Known to Us in this Great Absence: The Absent Self's Identities in Edwin Muir's Poetry

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims at exploring issues pertaining to the theme of an apparently absent self in Edwin Muir's poetry, in the light of Derrida's theory of metaphysics of presence. It offers a thorough deconstructionalist reading of some poems to highlight the suspension or negation of the privileging of presence over absence in the evaluation of being, the consequent redefinition of the self's relationship with the other, and the ontological impossibility of envisaging unmediated nothingness. In other words, it demonstrates how Muir centralizes a liminal space between existence and nothingness in his treatment of the poetics of reality involved in the representation(s) of an absent self. As this process leads to the discovery of the loss of the transcendental signified, language fully reveals its reliance on provisional meanings.*

Keywords: Edwin Muir, Derrida, presence/absence, self/other, deconstruction, existence, nothingness, liminality.

Edwin Muir's preoccupation with the philosophy of self and identity is evident from the great variety of complicated issues he delineates when reflecting on it in many of his poems. A critic, consequently, needs to have recourse to a vast range of critical perspectives when interpreting those poems. This paper would deal with the interpretation of those of his poems that deal specifically with the representation of an apparently absent self.

Muir's poem "The Child Dying" is the monologue of a child who is about to die, addressed to the "Unfriendly friendly universe" (178). Just as the initial definitive attributes of the universe are oxymoronic, so are the terms of existence within it. During the monologue, the speaker says, "You are so great, and I so small: / I am nothing, you are all: / Being nothing, I can take this way" (178). In the first two lines quoted here, apparently the binary opposition of "you" and "I" is the harmonious equivalent of being and nothingness respectively. According to the conventions of common everyday discourse, it would be taken for granted that the universe that exists is present while the child who claims not to exist is absent.

But this absence is not to be confused with nothingness. A being that is talked about with an emphasis on its absence can only be perceived if ontologically posited in a liminal space, midway between the contraries of existence and non-existence. So when the child claims to be a not-being, its nothingness is challenged in three different ways. Firstly, the emphatic present tense of the verb in the poem's title stipulates that the subject is in the process of dying, not actually dead while he delivers the monologue. Secondly, in structuralist terms, the first person narrator essentially renders the poem as a discourse in which the persona of the text's subject of enonce[1] has an inescapable claim on existence as the initiator of its meaning. The third reason to be skeptical of the child's nothingness deserves more attention: in the third line quoted above, the narrator refers to himself as "Being nothing." Besides its obvious meaning of something that is nothing in the present tense, a post-Sartrean reader can readily isolate the phrase from its immediate context to ponder over its oblique suggestion of an oxymoronic fusion of existence and non-existence, in other words "Being" and "Nothingness." Such a suggestion serves the purpose of pointing out the self's ontological multiplicity, thereby indicating how the referential system of language, the very arrangement of morphemes necessary for its syntactic correctness, is itself inevitably imbued with the scope for the deconstruction of (non-)existence.

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Whereas the second stanza projects the child as being nothing, in the third and the fourth stanzas an altogether different thought is established for the speaker child no longer comments on his own death but the annihilation of the world (i.e., the universe). This is to say that once the logical impossibility of his own non-existence has been hinted at, the child temporarily shifts his attention to the non-existence of the world with which his contact is being severed. This latter non-existence would ensue on account of its absence from the speaker's consciousness:

> It's said some memory will remain
> In the other place, . . .
> But the world is out. There is no place
> Where it and its ghost can ever be. (178)

The world and everything belonging to it has vanished completely. The motif of the ghost—which in the present context seems to signify a subsidiary trail of a being—is used here to highlight the complete nullification of the world. This brings out the crucial difference between the nature of self-image and world-image respectively for while the absence of the former does not and could not denote non-existence but only a state in which its presence and continuance is open to reconsideration, with the latter it is not so. The self, in an apparently absent state, only questions the importance of presence and the role it plays in the general assessment of reality but anything other than itself, if absent, is simply not-being. This is clarified in the concluding lines of the fourth stanza in which the speaker sees an image of nothingness that exists not within but without, ". . . I look and see / Nothing-filled eternity, / And the great round world grows weak and old" (178).

The fifth and the last stanza attempts to bring about a reconciliation between the interrogative non-existence within and the definite non-existence without. The child reverts to the thought of the second stanza as he holds his father's hand and realizes that it is he and not the father (a representative other symbolizing the world without, the universe) who has died—"My hand in yours no more will change, / Though yours change on" (178). But this stationary self, it ought to be repeated, has not slipped into annihilation but has only acquired the status of what can loosely be called "an absent self," as opposed to the self-assertive presence of the father's self, " . . . You here, I there, / . . . I did not know death was so strange" (178).

The crux of the poem lies in its destabilization of the relationship between existence and presence. If existence always unambiguously implies presence, the self being spoken about in any discourse is

privileged automatically as something that is present, i.e., a reference to even a dead body, which can only through metaphorical rendering be treated as a self, inevitably deals with its presence one way or the other. However, Derrida's coinage of the word 'differance' has opened up avenues of coming to terms with an absence that is realized as something that exists[2].

