

telly programmes that disclose only the internal confusions of the corporations and companies that project them. Then down from Salford comes this splendid young prophetess who, with typical good sense, calls at the right address among the conspirators in Stratford, E. 15, who then carry her voice into "the heart of Theatreland." At Wyndham's, we have been looking back with that Boy Friend for years, and the question now is whether we can see that the 1950's are so much more peculiar and disturbing than the 1920's ever weren't. As Helen and Josephine walk on to John Bury's bleak, poetic set, one glances round the stalls and holds one's breath. Are they slumming, or are they listening at last?

Colin MacInnes

Edwin Muir

IF I BEGIN by speaking of myself in this brief memoir of Edwin Muir it is because I was always aware of a deep affinity of origins and experience, and this may be my best qualification for writing about such a man. We had both been born on remote farms, and though Orkney is a long way from North-East Yorkshire, they were both Viking or Scandinavian settlements and the place-names that echoed in our infant ears have a striking similarity: Wyre and Wass, Ness and Garth. In the farmyard our sensibilities had been assailed by the same elemental sights and smells, though I had no experience of the sea. The parallel does not end with childhood. At the age of fifteen we had both gone to large industrial cities to become clerks at the same salary of four shillings and twopence a week. But then after a few years our careers began to diverge. Muir's experience in Glasgow was grim, and lasted for eighteen years; mine in Leeds was genteeler and lasted for only three years. I was ambitious and resolved to better myself. Muir remained unambitious to the end of his life, and more reluctantly than anyone I have ever known had his greatness thrust upon him.

During our youth we had experienced the same intellectual excitements, acquiring our knowledge from public libraries and cheap books bought with the few pennies we managed to save. We were both swept away by Nietzsche, who became the guide to our further education. We both became interested in Guild Socialism,

and eventually contributed to its pages. We both came under the influence of its editor, A. R. Orage—a man of great intelligence and intuitive understanding, who naturally attracted disciples, as Muir said of him. But there the parallel ends, for the First World War had meanwhile broken out and I was swept into it. Muir escaped because his physique was not equal to it. It plays little part in his *Autobiography*, whereas in my life it is the watershed that divides innocence from experience, faith from disillusion, hope from frustration. For this reason Muir could always attend and listen to a class of experiences to which the war had left me sardonically indifferent. He describes these experiences in his autobiography:

The experiences I mean are of little practical use and have no particular economic or political interest. They come when I am least aware of myself as a personality moulded by my will and time; in moments of contemplation when I am unconscious of my body, or indeed that I have a body with separate members; in moments of grief or prostration; in happy hours with friends; and, because self-forgetfulness is most complete then, in dreams and daydreams and in that floating, half-discarnate state which precedes and follows sleep. In these hours there seems to me to be knowledge of my real self and simultaneously knowledge of immortality.

I have never had such experiences and to me a belief in immortality remains in substance a convenient myth.

In discussing Orage, and contrasting him with another friend who was very close to him, Muir draws a distinction between a personality; such as Orage was, and what after Goethe he can only call a "nature."

A personality is too obviously the result of a collaboration between its owner and Time, too clearly *made*; and no matter how fascinating or skilful the workmanship may be, ultimately it bores us. Orage was much more than a personality, but he kept that "more" to himself as if jealously guarding his real strength, and it was his personality that he turned to the world; he was too proud of it. Holms had hardly any personality at all; when he impressed you it was by pure, uncontaminated power. . . . To show the irreducible second-rateness of a man of personality one has only to think of Holms's words in his letter to Hugh Kingsmill: "The supreme height of individual self-expression, and union with the universe, are one." If the soul is immortal and the personality is not, obviously our real task is not to cultivate but to get rid of personality.

This distinction is a clue to Muir's own life, which was so gentle and self-effacing, and impressed his friends with almost a sense of holi-

ness. His poetry is unified by this quality in his character and experience. Muir did not begin to write poetry until he was thirty-five, and the public has been slow to recognise its virtues. It is not the poetry of any school; its diction is cautious and unassertive. Nevertheless it progressed intensively and is now a body of verse that challenges comparison with the work of any of his contemporaries. In historical perspective it may seem to be the natural continuation of the poetry of Yeats.

