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Edwin Muir's Local Attitude Towards Globalization: A Brief Look at "The Horses"

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Abstract

The rise of imperialism has given birth to the notion of globalization that connotes several ideas: First, threat to national boundaries; second, rapid technological progresses; and third, the policy of homogenization or uniformity. Technological progresses have been regarded as the main threat on national identity and the main cause of global identity. The discursive reflection of globalization can be studied in literature and best in poetry. Because the local aspect of English poetry places more emphasis on the significance of poetry in the latter half of the 20th century, "The Horses" by the Scottish Edwin Muir (1887-1959) can be an excellent study of the poet's local attitude towards globalization. Although Muir wrote in English, he never lost sense of regionality and national identity. He was always concerned about feeling in one language and thinking in another. This study is an attempt to show Muir's view, as a localized figure, about globalization and the aftermath of technological progresses with a brief look at "The Horses" offering possibility of nationalism.

Key words: Edwin Muir; "The Horses"; Globalization; Technology; National identity

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INTRODUCTION

Edwin Muir (1887-1959) had a strong desire for true Scottishness, and would look at national identity as directly related with European modernism, an illusion and a discourse limiting the free flight of the imagination. As a matter of fact questions related to national identity form part of every (modern) poet's poetic career. Robichaud believes that Muir's Scottish identity gave him "an insider's understanding of national culture and class divisions, but whose Orkney origins, London residence, and writer's occupation enable[d] him to claim a wider perspective" (2005, p.148). This is not to say that traditionality has no place in Muir who was very much concerned about globalization as a complex process of threatening a nation like Scotland; invading nature; and cutting man from locality and historical consciousness, for as Hamilton indicates "globalization threatens to abolish history" (2003, p.175). Actually, Muir was a critic of Scotland's lack of self-knowledge and passivity, and desired a more modern Scottish nationalism.

Racist theories of history have, indeed, always been present to accompany global concepts of superiority and power. Patrick Brantlinger says, in *The Rule of Darkness*, that in the 1870s "Germany, Belgium, and the United States began an intense imperial rivalry against the older colonial powers, above all great Britain" (Rivkin and Ryan, 2000, p.856). This was closely related to profit and "capitalist thinking" that was the "dominant mode of thought that has changed other modes of understanding" (Fukuyama, 1999, p.16). This global exercise of power can easily shape global citizens and induce them to accept similar roles and become homogenous. Globalization is a formation of discourses that interpellate local subjects by homogenizing them. This is the serious conflict and interaction between the local and the global that is crucial

to a study of Muir's poetry. Many critics see globalization as "a form of dominance by 'First World' countries over 'Third World' ones, in which individual distinctions of culture and society become erased by an increasingly homogeneous global culture, and local economies are more firmly incorporated into a system of global capital" (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p.101). This is reminiscent of Wisker's look at globalization as "an attempt by first-world powers […] to identify the needs of, and redress economic imbalances in, Third World countries" (2007, p.6). Taylor and Winquist believe "globalization emerged from management and business literature in the 1970s" to define "new strategies for worldwide production and distribution, entering the social sciences through geography and sociology, and the humanities through anthropology and cultural studies" (2004, p.158). Hamilton defines globalization as "the creation of a new kind of world market for commodities through vastly improved systems of communication, information and means of circulating capital" (2003, p.176). Related to this is Taylor's and Winquist's claim that globalization was "the unprecedented flows of goods, money, people, and images across national boundaries" (2004, p.158).

The result of this global competition is, according to Hart, "expansion and economic growth" (2008, p.125) or to use Brennan's words "to euphemize […] imperial expansion" (2004, p.122) as well as achievement of capital. However, this is not the whole story. Globalization provides global citizens with similar economic, social and cultural opportunities which implies the unification of people living in a single place as well as the uniformity of local communities. Ideologically speaking, Ferguson sees globalization's "attendant myths function as a gospel of the global market" (1993, p.87). This is why many critics associate globalization with imperialism—a global system that can link different parts of the globe—and believe it to be the legacy of colonialism that is simply "the conquest and control of other people's lands and goods" (Loomba, 2000, p.2). Gordon Mathews goes too far to define the new cultural identity as "one's sense of culturally belonging to a society and beyond that to the global cultural supermarket" (2000, p.17). Global culture, like a supermarket, can determine what items and ideas people need.