> Since western metaphysics holds that presence is supreme or privileged and absence unprivileged, Derrida suggests that we temporarily reverse this hierarchy, its now becoming absence / presence. By such a reversal, no longer can we posit a transcendental signified. No longer is there some absolute standard or coherent unity from which all knowledge proceeds and develops. All human knowledge and all self-identity must now spring from difference, not sameness, from absence, not presence. (Bressler 79)

The consequences of this reversal are far-reaching and, demanding a startlingly postmodern perception of self-identity, quite a few poems of Edwin Muir deal with the complicated aspects of an absent self that exists. Because reality is multifaceted, an evaluation of an absence is sometimes indispensable for its comprehension. Looking at the nature of concepts and ideas about the self's existence on the one hand and the inevitable implications of language in which they are encoded on the other, it is possible to elaborate Muir's observations into a somewhat coherent (though not necessarily logical) theory that adds an important dimension to his treatment of the themes of self, identity and self-identity.

A rather superficial way of rationalizing the situation of the 'nothing' child talking to the universe (and by implication the reader) in "The Child Dying" can be found in Austin's Speech Act Theory that differentiates sharply between real, living speech acts and the fictitious ones handled in such discourses as literature. Since according to Austin the author of a literary text must not be treated as "actually talking" (Eagleton 119) to the reader, his speech acts should be treated only as "'pseudo' or 'virtual' speech acts – 'imitations' of speech acts . . . [which] were more or less dismissed by Austin himself as 'non-serious' and defective" (Eagleton 119). According to this categorically delimiting view, there is no mystery about the speech of a child who is nothing because literature is defined by its stylistic trait of dealing only with pseudo reality. However, the theory of deconstruction would approach the issue from a very different perspective and one of the bases of the

present study is Derrida's rejection of Austin's claim about non-serious representation of speech acts in literature[3]. The aim here is to come to terms with situations in which what Derrida calls the transcendental signified is apparently or actually absent and the reality of the self is judged from the relativism of sketchy, partially valid and often oxymoronic alternatives.

Before looking at the poetics of reality from the perspective of privileged absence, it is necessary to understand how language in everyday discourse, if it represents only convention, inevitably privileges presence over absence, making it impossible to talk about a state of pure non-existence[4]. This could be amply illustrated through an analysis of Muir's poem "The Shades" that deals with existence before birth. The shades are essentially insubstantial images of people who have not yet realized their existence and, while waiting for that time to come, they practice ways of existent beings—"Rehearse the play of evil and good, / The comedy and the tragedy" (112)—in a manner similar to that of children imitating adult ways during their games when their actions only apparently reproduce adulthood without actually realizing its potential signification. The shades are referred to in the first line as "bodiless spirits" (112), which means that though they lack the substance to render them as an objective reality, they have some kind of consciousness to lend them a certain, albeit imperfect, raw and incomplete, human identity. The kingdom they lie in is the "black Nonentity" (112) but this is not the Miltonic chaos per se, in which the only possible consciousness would be that of 'the Being' rather than the more diffusive and fragmentary one attributed to 'beings.' For the Shades, though yet to be created, have a power of foresight that links them with the world of created beings, their very act of waiting is suggestive of a consciousness alive to cross-temporal notion that links together the present and the future. The absence being talked about, therefore, exists in relation to presence. Whereas the major lexemes of the first two lines, "bodiless spirits" and "black Nonentity" (112), are both compounds denoting non-existence, the third line that takes into account the "passage to the living land" opens up the possibility of existence / presence that continues throughout the rest of the poem. This verse not only talks of but also acts as the textual fulcrum that initiates the spirits from non-existence into the living land and encodes, as such, a remarkable example of harmony between the text's form and content. However, this harmony, as shall be seen, is momentary and, therefore, seems to exist only to foreground the more pithy contrast between the two operating on another level.

The spirits are shown to let themselves imagine activities that are impossible without the manipulation of sensuously activating body organs i.e., the "eyes," the "ears" and the "hand." More than that, these activities are of a kind that is meaningless without there being tangible phenomena around the absent body to create a need for it. This is to say that unless there is something surrounding the self, there is no need to see or hear or touch and any such act would be self-annihilating. Therefore the spirits, while they imagine having bodies, also imagine having a material world surrounding their bodies that includes a sea, billow and sand, a bird sitting on a tree, etc. As the process of imagination becomes progressively denser, the interaction of imaginary bodies with imaginary phenomena leads to the creation of imaginary human feelings, "love" and "fear" manifested in such gestures, once again imaginary, as a "smile" or a "tear" (112). This show would continue, the poet concludes, until the time this dream is converted into a reality, "Until the summoned ghosts appear / In patterned march around the hill / Against the hoofed and horned wood" (112). While an overview of the procedure by which things work in the prenatal experience starts with absence and ends with a pseudo-physical theatricality, culminating in "The comedy and the tragedy" (112) of existence, the complex process of word formation in the poem denotes an opposite procedure. The major part of the poem is devoted to a depiction of the fake existential sequence indulged in by the unborn spirits and the picture overtakes the attention of the reader at the expense of effacing the importance of the initial absence.

