

Maria Korusiewicz

University of Bielsko-Biala
mkorusiewicz@ubb.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-7247-0966

The Return of The Labyrinth; notes on Edwin Muir's poem and its paradoxical dynamics of symbolism

Introduction

The aim of the present article is to apply classical and contemporary conceptions of the labyrinth in a hermeneutic interpretation of a poem by the Scottish poet Edwin Muir entitled *The Labyrinth* with reference to its conception of space, time, and the notion of the centre, as well as to point to the possibility of continuing research on the specificity of the tragic vision presented in the poem, close to the approach proposed by Hans Urs von Balthasar. The poem, written shortly after World War II in the heart of Central Europe, in Prague, represents not only the existential experience, deep fear, and sense of personal helplessness of its author in the face of contemporary events, but also the peculiar status of the human individual in the world, which is subject to the processes of monstrification and decay. Another of its immanent features is its multilayer intertextuality, whose most significant tropes are, on the one hand, elaborate transformations of the Minoan myth, and consequently also of the heroic monomyth, and on the other hand, modernist inspiration from the work of Kafka.

The complexity of Muir's experience allows us to read his *The Labyrinth* in the context of our own contemporary reality, especially in the dynamics of the symbolism of the oppositions bound with each other: primarily chaos

and harmony; Hades and Eden, time and timelessness; and despair and confusion and epiphanic sensations. This paradoxical, and yet dualistic assumption corresponds to the vision of reality Muir presents in nearly all of his output, which combines two readings through the adoption of the conception of two “corresponding orders of existence,”¹ which Muir termed the Story and the Fable. He treated these notions as fundamental to our understanding of the narrative of human existence, which is confirmed by the title he gave to his autobiography, published in 1940². From the perspective of the world of phenomena and the individual experience of our lives that is subject to the linear nature of time, we are dealing with the Story. The Fable, on the other hand, remains outside of time – in the sphere of Platonic ideas and perhaps even, as Kathleen Reine once wrote, among considerably more archaic beliefs³, dating back to myth, tales from beyond time – although it is precisely time, through the procession of human experience, that offers us such access. The Story unfolds within a framework that takes in locality, time, objects, and events, and thus brings into itself cultural tradition and the filters of perception of the world that are unique to a particular culture. The Fable, on the other hand, is much broader in nature and harks back to the innocence of childhood; it persists in the hidden recesses of our consciousness. Clive Wilmer goes so far as to connect the Fable to mystical experiences:

The ‘story’ is the life we are conscious of living from day to day, the rectilinear narrative of our journey from birth to death. [...] The ‘fable’, by contrast [...] haunts us in dreams, in those waking moments that Joyce called ‘epiphanies’ and Wordsworth ‘spots of time’, in the most intense of our emotions and in the illuminations of reading⁴.

However, like all archetypal structures, the Fable is accessible to us in one additional way – it is revealed by the creative act, which also means poetry, as in the case of the English Romantic poets, including Traherne

¹ J. E. Gillmer, *The archetypal fable: an inquiry into the function of traditional symbolism in the poetry of Edwin Muir* (PhD diss., Rhodes University, 1970), 1, accessed February 12, 2023, https://vital.seals.ac.za/vital/access/manager/Repository/vital:2297?site_name=GlobalView.

² Cf.: Edwin Muir, *The Story and The Fable* (London: Harrap, 1940).

³ Kathleen Reine, *Defending Ancient Springs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 110.

⁴ Cf.: Clive Wilmer, *Story and Fable: Reflections on Edwin Muir*, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/d8835fcb172761b5302fa2b5a436e7d7/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=42474>.

and Wordsworth. Following this lead, Muir is searching for the right poetic symbolism of separateness, and at the same time for a profound connection between the Story and the Fable; one that would at once build the kind of closed narrative form that is fundamental for this arrangement, and allow a two-way interpretation of the questions being discussed and – significantly – would constantly confront the author and the reader with Mystery. Such a possibility is opened by the symbolism and the structure of the labyrinth. After all, the labyrinth represents not only a journey from the entrance to the centre and back, based on the old literary ring composition; it is also a metonym for the external and the internal world, in which, along with the choices of the one traversing it, Truth itself is uncovered or covered. This model of the labyrinth has been created repeatedly through the esoteric teachings in the history of Western philosophy.

