

## Edwin Muir's *Chorus of the Newly Dead* and its Analogues\*

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In 1926 the Hogarth Press published Edwin Muir's *Chorus of the Newly Dead*. This poem was never reprinted in his life-time, although he expressed his intentions of re-writing it with substantial revisions. This hope he never realised. In a letter to Schiff (11 July 1926), Muir declared that the poem was "the best thing I have ever written; there is most of myself in it"; and his Wife, Willa, said that "he was making his first poetic attempt to come to terms with Death by looking for a transcendental meaning in Life."<sup>1</sup> As Peter Butter records,<sup>2</sup> Muir made changes in the printed copy, trying to eliminate poetic clichés; but in the process he came to realise that the poem fell far short of his intentions.

Although Muir was right to say that there was more of himself in the poem than in any of his previous work, it had a literary source—Herbert Trench's "Requiem of Archangels for the World." The archangels announce that Earth's sleep has come, that trees are dying, streams are stricken dumb, and hearts beat no more. Great wars, just and unjust, sleep; high-shining Kings, simple men, heroes, Gods of men, all sleep. At the conclusion of the poem, it is said that their strivings enlarged the self-dominion of the Absolute:

Absolute, let them be absolved!  
Fount of the time-embranching fire,  
O waneless One, that art the core  
Of every heart's unknown desire,  
Take back the hearts that beat nor more!<sup>3</sup>

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\*This essay was submitted by the author to be published posthumously.

Trench was a dramatist as well as a poet. His *Napoleon* had been performed in 1919. He was naturally acquainted with *The Dynasts* and it may be suggested that his "Requiem" was influenced by the choruses in which Hardy comments on the action, in particular that of the Pities, which take a similar attitude to the aspirations and sufferings of humanity. Like Muir, Trench pities those who are rated as successful, as well as those who are apparently failures.

Most of Trench's poems suffer to-day from an unfashionably diction, but in his "Requiem" this matches the theme, and it remains an impressive poem. Muir was not the only poet to be influenced by it. 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. In an epilogue to the satire, *News of the Devil*, he had indicated that he was going to write of "the quiet overseeing / of man by eternity," thus "revealing / the vision absolute."<sup>4</sup> This appears to be an allusion to the lines quoted above from Trench. The publication of *Requiem* seven months later was preceded by a remarkable advertising campaign. Wolfe had justly earned a reputation for wit and cleverness rather than for profundity; but now there were rumours that he had written a great poem. So effective they proved that Oxford bookshops on the day of publication were besieged by long queues of customers anxious to obtain a copy of the first edition. The book became a best-seller. One reviewer compared Wolfe to Keats, and others were full of praise. Purchasers were initially delighted, but their enthusiasm was eroded by later readings.<sup>5</sup>

Muir's poem and Wolfe's have a great deal in common. In both the speakers are divided into winners and losers, and some of them have the same names. Originally in 1923, Muir had four losers—Idiot, Beggar, Coward, Harlot—and Saint and Hero as winners. Two years later he added the Mystic and in the published version he substituted the Poet for the Saint. Wolfe has eight losers, including the Harlot, and eight

winners, including St. Francis and St. Joan. One of his Lovers, also belonging to the winners, is a poet.

In Muir's poem each soliloquy is followed by a chorus. Wolfe has no chorus, apart from the Coda. All his characters use the identical six-line stanza, with a short fifth line followed by an alexandrine. The speeches of the winners and losers are each followed by two or three more poems on related topics. The Huckster, for example, is followed by a poem on the Last Supper, and another in which Judas attempts to return the thirty pieces of silver to the High Priest. When Wolfe inserts a poem about the 1914-18 war, he ingeniously and appropriately employs Wilfred Owen's use of par rhyme (trenches/branches; clasping/lisping).

Muir and Wolfe were born within two years of each other, but in education and experience they differed in almost every way. Wolfe entered the civil service in 1908 after graduating at Oxford and he was brilliant at his job. Muir hated his work as a clerk in Greenock and Glasgow. By 1926 Wolfe had published seven volumes of verse and one of prose. Muir had repudiated his early verse and he regarded thirty-five as his real birth as a poet. Yet his *First Poems* (1925) contained fourteen he did not reprint in his *Collected Poems*; and when he published *Chorus of the Newly Dead* he was still unsure of himself. He was a late developer and excessively modest. Wolfe was over-confident and seems to have shared the belief of his admirers that he was a great poet.

It may be assumed that although both poets were mainly indebted to Trench's "Requiem," they had read each other's work. Muir's reaction to Wolfe's *Requiem* must have been mixed. On the one hand he would have realised that Wolfe's gallery of winners and losers had dwarfed his hesitant group of abstract figures. He would have realised, too, that Wolfe's verse was technically accomplished. On the other hand, the publication of *Requiem* must have come as a shock. Its large sales, though temporary, meant that his own *Chorus* was damaged by comparison. He may well have felt that Wolfe's claims of divine inspiration were invalid, that his characters were all stereotypes, and that he was too clever by half. The things that made him so popular proved that he was a brilliant writer of pastiche, rather than a great and original poet.

Muir himself did not emerge as one of the best poets of his time until a few years later. It may be that his failure to finish the new version of *Chorus of the Newly Dead* was caused by a half-acknowledged inhibition and a feeling that *Requiem* had vulgarised a theme that was dear to his heart.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir*, ed. Peter Butter (Aberdeen: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1991) 317.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Butter, *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966) 105.

<sup>3</sup>*The Collected Works of Herbert Trench*, 3 vols. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924) 1: 130.

<sup>4</sup>Humbert Wolfe, *News of the Devil* (London: Ernest Benn, 1926) 38-39.

<sup>5</sup>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.