However, the inescapability of unreality in the existence (or the non-existence) of this three dimensional world of experience is highlighted by such adjectives as "unincarnate" and "insubstantial." The usage of both is highly meaningful since they both come into being through the addition of prefixes, directing attention to a microcosmic interplay of opposites since the bound morphemes "un-" and "in-" substitute the meaning of the words they are attached to with their opposites. If these prefixes are an addendum to the core of semantics, the fact that lies at the beginning of everything is existence of presence, with the non-existence or absence being a supplement. On the syntactic level, the same structure of absence being an offshoot of the root of presence is held intact in three of the four noun phrases denoting absence in the poem. In "bodiless spirits," "unincarnate hand" and "insubstantial sea," the adjectives denoting absence are clearly a supplement to the nouns denoting the other half of the dualism. Even in the fourth, exceptional phrase, i.e., "black Nonentity," the noun itself demonstrates the same principle in its morphemic make. In this way, the anatomy of the linguistic icons proves

the inevitability of presence as the initial fact and acts to reinforce the inability of conceiving pure non-existence. The poet as a man first of all exists, his mediatory reflections on what the state of being would be like before coming into existence must necessarily be encoded in language that he has learned and could use only while he exists. In this way, the formation of words follows a pattern leading from existence to non+existence (substantial to in+substantial, etc.) even as the poet constructs a narrative in which absent beings precede the imaginings of phenomena. In other words, it might be said that the language of the poem is responsible for overturning the initial status of the absent subject of the enonce by bringing to the reader's attention an even earlier presence of the subject of the enunciation. Thus the phrase "the living land" semantically outweighs the four phrases used for opposite signification in the sense that any being's conception of absence must be relative to a conception of presence.

The situation can be summed up as follows: in so far as the content of the poem is concerned, it deals with absence but what makes all the difference is that language, which posits itself as the medium of thought and expression, bars a discussion of unadulterated absences. Therefore, the pattern that emerges from the semantic processes of this poem is a celebration of what Foucault calls the use of language in the Classical Age in which, instead of there being any essential or primitive act of signification, there is "at the heart of representation, the power that it possesses to represent itself, that is, to analyze itself by juxtaposing itself to itself, part by part, under the eye of reflection, and to delegate itself in the form of a substitute that will be an extension of it" (Foucault 78). This is to say that when a particular kind of language that is governed primarily by the privileging of presence takes to talking about absence, this absence presents a substitute to presence that is an extension of it.

The conclusion of the poem being that Man, who is, for as long as he can think or communicate his thoughts, a being, cannot envisage pure absence and that language and its use itself becomes a hurdle in his ability to talk unhindered about absence of self, one can now proceed to see how the burden of consciousness, the store of memory etc., has an inhibiting influence on an evaluation of absence. In Muir's poem "When the Trees Grow Bare on the High Hills," the poet recounts a Wordsworthian experience of finding "perfect and cold" (22) attainment within himself by ridding himself of his thoughts. These thoughts

> . . . which through long months
> Have lain like lead upon my breast,

> Heavy, slow-ripening thoughts,
> Grow light and sere,
> And fall at last, so empty and so beautiful. (22)

The speaker's earthy existence becomes increasingly shrunken until it sinks towards a kind of partial nothingness, becoming "Mere memory, mere fume / Of my own strife . . ." (22). Since, as has been seen before, absolute extinction is impossible, the best that relinquishment of thoughts can do to efface the speaker's self is to make it into something known only as a thing of the past. For a being to become mere memory does not denote its extinction but only the fact that it now exists as a part of another consciousness. This is, therefore, another case of an absence that has a presence of its own. The whole poem, with its rich autumnal imagery of falling leaves, deals with the journey of a man towards renunciation of himself until, identifying himself with the fallen leaves, he suddenly finds "attainment" at the very point when the burden of consciousness, encoded in thoughts, is shed like a skin and a new, almost insubstantial, entity is born instead.

The theme of movement towards absence of oneself leading to a kind of incomprehensible fulfilment is also elaborated in another poem, "The Voyage," in which a psychological journey traces, step by step, the discovery of emptiness, uncertainty and finally fulfilment (or the realization of being). The domain of words suggesting deadness and unfulfilment is established in the earlier part of the poem by the use of such words as "empty," "vanish," "alone," "lost," "vacant," "blank," "ghostly," "graves," "tombs." The words forcefully convey the impression that the essence of life and vitality is lacking in the existence of the sailors and this feeling is pushed to its extreme by the realization that the emptiness is not passive but inflicts its negative influence by inhibiting human spirits: note the implications of the sustained collocation of "unchanging," "check," "barred," "untravelled," "stolen," etc. in the first half of the poem. The seafarers describe their situation as being similar to that of a man who

> . . . may vanish in a day
> In some untravelled fold of pace
> And there pursue his patient way
> Yet never come to any place . . .
>
> And he out of this world has run
> And wanders now another world . . . (135—136)

The image presented here deals with a man who has vanished, one who has negated the observable existence and has become an inhabitant of

another world that can only be defined by the character trait that it does not contain any place. The "another world," according to the principles of psychoanalysis, is the world of the other, and the man having interchanged the self with the other, can only grasp his new world in terms of its emptiness. When the sailors' contact with the physical world becomes strictly restricted to the monotonous sea and the sky, the self begins to doubt the life of its body. In such a condition, with a pervasive and inescapable sense of being caught in emptiness, life and death or the consciousness of dream and reality becomes interchangeable:

