

A Letter in Response to Kenneth Muir*

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In Kenneth Muir's article on Edwin Muir's work, *Chorus of the Newly Dead*, he raises the possibility that the timing of Humbert Wolfe's more popular work, *Requiem*, may suggest that it owes some of its inspiration to Muir, or to Muir's source of inspiration, Herbert Trench. He writes:

A year after *Chorus of the Newly Dead*, Humbert Wolfe's *Requiem* appeared, and its title is a significant link with Trench's poem. Although Wolfe was a very prolific writer—he published two volumes in 1926—and a regular reviewer of modern poetry, there is some evidence that he had begun *Requiem* before the publication of Muir's poem. (204)

In saying that there is "some evidence that he had begun *Requiem* before [...] Muir's poem," he implies the possibility of a derivative reading of Wolfe's *Requiem*. I am researching Wolfe's work, focusing on *Requiem*, and although he does not specify a particular source of inspiration, his book, *Signpost to Poetry*, and his connections with modernist poets may offer alternative suggestions to Trench's poem. The title, *Requiem*, may owe something to T. S. Eliot's seminal work, *The Waste Land*, particularly "The Burial of the Dead" published in 1922. The legacy of the war poets can be traced in "The Soldier" section of *Requiem* where the loss of life is examined in a similarly dreamlike state to Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," for example:

*Reference: Kenneth Muir, "Edwin Muir's *Chorus of the Newly Dead* and Its Analogues," *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/1997): 203-06. For the original article as well as contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/muir00602.htm>>.

Down some cold field in a world unspoken
 the young men are walking together, slim and tall,
 and though they laugh to one another, silence is not broken:
 there is no sound however clear they call. ("The Soldier" 1-4)

Chorus of the Newly Dead was published in 1926. In a letter to his wife dated 25 April 1926, Wolfe wrote, "I have been writing all morning, and have got on with 'Requiem.' I want very much to finish it on time for autumn publication." This timing makes it unlikely that Muir's work inspired Wolfe's. Once Wolfe had finished *Requiem*, there is evidence that it was delayed. He writes in a letter dated 8 April 1927, "I have had my usual mass of communications from Benn's. 'Requiem' isn't coming out till the 27th. They had to re-set the whole book, because the first setting was a muddle."

Wolfe writes ruefully in a letter on 7 August 1926 that the structure of pairings of Edwin Muir's *Chorus of the Newly Dead* is "like a clumsy anticipation of me." Kenneth Muir notes that, "[i]n Muir's poem each soliloquy is followed by a chorus. Wolfe has no chorus, apart from the Coda" (205). However, each section of the speakers in *Requiem* is divided into three poems with the third in sonnet form functioning as a chorus, commenting upon and summarising the two preceding poems.

Where Muir and Trench are inspired by pity for "those who are rated as successful, as well as those who are apparently failures," Wolfe was inspired by the Pauline doctrine which inverts the idea of who are the winners and who are the losers (cf. Muir 204). At a time when "post-war malaise" gripped the nation, *Requiem* was Wolfe's response to loss of faith, "couched in language which believed in the music of the word" (*Harlequin in Whitehall* 254). Wolfe's dedication says that "some alien virtue wonderful" stirred him to write ("Dedication," *Requiem* 5); his poetic imagination was inspired, not by the spirit of the times, but by something more hopeful which in turn prompted Gustav Holst to compose twelve songs and Vera Brittain to resume writing *Testament of Youth* (cf. *Harlequin* 254).

It seems that inspiration struck two poets at the same moment. Both of them felt it was their best work. Wolfe's poem of dedication at the front of the volume claims, "I shall not write its fellow / earthsides of immortality." John Willis saw Muir's reputation as a poet continuing to grow and that "it was not until the 1940s that Muir wrote the mature poems on which his reputation, and [T. S.] Eliot's appraisal rests" (Willis 118). Kenneth Muir's footnote suggests that Wolfe had little influence on modernist contemporaries, saying: "It is notable that the 1927 collection of *Oxford Poetry*, edited by W. H. Auden and C. Day-Lewis, showed that the dominant influence on most of the contributors was T. S. Eliot. Not one of them seems to have fallen under the spell of Humbert Wolfe" (Muir 206n5). However, Wolfe's biographer, Philip Bagguley, describes the early influence of Wolfe on Day-Lewis and Spender, which waned under the influence of Auden. "Day-Lewis [...] admired Humbert's poems and was grateful for his help in his early days," and "Sir Stephen readily admitted his own admiration as a schoolboy and an undergraduate. He had written an article in praise of Humbert [...] in *Cherwell* in November 1927" (280). Posterity may read into the composition of these poems collaboration or competition, but it would appear from the poets' own understanding, none existed.

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