It is interesting to note that Pratt sees "natural history" as the result of colonial expansion, for it demanded "better means of preserving, transporting, displaying, and documenting specimens […] jobs came into being for scientists on commercial expeditions and colonial outposts" (1992, p.29). This means export of ideas, local communities and cultures for the sake of familiarity and homogenization or what Robichaud refers to as "cultural leveling" (2005, p.149). The most important commodity in such a world, then, is knowledge which, according to Waugh, "determines the shape of the world" (1992b, p.46) and takes the place of labour. Muir believed that modernization and rapid industrial changes would negatively affect local communities while he was not content with Scotland's past, cultural conditions and industry. His comment in *Scott and Scotland* (1936) shows his desire for a more modern society: Scottish industrialists are "conceivable as thoughtless or perverted children" (75). Muir could not be indifferent to the harsh economic state of Scotland after a serious change in technological opportunities, provided by other countries like Britain, occurred. Muir's views regarding globalization and national identity can be better grasped by a look at his ideas concerning language and identity.

DISCUSSION

Edwin Muir believed in Scotland as a passive nation and was worried about Scottish political independence and the relationship between modernity and Scottish nationalism. The general ambience of such poems as "The Horses," "The Labyrinth," "Robert the Bruce," "Scotland 1941" and "The Journey Back" is conservative, for although Muir was skeptic about national independence, he was optimistic about the future. Muir had a bleak vision of Scottish history and felt that modern Scotland lacked "the sense of community which would give meaning to the poet's bardic role, and the modern Scottish poet is as alienated from the people as poets elsewhere" (Robichaud, 2005, p.146). Muir, in his "Scotland 1941" (1943) which is about Scottish lost identity and shows Muir's contempt at Scotland's material acquisition refers to the negative influence of Scottish history on the nation. Robichaud refers to Muir's belief that "if ancient Scotland was "a tribe, a family, a people, its modern successor is a hoax produced by a kind of false consciousness masking its participation in British imperialism" (2005, p.145).

Muir preferred the Edenic world of the local setting of Orkney where he grew to the fallen world of modern Glasgow. In his poems Muir explores such themes as quest for identity in modern Scotland, search for a lost, Edenic community, guilt versus innocence, and national identity. It is noteworthy that the speaker of "The Horses" never tells what country it is but that it is by the sea symbolizing tradition and identity which shows the poem as a warning about the past, and an encouragement of returning to nature.

Related to the issue of identity is language. Muir can easily make his language universal but the paradox in Muir is that despite his concern with Scottish identity and never losing sense of regionality and nationalism, he did not believe in the Scots language to be capable of expressing and restoring Scotland's soul. As a matter of fact he preferred standard English to Scots and wrote in English while his poetic tradition was Scottish. In *Scott and Scotland* (1936) he states that "Scotland can only create a national literature by writing in English" (178). Perhaps this was the reason for being afraid of a divided

consciousness: feeling in one language and thinking in another. In the same book Muir argues that Scotland's "linguistic division means that Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another; that their emotions turn to the Scottish tongue, with all its associations of local sentiment and their minds to a standard English which for them is almost bare of all associations other than those of the classroom" (20-21). The dichotomy of thought and feeling is believed to be "strikingly similar to Eliot's theory of dissociation of sensibility" (McCulloch, 1993, p.92). It must be noted that Muir knew that London was no longer the center for English poetry and this is reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's claim in a conference at Aberdeen in 1986 that "we are all regionalists now" (Draper, 1999, p.161). Muir can be regarded as an English regional poet with a non-metropolitan outlook with his poem as a kind of writing back to the centre.

"The Horses" (1952) is about the removal of boundary between centre and periphery. As a localized figure and defender of localized interests, Muir has found a voice to write back to the center/metropole and show the aftermath of modernity. "The Horses" is a local-community response to the centre as well as a critique of Eurocentrism.

"The Horses" is fable-like and a neo-Wordsworthian spot of time that explores invasion of nature, lost innocence and end of the past. Cox and Dyson believe Muir's aim was to describe "a return to the lost Eden, a re-establishment of the old covenant with God" (1963, p.130) and nature. Muir shows the abolishment of history by showing the world as a global village. The loss of historicity is a postmodern feature closely related with the ideological idea of uniformity. Hamilton states that "if you don't historicize, then you assume a uniformity that is discontinuous with the stories people use to justify what they have in common as much as to justify their differences" (2003, p.182). This implies the relationship between history, memory and expression of regional identities. Fukuyama in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) refers to "the different national wagons" that "have either pulled up inside the same Corral or are at some earlier stage of the same historic journey" (339).