In order to contemplate the above issues in the work of Edwin Muir, I suggest the following division: the paper will start with a close look at the context of the poem's creation with reference to the poet's biography, which will be useful in a subsequent hermeneutic analysis of *The Labyrinth* by means of exploring in turn the questions of space, time, and the complex conception of subjectivity. The results will allow the text to be located within the framework of the so-called tragic vision.

1. Edwin Muir – a man in a labyrinth

Edwin Muir (1887–1959) is possibly the most distinguished poet of the Scottish Renaissance. This literary and artistic movement developed in the first half of the twentieth century, and corresponded in a sense to modernist trends, while also seeking to emphasise the specificity of Scottish culture, tradition, and identity. Muir's work does not necessarily achieve all the goals that the artists of the Renaissance set for themselves, and was either overlooked by contemporary critics or considered “traditionalist,” and it was only years later that solid critical analyses of his work began to appear⁵. Nevertheless, out of the three goals of the poets of the Renaissance as suggested by Christopher Murray Grieve (later known by the pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid), he met at least partially the conditions listed in

⁵ The reception of Muir's work is discussed by e.g. Gabriel Insauti. Cf.: Gabriel Insauti, “Myth, Form, and Intertextuality in Edwin Muir,” *International Journal of English Studies* 21, no. 2 (2021): 83–100, <https://digitum.um.es/digitum/bitstream/10201/115649/1/475091-Article%20Text-1794321-1-10-20211226.pdf>.

point three: “To bring Scottish Literature into closer touch with current European tendencies in technique and ideation.”⁶ However, Muir saw this rather as producing creative output of supranational scope, reaching freely for models and inspirations from the Mediterranean literary tradition, even though the sources of his writing and his vision of the world were undeniably to be found on Scottish soil. This is why, in seeking to interpret *The Labyrinth* appropriately, one must not overlook several basic threads in Muir’s complicated biography.

His childhood was spent among the rough nature of the Scottish Orkney Islands, on his family’s farm on the island of Wyre. This location remained in his memory as an image of almost Edenic harmony and peace, and would accompany him for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, the family lost the farm and moved to industrial Glasgow, where, in an atmosphere of sadness and confusion, both of the poet’s parents and his two brothers died within four years. The dark and grey city, difficulties with maintaining employment, and loneliness in an unfamiliar and hostile environment mark this period with a sense of alienation not only from his direct surroundings, but also from the current time, his own era, which encouraged the emergence of a duality in perceiving the world that has already been mentioned. Much later Muir would write in his memoir: “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 for Glasgow.”⁷ And in Glasgow, the life of the year 1901, so deeply foreign to him, was going on at a distance – at least in young Muir’s experience – of at least a century and a half from the time in which he had grown up. This sense of having fallen out of time, worthy of Hamlet himself, would reappear throughout the poet’s later life and work, drawing ever new rings of the labyrinth both in his poetry and in his life. In 1940 he wrote: “I felt like a man with an inefficient torch stumbling

⁶ The goals pointed out by MacDiarmid: “1. To encourage and publish the work of contemporary Scottish poets and dramatists, whether in English, Gaelic, or Braid Scots. 2. To insist upon truer evaluations of the work of Scottish writers [...] and develop the distinctively Scottish range of values. 3. To bring Scottish Literature into closer touch with current European tendencies in technique and ideation.” Cf.: Roderick Watson, “The modern Scottish Literary Renaissance,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 75-87, accessed November, 22, 2022, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9780748636952-008/html>.

⁷ Cf.: <https://mypoeticside.com/poets/edwin-muir-poems>, accessed October, 17, 2022.

through a labyrinth having forgotten where he entered and not knowing where he would come out.”⁸

In the years that followed, Muir’s personal and professional situation became considerably improved. In 1919 he married the linguist and novelist Willa Anderson and worked with her on translations of German-language literature, including Gerhart Hauptmann, Lion Feuchtwanger, and above all on the first translations of the works of Franz Kafka⁹, whose influence is clearly present in his own output. He travelled across Europe¹⁰, and returned to Scotland in 1935. This period was brought to an end by World War II. In the years 1945-48 Muir held the post of Director of the British Institute in Prague, and this stay in the centre of Europe, marked not only by the still-fresh memories of Nazi occupation, but also by the brutal occupation by the Soviet Union¹¹, was extremely difficult for him. In 1949 he was offered a similar position in Rome, but came back to Britain only a year later and experienced a nervous breakdown, a period of depression and apathy, which he would later refer to as a “dead pocket of life.”¹² He would go back to the continent again, and in 1955 fate would lead him to the USA, where he lectured for a year at Harvard. Muir died in the small English village of Swaffham Prior near Cambridge in 1959.