> What thoughts came then! Sometimes it seemed
> We long had passed the living by
> On other seas and only dreamed
> This sea, this journey and this sky, . . . (137)

As in "The Child Dying," the dilemma of the uncertainty of existence becomes so stark that they are not even sure whether it is they who have become non-existent or that it is the world around them that has suddenly "ended so / Without a cry" (137). The voyage, in this way, becomes a metaphysical journey calculated for an encounter with absence and in its first stage, as it has been shown, the consciousness of emptiness precedes the consciousness of uncertainty. This frame of mind lays the groundwork for the complex dualism that operates at the heart of the poem and has been summed up by the poet in the interrogative phrase "Delusion or truth?" (138). After the cessation of life emerge delusions of firm set earth under their feet and all the joys and pleasures that they have left behind them from the externalist perception. Then the speaker states the paradox that turns the entire background knowledge upside down:

> And blessing, we ourselves were blest,
> Lauded the loss that brought our gain,
> Sang the tumultuous world to rest,
> And wishless called it back again.
>
> For loss was then our only joy,
> Privation of all, fulfilled desire,
> The world our treasure and our toy
> In destitution clean as fire. (138)

If delusions take over consciousness, loss turns into gain, privation into fulfillment and emptiness into fullness. This is the indomitable and irrepressible consolation of encountering a complete absence. The denouement finally occurs when the voyage on the empty sea comes to

an end and signs of real world phenomena again make their appearance, bringing in their wake "the familiar pain" (138) of a world of presences. Whereas the poem "When the Trees" deals with the fulfillment gained by the self that drops into absence, "The Voyage" deals with the act of redemption brought about by the speaker's world falling into an absence. Together, the two project an image of an exclusively positive result emerging from absence. However, there are poems in which non-existence is sought less optimistically and with a more reactionary fervour as an escape from the gloomy conditions of life, as a means of fighting back dejection.

"Dejection" is such a poem and has another perspective to offer about the absent self. It begins with the following pronouncement of desire: "I do not want to be / Here, there or anywhere;" (150). But this desire for self-annihilation is bound to remain ultimately unfulfilled. The self cannot fully acknowledge its own effacement since if it disappears without a trace, there would be no consciousness to comment on it. Therefore, the poem "Dejection" deals essentially with a narrative of what a dream would look like when and if it is realized. The opening expression of "want" sets the tone of the poem since its polysemic status goes a long way to explain the change that occurs in the poem. As a verb, the word signifies something that is required or something that is desired but as a noun of absence it signifies the lack of something. The poem consists of two stanzas and these two distinct meanings lie embedded in the first and the second stanzas respectively.

After the opening statement of desire, in the second stanza there is the revelation of the attainment of this desire since the speaker has suddenly become as senseless as "the undreaming folk of rock and stone" (150) while time slips by without stirring any possible thought, "Nor count nor care to count the dull returns / Of day and month and year and century / Crowding within the crowding urns" (150). In this fulfilment of not-being, the second meaning of "want" comes into full play as it is the lack of existence, thoughts, feelings, passage of time, etc. that defines this state. However, as always, even this state is not that of absolute nothingness as, firstly, in this state where time has no meaning, there is still a sense that a change would occur when something incomprehensibly self-destructive would take place—"Until the rock rise up and split the rock" (151) and so this state of nothingness and timelessness is confined within a certain period of time. The second, more fundamental reason to question the absoluteness of this nothingness is that the closing lines of the first stanza make it clear that this state brought about by extreme dejection is like the experience of a dream that

was once dreamt but later abandoned, the speaker's melancholy places him in a position comparable to being "As in a valley / Whence long ago I tried to sally, / But dreamt and left my dream upon the air" (150). If the meaning of these apparently twisted lines is put into simple words, the situation presented here is of the speaker caught in a dream-valley from where he once dreamt of escaping (it is "whence" he tried to sally, not "into which" he tried to sally) but then abandoned that dream. So the dream-valley continues to enclose him in the given fit of dejection and, naturally, what follows in the second stanza is the narration of what it felt like being in that dream. So absolute extinction is negated through this roundabout assertion that whatever follows is only a dream. Only when things are put in this perspective is the full impact of the "want" understandable for over and above everything it is the want of nothingness or, in other words, the want of an absolute want.