The speaker longs for the past in "The Horses," the days gone by. Horses can be said to be the relic of the past symbolizing innocence, joy, identity, memory, Eden, beginning and the relationship between mind and nature. They change from "romantically mythical creatures" to "domesticated beasts that freely pull ploughs and carry loads" (Draper, 1999, p.171). Horses represent communality, locality and the physical energy needed for regeneration and a change in man's way of the world. The divine, humble and determined horses come to destroy the land and bring a new mode of life that is reminiscent of the themes of rebirth, freedom and going back to the origins of life. From Muir's view although the world is fallen and "broken," (l. 46), one can find innocence in a new-born colt.

Muir is a critic of modernity as a serious threat to innocence. The distrust of modernity and technology is well shown in the Romantic modern style of the poem were the harsh technology is juxtaposed with horses from nature. "The Horses" is a narrative of a world threatened with technology—nuclear war. This is so threatening that can put an end to history and leave people and their homes desolate. Muir laments, in *Scottish Journey* (1996) which is about search for identity, that "Scotland is gradually being emptied of its population, its spirit, its wealth, industry, art and innate character" (3) which is an attack on modernity as a spiritually emptied land. Technological progresses—radios, tractors, warships and planes in the poem—can destroy local commodities and identities by making people think and act the same. Cultures change into commodities and the flow of commodities becomes the flow of a global culture washing localities away. Global unity familiarizes local differences. In such a global market people become customers with little cultural differences. Technology, by penetrating nations and violating boundaries, has the power to make people alike and homogenize natures. Accordingly, Meyer refers to the "emergent postmodern" world as "multinational" (1991, p.661-662). Waugh refers to Charles Jencks's *The Language of Post-modern Architecture* (1977) and says that he has identified that "modern capitalism and technology have produced a world which is more like a 'global village'" (Waugh, 1992b, p.44) where even colonies provide markets for European goods produced by modes other than traditional modes of production. The uniformity occurs both inside the minds and outside in nature. Jameson links the logic of capital and "a technological revolution in agriculture" or the Green Revolution the aim of which was "supposedly destined to free the world from hunger" (Waugh, 1992a, p.131). In "The Horses" Muir refers to the selling of horses "to buy new tractors" (l. 36). There is a return after an apocalypse and this suggests end of a world of differences where people are blind to see them: "the seven days war that put the world to sleep" (l. 2); "the nations lying asleep, / Curled blindly" (ll. 20-21). Muir knew self-knowledge to be crucial to national identity, and would condemn Scottish people for ignorance and passivity. However, the optimistic Muir expects a second coming or a different destiny for the world with horses suggesting a new beginning.

To the new means of production in such a mechanical world media must also be added. The postmodern world is, from a Baudrillardian point of view, a media society where image is no longer separated from the real. This again is a threat upon history: "it is global access and the power of the virtual that has defeated history by the very effectiveness of communicating it or recording what it essentially is" (Hamilton, 2003, p.179). Horses show the relationship between community, technology, and primitiveness. The postmodern paradox is that

people become, ideologically speaking, alike but less communicative. The media turn people into clichés and make them passive. Muir beautifully shows this in the silence of radios—"the radios failed; we turned the knobs, no answer" (l. 7); "Nothing. The radios dumb;" (l. 11)—which signifies that communication is cut off. Muir implies that globalization and technology (warships and planes) have failed at helping people with their communication and have muddied the past and history instead. Despite the fact that people become ideologically and globally shaped, they suffer fragmented psyches as both the result of war and removal of the boundary between reality and hyperreality. This fragmentation is lack of identity and detachment from one's cultural roots with which Muir was obsessed.

The sublime "wave" (l. 34) suggests the divinity and power of the new experience both beautiful and frightening as it shatters old habits of thought. Muir associates war, technology, disease, tractors that "look like dank sea-monsters crouched and waiting" (l. 24) and imply global aspects of trade, with evil to show what globalization has offered humanity. In Draper's words Muir's poem is "a nightmare scenario of twentieth-century technology in post-nuclear collapse" (1999, p.170). It is interesting that Noah's flood and the nuclear war are juxtaposed both as means of cleaning the world but with a great difference as the latter is the cataclysm of the earth. Allusively speaking the nuclear war is said to be "the seven days war" (l. 2)—in Genesis there is a reference to the creation of the world in 7 days—that shows man's power at destroying the world and creating chaos. Nevertheless Muir was hopeful and somehow romantic that after the world's destruction the link between man and nature or "that long-lost archaic companionship" (l. 42) could be restored, and regional identities may be able to find a voice to express themselves. A new beginning or Muir's hope for possibility of nationalism is different from a contemporary like MacDiarmid who in his poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* does not seem so hopeful. Nairn believes that this poem is really a "great national poem on the impossibility of nationalism" (1981, p.169).

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