The poem *The Labyrinth* was written during Muir’s stay in post-war Prague, and lent its title to the entire volume published in 1949¹³. The circumstances of its creation are significant enough to merit recalling, especially that they point to a close affiliation with Kafka’s *The Castle*. In a radio broadcast from September 1952, Muir remembered it this way:

The Labyrinth [...] started itself in a castle in Czechoslovakia, which had been presented as a home for writers by the Benes government after the war.

⁸ Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (Edinburgh, London: Cannon Gate, 1993), 278. Partially quoted in Insausti, *Myth, Form and Intertextuality*, 87.

⁹ The translation of *The Castle* was published in England in 1930 by Martin Secker.

¹⁰ In 1921 Muir and Willa came to Prague for about six months, and entered the literary milieu there, although it seems unlikely that Muir was introduced to Kafka himself.

¹¹ In his autobiography Muir noted: “The Czechs as I had known them were a noisy, somewhat unruly people; but now they hardly spoke. Russian soldiers were everywhere, short, powerful, hairy men who seemed to be lost in an alien city and only half-aware of the power they possessed and the fear they inspired.” Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography*, 251–252.

¹² Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography*, quoted in: Christopher Wiseman, *Beyond the Labyrinth. A study of Edwin Muir’s poetry* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1978), 67.

¹³ Edwin Muir, *The Labyrinth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949).

This was a year or two before the Communists came into power. Thinking there of the old story of the labyrinth of Cnossos and the journey of Theseus through it, I felt that this was an image of human life with its errors and ignorance and endless intricacy. In the poem I made the labyrinth stand for all this. But I wanted also to give an image of the life of the gods, to whom all that is confusion down here is clear and harmonious as seen eternally¹⁴.

This juxtaposition of two realities – the safe and changeless world of the gods against the chaos, fear, and sense of confusion whose metonym is the eponymous labyrinth – is found as early as in the first part of the poem, framing the paradoxical space between these two worlds, where the vagaries of time, the subject of the poem, its protagonist and prisoner, will wander, doubtless standing in for the Author himself.

2. space/time and an Absent One - Ariadne

As a structure that is by definition spatial, and at the same time one that gains temporality through the journey of the one moving through it, the labyrinth proved to be the perfect medium to transfer not only symbolism rooted in culture and literary tradition, but also Muir's personal experience as someone who changed his location and way of living repeatedly, his specific "rootlessness," "a host of names, dates, and events," "incessant wandering from one country to another" that his biographers and critics would go on to write about¹⁵. It is therefore no incident that the semiotic wealth of the labyrinth is present throughout Muir's poetry¹⁶. However, while the poet's earlier works often employed archetypal images and metaphors of journey¹⁷ in the collection entitled *The Labyrinth*, this journey would coil around itself in a ring-like composition of paths and phrases; as Rybicka puts it, "[I]t is a quintessence of closed, dangerous

¹⁴ Cf.: *The Poems of Edwin Muir*, "Chapbook" BBC, 03.09.1952, Radio.

¹⁵ Cf.: Frederick Garber, "Edwin Muir: Man and Poet by Peter Butter," *Contemporary Literature* 9, no. 3 (1968), 423–426, 424; accessed October 7, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1207813>.

¹⁶ Cf.: Brian Keble, "In Time's Despite: On the Poetry of Edwin Muir," *Sewanee Review* 82 (1973), 644. (Cf. pp. 633–658).