This theme of absolute nothingness being impossible for the subject to imagine can be further explained through an interpretation of the following eloquent aphorism of Heidegger, "As potentiality-for-being, *Dasein* [i] cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein[5]" (qtd. in Derrida, *Aporias* 69). Commenting on this statement, Derrida says that the modes of waiting or of anticipating death and the "not yet" [*pas encore*] that are proper to *Dasein* are, "[f]rom an ontological point of view, . . . not the anticipation of a completion or accomplishment" (*Aporias* 69). Rather,

> In the "not yet" that bends us toward death, the expecting and waiting [*le s'attendre*] is absolutely incalculable; it is without measure, and out of proportion with the time of what is left for us to live. One no longer reckons with this "not yet," and the sigh that it calls forth does not bespeak the measurable but instead the nonmeasurable: whether it lasts a second or a century, how short will life have been. (*Aporias* 69)

This shows that somebody can never claim to have grasped, in dreams or otherwise, his non-existence that may materialize in future. The extent to which the presence or absence of a self is affected by thought process is an issue taken up in more detail by Edwin Muir in poems like "If I Could Know" and "Nothing There But Faith." In the first, the speaker longs to know with ultimate certainty about whether the phenomena that present themselves to his eye are actually there or it is a gigantic web of fallacies contrived by the deviousness of his eye and imagination, "If I could truly know that I do know / This, and the foreshower of this show, / Who is

myself, for plot and scene are mine, . . . (252). In this game of epistemological skepticism, the speaker begins by questioning the truth or presence of what his eye shows him but the last logical step in this skepticism is to question the truth of the very sense mechanism that creates this entire show of things, the speaker's self. The knowledge of what one comes across in the world does not require a process that might deliberately be taken up or set aside at will; it is a continuous process that is automatically set into motion whenever the bodily senses are active. However, if one begins to doubt the reality of what one sees even to the extent of doubting oneself, the self poses itself in a universe that is split up between the alternatives of presence and absence. The absence becomes frightening because the self, if the doubt persists unendingly, is itself consumed by the void.

The second stanza deals in detail with the speaker's skepticism of his sight and the third one complements it by dwelling on the same theme with reference to his hearing. Seeing "the real world" (252) is an urge that cannot bring the speaker to a definite conclusion because his vision is basically inadequate but he introduces a certain element of hope towards the end by saying that this uncertainty persists while he is making the journey of life but he is more than a physical being and, carrying a transcendental personality, he at least has a beginning and an end, "For a beginning and an end are mine / Surely, and have their sign / Which I and all in the earth and the heavens show" (252). This means that the speaker justifies his existence and his consciousness by imagining that he must have made his start as a being and is going to end it in another realm of consciousness, possibly in another, Platonic world, where truth becomes clear and unambiguous.

This suggestion might be true but, what is perhaps more important in the present context, it is highly unscientific. A further comment shall be made on this after the analysis of the next poem that builds a case in favour of the viewpoint that thought process can possibly fill in the void of existence since if one cannot be sure of whether one's senses guide one to a real world around one and a real sense of one's existence, the advantage of this epistemological uncertainty is that one can, through a cognitive operation involving will, create a world to substitute nothingness.

This is elaborated in the poem "Nothing There but Faith." The speaker, in this case, does not talk about himself but assumes the role of a detached observer of some unknown people (whether or not they are actually people is also never made clear, they are just thinking entities, the problematic "they"). The poem starts with an exposition of non-

existence: "Nothing, it seemed, between them and the grave. / No, as I looked, there was nothing anywhere" (238). In the preceding poem, the speaker was caught in the dilemma of not being sure about the validity of his own observations about himself but here he is freely commenting on the reality of others' world. However, the element of doubts and illusions ensuing from subjectivity is included into the statements with the all-important phrase, "it seemed" (238). Initially, then, the speaker reserves his judgment and records simply what seems to be the truth to him. While in the second line he seems to be surer of himself, it is not a coincidence that as soon as this surety is expressed, the speaker apparently loses the exactitude of his words since in saying "there was nothing anywhere" (238), he makes the conceptual mistake of omitting also "them and the grave" (238). This flaw, whether intentional or not, declares the flippancy of being sure of one's senses, particularly when the topic of debate involves nothingness.

The beings that lived in the void did nevertheless have a sense of possession and called the bare ground of nothingness theirs. The one thing that makes all the difference between the vision of the speaker and that of the beings is that the latter had the gigantic and irreplaceable support of "faith," faith that constructs or demolishes any conceptualization. The speaker, therefore, with a contrived and artificial naivety says that "This, this was what I could not understand" (238) to highlight the contrast between the minds of those who have faith in there being something and the one who thinks that there is nothing. This naivety is contrived because in the very next lines the speaker himself explains the cause of the difference between his vision and that of those beings. Nobody can lay claim on nothingness, it is by its nature something that cannot be possessed. So the reason for those beings laying a claim to the nothing-land was that they had "faith," something that the speaker lacked, "The reason was, there was nothing there but faith" (239). Hence the following conclusion of the poem: "They looked: all was transfigured far and near, / And the great world rolled between them and death" (239). These last lines form an almost exact antithesis of the opening lines in which it seemed that there was nothing. This is how the poem, through the development of its own structure, demonstrates how faith makes all the difference in the evaluation of the presence or the absence of being.

One way of looking at the problem addressed in the two preceding poems is that they deal with the philosophical debate about the antagonism of introspection and objectivism. For the longing to know

about one's reality or the difference that one's belief (faith) can make in one's understanding of the world around him involves a highlighting of introspective activities that may or may not coincide with externalist objectivity. The introspectionist school met its demise, writes B. Alan Wallace,

> as a result of both ideological and pragmatic, scientific problems. One ideological objection was that the principle of objectivism demands of scientific observation a kind of independence of subject and object that is impossible in introspection. Wundt acknowledged that subjective events can be internally observed, but he argued that this does not imply that such events are observable in any *scientific* sense. (79)

In the light of this theory, it can be concluded that while the speaker's conviction about having his beginning and end elsewhere is clearly unscientific, filling a void through faith is no better because in either case introspection thrusts an inevitable subjectivism. So, both the attempts to overcome an absence of the self or of the world around it, from a purely scientific view, end in failure.

