envious circle.
In front the wreath was gathered in a knot
That as he gazed looked like the last stump left
Of a death-wounded deer's great antlers. Some
Who came to stare grew silent as they looked,
Indignant or sorry. But the hardened old
And the hard-hearted young, although at odds
From the first morning, cursed him with one curse,
Having prayed for a Rabbi or an armed Messiah
And found the Son of God. What use to them
Was a God or a Son of God? Of what avail
For purposes such as theirs? Beside the cross-foot,
Alone, four women stood and did not move
All day. The sun revolved, the shadows wheeled,
The evening fell. His head lay on his breast,
But in his breast they watched his heart move on
By itself alone, accomplishing its journey.
Their taunts grew louder, sharpened by the knowledge
That he was walking in the park of death,
Far from their rage. Yet all grew stale at last,
Spite, curiosity, envy, hate itself.
They waited only for death and death was slow
And came so quietly they scarce could mark it.
They were angry then with death and death's deceit.

I was a stranger, could not read these people
Or this outlandish deity. Did a God
Indeed in dying cross my life that day
By chance, he on his road and I on mine?

Edwin Muir

The Transfiguration

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.
We would have thrown our clothes away for lightness,
But that even they, though sour and travel stained,
Seemed, like our flesh, made of immortal substance,
And the soiled flax and wool lay light upon us
Like friendly wonders, flower and flock entwined
As in a morning field. Was it a vision?
Or did we see that day the unseeable
One glory of the everlasting world
Perpetually at work, though never seen
Since Eden locked the gate that's everywhere
And nowhere? Was the change in us alone,
And the enormous earth still left forlorn,
An exile or a prisoner? 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.
The shepherds' hovels shone, for underneath
The soot we saw the stone clean at the heart
As on the starting-day. The refuse heaps
Were grained with that fine dust that made the world;
For he had said, 'To the pure all things are pure.'
And when we went into the town, he with us,
The lurkers under doorways, murderers,
With rags tied round their feet for silence, came
Out of themselves to us and were with us,
And those who hide within the labyrinth
Of their own loneliness and greatness came,
And those entangled in their own devices,
The silent and the garrulous liars, all
Stepped out of their dungeons and were free.
Reality or vision, this we have seen.
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.

But he will come again, it's said, though not

Unwanted and unsummoned; for all things,
Beasts of the field, and woods, and rocks, and seas,
And all mankind from end to end of the earth
Will call him with one voice. In our own time,
Some say, or at a time when time is ripe.
Then he will come, Christ the uncrucified,
Christ the discrucified, his death undone,
His agony unmade, his cross dismantled—
Glad to be so—and the tormented wood
Will cure its hurt and grow into a tree
In a green springing corner of young Eden,
And Judas damned take his long journey backward
From darkness into light and be a child
Beside his mother's knee, and the betrayal
Be quite undone and never more be done.

Edwin Muir

They Could Not Tell Me Who Should Be My Lord

They could not tell me who should be my lord,
But I could read from every word they said
The common thought: Perhaps that lord was dead,
And only a story now and a wandering word.
How could I follow a word or serve a fable,
They asked me. `Here are lords a-plenty. Take
Service with one, if only for your sake,
Yet better be your own master if you're able.'
I would rather scour the roads, a masterless dog,
Than take such service, be a public fool,
Obstreperous or tongue-tied, a good rogue,
Than be with those, the clever and the dull,
Who say that lord is dead; when I hear
Daily his dying whisper in my ear.

Edwin Muir