¹⁷ Journey is the dominant motif in his later volumes of poetry (*Variations on a Time Theme* 1934, *The Narrow Place* 1937, *Journeys and Places* 1943, *The Voyage and Other Poems* 1946, *The Labyrinth* 1949 and in his last book of poetry *One Foot in Eden* 1956.)

and complicated space, which questions traditional, common-sense spatial relationships.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, in the volume’s titular poem the labyrinthine structure contains many more layers as well as interpenetrating meanings and forms. Their basis is constituted by the paradoxical arrangements of space and temporality, which are a direct product of the very idea of the labyrinth, with accumulations of intertextual references and fluctuations of symbols. Muir successfully inscribes his poem into the long tradition of the labyrinthine form in the arrangement of the contents themselves, and within the syntax of his sentences.”¹⁹ As the author himself emphasised,²⁰ the first sentence of *The Labyrinth* takes up thirty five verses of convoluted phrases, full of stopped rhythms and brackets, where “[t]he period moves forward like a winding road where you can never see the end: the predicate of the main sentence is constantly eluded or deferred.”²¹ The sentences that follow the first are nineteen, six, and three verses long respectively, with this diminishment in the length of the sentences mirroring the ever-shorter rings of the labyrinth itself towards its centre.

This labyrinthine syntax structure interacts with the complexities of the message, repetitions that resemble spiral coils, capturing ever new meanings and references. At their basis is the rather loose, but clearly perceptible ring composition, characteristic for great antic poetry²² and numerous dramas, as well as some of the books of the Old Testament and, of course, the structure of the classic labyrinth. In accordance with its assumptions, the poem opens with an image of exiting the “twilight nothingness” in which the protagonist fails to recognize himself, and ends with a return to the same space: “I did not know the place.”

The first, “ascending,” part of the ring is defined by the triple repetition of formulas of exiting the maze, at the beginning, in the middle, and right

¹⁸ Elżbieta Rybicka, “Labirynt: temat i model konstrukcyjny. Od Berenta do Młodej Prozy” [*Labyrinth: a theme and a construction model. From Berent to Young Prose*], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 88, no. 3 (1997), 70.

¹⁹ Cf.: Penelope Reed Doob, “Textual Labyrinths; Toward a Labyrinthine Aesthetics,” in: *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity Through Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019), 192–222.

²⁰ “The poem begins with a very long sentence, deliberately labyrinthine to give the mood.” Muir in: Margery Palmer McCulloch, “European Influences: Edwin Muir, Kafka, and the Spirit of Italy,” *Complutense Journal of English Studies* 22 (2014), 74, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3ccf/cf12f0d9f8182fb18fe6bedc4bc10e457855.pdf>.

²¹ Insausti, *Myth, Form and Intertextuality*, 87.

²² Cf.: Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2007); Erling B. Holtsmark, “Ringcompositions and the Persae of Aeschylus,” *Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies* 45, no. 1 (1970), 5–23.

before the turning point of the poem. There, a certain slowing of pace takes place, an arresting of motion which allows a distance, a look from a philosophical perspective at the efforts of the protagonist, Sisyphus-like in their nature. At the same time, this is the moment of revelation of the almost Lacanian Realness of what is there and what we wish to veil, drown out by means of “haste and delay”: full awareness of the nature of the world, which we are unable to leave behind. Muir marks this moment of distanced reflection – the centre of the ring composition – with the very word “centre.”

[...]No need to hurry. Haste and delay are equal
 In this one world, for there's no exit, none,
 No place to come to, and you'll end where you are,
 Deep in the centre of the endless maze.

In accordance with the principles of a ring composition, this is where the turn occurs towards the second, in this case much shorter, “descending” part of the ring, in which in reply to the descriptions of exiting the labyrinth in the ascending part, we get a triple repetition of parallel explicit definitions of the illusory nature of the world outside the maze (illusion, lie, deceit), leading the protagonist and the reader to the terrifying ignorance of the final phase of the poem.

Within this rigid formal framework, a dynamic relationship of contradictory signs and concepts is constructed, enmeshed in the great oppositions that sit at the fundamentals of Western culture: light and darkness, good and evil, fall and salvation, all focused around the symbolism of Eden and of the maze.