Another question that can be posed about the identity of an absent self has to do with the status of a dead man's identity that investigates the extent to which bodily death (or physical absence) contributes to non-existence. In this regard, two poems that apparently present a pronounced sequence of thesis and anti-thesis, but actually project a similar idea, are "The Heroes" and "To the Forgotten Dead."

The sonnet named "The Heroes" talks about the people whose identity undergoes a radical change as their stature grows to legendary proportions after their death. Having become implanted in tradition as heroes, they paradoxically come to live in a framework larger than life while their bodies decay after death. The poet assumes a half-ironical, half-serious stance towards the heroes who "in all their bravery took the knock / And like obedient children swaddled and bound / Were borne to sleep within the chambered rock, . . ." (220). That the heroes themselves gained nothing from this heroic existence is evident from the revelation that "A splendour broke from that impervious ground, / Which they would never know" (220). Thus this new identity is highly impersonal, affecting them, as it were, only from without in the minds of other people while they never even get to know about it. To a detached observer, those so-called heroes are potentially no more than extremely helpless captives in the tombs since "the straitness / Of full submission bound them where they lay" (220). This identity of the hero is mocked at by the

imperturbable forces of physical nature that indiscriminately treat dead bodies as empty, worthless shells.

But the truly significant point made in the poem is that this enticing greatness does not simply ensue from fame; the particularly bare and simple assertion in the short sentence within a verse—"It was not fame" (220)—is immediately striking for its definitiveness. In the last five lines that follow this assertion is the viewpoint that it is something in the nature of the absence entailed by death that enables this legendary existence to flower. The traditional conception of a hero commonly involves the distancing of his figure from what is typically human and, indeed, the human identity encoded in the earthy trio of "feature, presence, name" (220), has to be forsaken before "that strange glory broke from namelessness" (220).

A poem that is remarkably similar in theme to Muir's "The Heroes" is Siegfried Sassoon's "Presences Perfected" in which the word "presences" is employed with deep irony since the people who have perfected their presence are the dwellers of a "prophetic Land" (127) where time makes no impressions while at the same time they also lack names and bodies of flesh:

> Names had they none. Through spirit alone
> They triumphed, the makers of mankind,
> Whose robes like flames were round them blown
> By winds which raved from the unknown
> Erebus of earth's ancestral mind. (128)

"To the Forgotten Dead" is an apostrophe addressed to people who have sunk into an eternity of Oblivion that "[i]s too vast for story or name" (287). If the heroes have attained a life higher than the human terms of existence, that is nothing compared with the timeless identity of the unknown obtained by these forgotten dead. For the poet says to them, "Do not make / Your silent magnanimity / A mock at fame's importunate breath" (287). This shows that the kind of eternity offered by oblivion has an intrinsic value far more powerful than whatever fame etc., can offer. Hence the contrast with the status of the heroes. A deeper signification, however, brings the two poems together in the sense that, as has been noted earlier, the heroes got their powerful identity not owing to fame but owing to their physical absence. And the poetics of oblivion lie embedded in absence. So the central importance of absence is what creates a craving for the magnanimity of being forgotten just as it lends to heroes a glossy but practically useless identity.

Quite incidentally, a certain pattern has emerged in this chapter in which two poems of Muir have been taken repeatedly as forming a pair to make a point about the relationship of identity and absence. The last two poems interpreted below can loosely be paired together not on account of thematic similarity or contrast but by the fact that they both are profoundly philosophical in their approach to the absent self and, as such, need a very close reading. That is why they have been selected to form a befitting closure for this paper:

A particularly enigmatic poem, even in the range of Muir's philosophical canon, making abundant use of paradox, is "Then," in which non-existence manifests itself through a play of bodies ("flesh") and spirits ("shadows") being separated from each other and the former falling into an utter and perpetual state of passiveness while the latter are "fighting on the wall" (94). Existence is guaranteed in the plainest sense when ensured on both the physiological and psychological levels by the fusion of the body and the soul. Bodily death occurs when the two are alienated from one another and the privileged idea of presence suffers if the body, through loss of spirit, becomes a dead body. Since the poem deals mostly with the activity of bodiless shadows, it foregrounds a kind of entity that exists midway between existence and non-existence. Just as the spatial reality of the self has been made half paralyzed by the absence of the body and the presence of the spirit, its temporal reality has been cut into half through the foregrounding of the "then" at the expense of the "now." This is because generally the notion of temporal reality is constructed through the comparative conception of two different points in time or in other words an ideological coming together of then and now. But as the title of the poem deals only with a foggy period removed in time from the present—a "then" without opposite dimensions—it is evident that the presence of the selves being talked about here is fundamentally incomplete in both space and time. In an earlier chapter, in elaborating Muir's usage of the word "ghost," it has been said that it refers to a living embodiment of the unreal self. With a slight change of diction it might be dubbed as a presentation of the absent self, an absence that is nevertheless dynamic and has realized its potential of overtaking and nullifying the core of presence.