In our present state of deprivation we must guard against sentimental exaggeration. Muir rarely conveys the immediate excitement that we associate with the later Yeats, nor does he evoke our spiritual predicament with the vivid poignancy of the early Eliot. He is not a magical poet; sometimes he is pedestrian. But if he is pedestrian he is always marching on the fixed point of a precise vision, and his poetry is therefore accumulative in its force; one has to read it as one reads a Book of Hours, or a chain of meditations. Perhaps the *Centuries* of Traherne is the nearest comparison, and we know that Muir had a great fondness for Traherne. Muir's is not metaphysical poetry, in the academic sense; it is not conceitful. The imagery is bland, the metaphors simple and not contrived. Sometimes, as in "The Horses," the imagination is Yeatsian in its cosmic scope; but more often it is humble, of conversational ease, as in George Herbert:

*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 can hear
Daily his dying whisper in my ear.*

Such simplicity easily falls into banality; but it can also rise into the purest beauty, as it does in "Day and Night," especially in this first verse:

*I wrap the blanket of the night
About me, fold on fold on fold—
And remember how as a child
Lost in the newness of the light
I first discovered what is old
From the night and the soft night wind.
For in the daytime all was new,
Moving in light and in the mind
All at once, thought, shape, and hue.
Extravagant novelty too wild
For the new eyes of a child.*

The sentiment is not original—it is Traherne's; and the opening metaphor is a Yeatsian cliché; yet how naturally, and how inevitably the accents fall.

I think there is another poet who must have influenced Muir, though I do not remember any reference to him—Coventry Patmore. There are certain later poems, such as "The Late Wasp" and "The Late Swallow," that have Patmore's well-wrought cadence; but the comparison ends on the technical level—no two poets could have had such different "natures."

The *Collected Poems* will have to be revised now, and brought to a sad conclusion. May we hope also for a volume of *Collected Essays*? This, too, would be impressive. Again of no school, grinding no academic axe, the criticism is yet firm and profound, and of remarkable range. There must be many scattered essays that have never been republished; I remember one that impressed me very much at the time of its publication on "Calvin and Marx." Muir was not politically-minded. I like to think that he was a fellow anarchist.

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 over-arching and embracing everything that gives meaning and proportion to the whole.

In all his work, especially his poetry, Muir was obsessed with Time. In the "Extracts from a Diary" printed at the end of *The Story and the Fable* (the original version of *An Autobiography*), he describes this obsession humorously:

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 to Glasgow. When I arrived I found it was not 1751, but 1901, and that a hundred and fifty years have been burned up in my two days' journey. But I myself was still in 1751, and remained there for a long time. All my life I have been trying to overhaul that invisible leeway.

Edwin Muir has now caught up with time and for him the riddle is solved: he is at peace. He found the perfect expression of his faith (he disclaimed the word philosophy) in the *Upanishads*, in the doctrine of the Self—the Self "that is not known through discourse, splitting of hairs, learning however great. He comes to the man He loves; takes that man's body as His own. . . ."

*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.*

To proclaim the victory of the bloodless word is an act of faith; it is to assert the superiority of the *vita contemplativa* in a world devoted to meaningless work and desperate erethism. Muir's significance is the significance of a dedicated man of letters, and his life of devotion is a silent criticism not only of the conventional

notion of success (which confuses art with entertainment), but also of those more professional betrayals which take the form of wilful eccentricity, academic conceit, or intellectual snobbery (as Mr. Cyril Connolly would say, "he never belonged to the literary élite").

I do not think Muir felt very optimistic about the survival of his values in our doomed civilisation. But his imagination reached beyond this historical moment, to the cosmic revolution that astrologers predict, that Yeats saw in vision, and that even to more rational philosophers now seems inevitable and imminent.

Herbert Read

On a Book Entitled "Lolita"

By Vladimir Nabokov

AFTER doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one—may strike me, in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book. A few points, however, have to be discussed; and the autobiographic device may induce mimic and model to blend.

Teachers of Literature are apt to think up such problems as "What is the author's purpose?" or still worse "What is the guy trying to say?" Now, I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book, has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Inter-reaction of Inspiration and Combination—which, I admit, sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another.

The first little throb of *Lolita* went through me late in 1939 or early in 1940, in Paris, at a time when I was laid up with a severe attack of intercostal neuralgia. As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage. The im-

pulse I record had no textual connection with the ensuing train of thought, which resulted, however, in a prototype of my present novel, a short story some thirty pages long. I wrote it in Russian, the language in which I had been writing novels since 1924 (the best of these are not translated into English, and all are prohibited for political reasons in Russia). The man

TOO much about LOLITA? Almost everybody has had a say about the novel except the author himself. Some years ago in New York, after the manuscript (in the form of quasi-smuggled copies of the two-volume paper-backed Paris edition) had gone rapidly, nervously, uncertainly from hand to hand in the Manhattan publishing world, I asked Vladimir Nabokov for permission to publish long excerpts from the novel in a number of the ANCHOR REVIEW. He agreed, and agreed too, after much reluctance (his) and prodding (mine), to do a personal essay "on a book entitled LOLITA. . . ." The English publishers intend to include this in their forthcoming edition (if and when), and we offer it here as a contribution, at long last, by the author himself to the curious local controversy, that strange "battle of the books" with the books left out.—M.J.L.