The poem is constructed around a principle of reducing a whole to a part not in a metonymic construction but with a clear understanding of the latter being only a part and then reversing the process to make the whole exist, on a second level, within the part. This process is carried out in both spatial and temporal terms.

Once the central reality of the time referred to as "then" has been established, the phrase "now and then" (94) has been used in the fourth line not to indicate an objective contrast between past and present but two points in time that exist within the confines of the all-important "then." Similarly, as the fighting shadows kill each other, they die in a manner that might more readily be associated with the death of the body: even though they have no body in the first place, they vanish leaving behind blood-drops. Blood is the metonymic representation of physiological reality whose absence was first highlighted by the exclusive focus on the shadow or the spirit. The absence of blood (the body) had left the shadow incomplete but when one of the shadows itself disappears, its killing is marked by the appearance of the blood. But at the same time it has been made clear that the poet is not interested in drawing a simple picture of a being in which the body-spirit duality cannot co-exist and one dies in order to be replaced by the other or, in other words, the effacement of the spirit does not here signify a plain replacement by the body. Rather, it is a case of "Big drops that looked yet did not look like blood" (94). Possibly this blood is a metaphorical signification of the kind of substance that shadows shed to denote their meeting with a violent death. And so, as "now and then" come to exist as an auxiliary of the "Then," so do "the blood (body) and the shadow (spirit)" come to exist as an auxiliary of the "Shadow." Another way of looking at this blatant contradiction about a substance simultaneously looking and not looking like blood seems to be the poet's desire not to let presence hold sway over absence. The disappearance of one of the shadows led to a further absence, an absence of movement and activity, as there is a lull in the fight on the wall before another shadow comes along to take its place.

From here onwards the blood is referred to as unambiguously a signifier for its referent—"the blood was all" (94)—but this sudden lack of ambiguity more logically pertains to a very provisional signification resorted to for the sake of smooth communication. For this blood continues to evoke absence and if in provisional discourse it becomes more substantial than a pure absence, it remains till the end less than a positive presence as it is "the poor blood, unowned, unwanted, / Blank as forgotten script" (95). To the end it does not take with itself either a sense of belonging or a registry in any memory other than the poet's provisional one.

At the same time the poet also talks about certain absent women who might have wept over the spilling of this blood if they had been there. To

give a detailed picture of the impact of that weeping, the women once again are given a provisional presence and the wall comes to be "haunted / By mute maternal presences . . ." (95). This image paves the way for the final crowning installation of absence as the non-existent sighs of these absent women are supposed to be responsible for "fluttering" (95) i.e., setting into motion "the fighting shadows and shook the wall / As if that fury of death itself were dying" (95). The death of death is a tautology in which absence at last comes into its own and here is the glimpse of the absolute nothingness that could not be envisaged elsewhere. For as long as death is the death of a being, it exists only with the idea of the being (who has a presence) but the same cannot be said about the death of death. But this triumph of absence only exists for a moment before its conceptual shortcomings make themselves known: either one cannot conceive what the death of death would look like or the figure of death, as in an allegorical story, is given a body, a figure, a shape, in which case it becomes a being—that has, in that event, a presence when death overtakes it.

The high-water mark of all the poems by Muir that philosophically investigate the presence / absence duality of the self is the one entitled "The Absent" which, being the soliloquy of the others whose selves are absent, present the case of unfixing the subject in a uniquely apparent manner. The opening lines of the poem address quite a few issues:

> They are not here. And we, we are the Others
> Who walk by ourselves unquestioned in the sun
> Which shines for us and only for us.
> For They are not here.
> And are made known to us in this great absence
> That lies upon us and is between us
> Since They are not here. (197)

Since the first person plural pronoun "we," within the common dimensions of language use, entails an inescapable presence of the agent who delivers the signifier, and the plurality of the agents only serves to make the presence more pronounced, the reader feels disconcerted by the utterly unexpected situation in which the "we," while proclaiming their presence, assert the fact that they only exist in relation to beings that are absent. For in the self / other binary construction, the general, truistic principle is that "[t]he Self also represents possibilities for agency and fully inhabited subjectivity, while other is dispossessed and incapable of self-actualization" (Ortiz 357). If this be the case, the self necessarily precedes the other for the latter's signification should always be an automatic intimation of the existence of the former. Obviously, this is

where the subversion of the truistic principle begins to operate in the poem. It presents the other's self-sufficient consciousness at the expense of the self that is usually the active polarity of the dualism and the fountainhead of consciousness.

However, along with the self's semantic precedence, the truistic principle of representation also holds that "[t]he binary relationship between self and other suggests that the "I" of the self cannot exist without the "non-I" or the non-entity of the other. The self, in effect, creates the other to ensure its existence and vice versa" (Ortiz 357). This proposition of necessity very logically inverts itself though extension into saying that the self takes form only by limiting itself, by defining its boundaries where the other begins, which makes 'conflict' the most vital postulate of the self / other identity. The poem's assertion of the other's presence in the face of the self can be rationalized by the fact that the other's creation would be epistemologically irrelevant and unnecessary without conflict, opposition and negation. The binaries ambivalently exist and do not exist in and for each other.

As in "The Shades," the narrative pattern deconstructs the semantic content in the opening sentence—"They are not here" (197)— which indicates the structural precedence of the central unit of existence (the self) over the auxiliary speaker (the other) because the first word that constitutes the poem is in any case "They," a pronoun that stands for the self, followed by the "we," the pronoun for the other.

At the same time, the relational nature of identity is indicated by the motif of the "sun," a potent symbol of the phenomenal world, as the others validate their self-assertion by claiming that it shines only for them. Their situation is partly like that of plural subjects in "The Shades" who also "dream and wander" (197) in a state of emptiness. But the subtle difference is that while, on finding the identity of being, the shades are received by the material phenomena of "the hoofed and horned wood" (112), these others, when they "breathe" (197) themselves out into the air, are received by an absence: "We do not touch, our souls go out in the absence / That lies between us and is about us" (197). The last construction creates an image of absence being an ethereal substance in which the others are rolling as eternally alienated beings. After this follows an elegiac longing for the absent selves but the loss felt thus by the others is once again of a unique nature, "Sorrow for loss of that which we never possessed, / The unknown, the nameless, / The ever-present that in their absence are with us . . . (197). The loss of something that was never possessed and never known occurs only in theory.

Without a prior possession of a thing, one cannot empirically know what the experience of having it or losing it would feel like. So the absent selves exist as an idea, a theory. And the poem finds a parenthetical denouement with the following continuation of the lines just quoted, "(With us the inheritors, the usurpers claiming / The sun and the kingdom of the sun) that sorrow / And loneliness might bring a blessing upon us" (197). While recognizing their status as usurpers, the speakers seem conscious of having introduced a subversion in the so-called natural (or more accurately the commonly accepted) order of things, of letting absence gain a victory over presence. But the final desire for a blessing has a direct association with the kind of fulfillment talked about in poems like "When the Trees" or "The Voyage."

As a final word, a deeply thought-provoking perspective can be added to the deference of meaning stemming from the primacy of the (absent) other studied here through contextualizing this analysis by one of Derrida's writings in which he talks comprehensively about the unique nature of the true moment of invention and concludes, "The other is indeed what is not inventable, and it is then the only invention in the world, the only invention of the world, *our* invention, the invention that invents *us*. For the other is always another origin of the world and we are (always) (still) to be invented. And the being of the *we*, and Being itself. Beyond Being" (*Psyche* 342). The pun in the phrase "our invention"— with its passing hint of something invented by us hurriedly replaced by the invention of ourselves—is a typical Derridean invention, whereby the reader's imagination is jolted into semantic ruination that follows from representation of the other's perspective and the world's / self's alternative origins.

On the basis of this discussion, it is evident that an important feature of Edwin Muir's treatment of the theme of self-identity relates to the suspension and capsizing of the smooth harmony between the dualisms of presence / absence and being / not-being respectively and the consequent lingual dilemmas of representation.

Notes

1. A formal differentiation between the subject of the enonce and the subject of the enunciation is made thus:

> The entry of the subject into the dimension of the symbolic produces a further splitting or decentring of the subject by subordinating (subjecting) it to the laws of language and to the unavoidable difference between the subject of the utterance (enonce) and the subject of the enunciation (enonciation): the "I" that speaks does not coincide with the "I" that appears in the message it sends. (Macey 369)

2. Posing a general "What if?" question, the term "differance" draws attention to the following questions: "What if no transcendental signified exists? What if there is no presence in which we can find ultimate truth? What if all our knowledge does not arise from self-identity? What if there is no essence, being, or inherently unifying element in the universe? What then?" (Bressler 79). Also, the fact that differance eludes a conventional definition has been stressed by Derrida again and again, e.g., "Differance is also something other than finitude" (Derrida, *Grammatology* 68).

3. This is how Derrida responded to Austin's said theory: "Does it not follow that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, "non-serious", *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality — or rather, a general iterability — without which there would not even be a "successful" speech-act?" (qtd. in Norris 109).

4. To forestall the possibility of a slight misunderstanding, it is imperative to notice a sensitive difference between what Derrida says and the thesis of this paper. While the essential importance of absence holds true, one of Derrida's principal claims is, as one famous commentator puts it, that "deconstruction would involve the demonstration that for presence to function as it is said to, it

must have the qualities that supposedly belong to its opposite, absence. Thus, instead of defining absence in terms of presence, as its negation, we can treat "presence" as the effect of a generalized absence or . . . of differance" (Culler 95). However, because this paper partly aims at centralizing the impossibility of envisaging pure and non-relational non-existence / nothingness, the last part of Culler's quotation should not be taken to mean that I intend to assert that absence has in some way become unquestionably more central to meaning than presence, but only that presence is not fundamentally or unproblematically linked with the idea of existence.

5. The exact meaning of "Dasein" is debatable; Heidegger, for instance, was uncomfortable with Sartre's appropriation that rendered it as "human reality" (Priest 60) because for him it denoted "a manner of being that is not captured by the empirical connotations of 'human reality'" (Priest 60).

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