Although, as Wieseman puts it, this is “Muir’s slow struggle with the forces of evil played out through the combat of symbols,” the struggle is never the result of sharp divisions and one-dimensional interpretations. The hero is moving as if in a labyrinth of mirrors, where successive reflections crest like a wave and change, and at times distort the perspective, creating spiralling fields of meaning. Along with such wave, the labyrinth becomes monstified as a maze²³ where “navigating is a trial-and-error

²³ The maze is usually seen as a specific type of closed labyrinthine structure and found its major iconographic representations in the age of the Renaissance. In English, the word itself is also a verb, meaning stupefy and daze, as well as bewilder, perplex. Its fundamental function is also well expressed in the German language, in which maze is *Irrgarten* or *Irrweg*, which means a disquieting garden in which one is lost and wandering, or a “bad,” “erroneous” way.

process;²⁴ it becomes Hades, but also returns towards images of the Great Labyrinth, above which the visages of gods are reflected in “[p]loughing and harvesting and life and death,” and whose rings are drawn not only by its dark corridors but also “bird-tracks in the air.”²⁵ The reader follows the protagonist through “overlapping centres of meaning, where oppositions are emphasized and resolved in a completely non-logical manner.”²⁶ This dynamism of symbols and images also includes a network of similarly intertwined intertextual references.

The most obvious of these reaches into our cultural memory of the Minoan myth and the labyrinth in which certain permanent elements remain: the possibility of fatal error, the presence of monstrosity, and hope offered by the thread that guides us towards the light. This is, however, a vision not entirely in accord with what archaeology tells us, therefore the dynamics of the structure of the labyrinth adopted in the poem merit detailed consideration. In spite of the common readings of the myth of Theseus, in the Cretan labyrinth, the corridor stretched before the wanderer, so there was no possibility of error here, or of choice. The only choice is the decision to enter the labyrinth itself, the striving, the pre-tragic virtue of courage in the face of the Inevitable. Likewise, the Greek labyrinth does not constitute an allogical tangle of paths like that which Karl Kerényi mentions²⁷, where one loses one’s purpose and wanders until death. In its principle, it remains cosmos – the Order.

Edwin Muir, aware of these features of the classic labyrinth, uses this ambiguity and broadens it through the multidimensionality of “another ordering,” which brings the image presented in the poem closer to the modernist notion of the aforementioned maze: the modern, or “northern”

Cf.: Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, https://monoskop.org/images/b/b3/Eco_Umberto_Semiotics_and_the_Philosophy_of_Language_1986.pdf

²⁴ Allan Parsons, *Porphyrian tree, labyrinth and rhizome; epistemology*, accessed November 11, 2022, <http://sites.google.com/site/praxisandteche/Home/architecture/knowledge/taxonomy/porphyrian-tree-labyrinth-and-rhizome>.

²⁵ The maze, broadened to the size of the entire human world is in the poem, as Catherine Tzouganatou presents it in her work, the final stage of the evolution of their symbolism in Muir’s work. It encompasses not only temporality, but also “the present, the past, and the fable.” Cf.: Catherine Tzouganatou, *Labyrinth of Edwin Muir* (University of Montana, 1955), 25; accessed January 4, 2021, <https://scholarworks/umt.edu/etd/2802>.

²⁶ Wiseman, *Beyond*, 73.

²⁷ Karl Kerényi, *Dionizos. Archetyp życia niezniszczalnego*, trans. Ireneusz Kania (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Aletheia, 1997), 92.

as William Henry Matthews suggests²⁸, version of the labyrinth. Its multicursal structure becomes the equivalent of a riddle, in its ancient meaning of a dangerous tool of the gods looking down on human efforts from up high²⁹. The deadly double edge of the truth being revealed is an old weapon of the riddle. Here, the fate of Oedipus deserves mention, the story of the limping king who entered Darkness in search of the truth³⁰. There, cognition means transcending the illusory nature of things and revealing their dangerous, hidden essence; things in their most profound nature prove to be and not to be the same, opening – as in Muir’s writing – the gates of the tragic based on paradox³¹.

Muir, inheritor and participant of overlapping cultural traditions – the Christian tradition, with its Mediterranean roots, and the Celtic, in which there exists an intuition of the unity of things – at the same never loses faith in the possibility of a positive solution to the riddle of the labyrinth; not so much of finding, as of miraculously discovering an exit into the light, towards a vision in which reside the gods of the harmony of everything that happens. One cannot but agree with Cuthbert that “one of the most important aspects of this metaphor is that it suggests that [...] there is a way through the myriad of pathways and junctions. The challenge is to rediscover our individual and collective paths and accept that we must retrace them in order to free ourselves.”³² Continuing this thinking, Muir offers another level in the structure of the labyrinth, in which today we might find the unharnessed openness of the rhizome³³, extending and growing together with the world.

²⁸ Cf.: William Henry Matthews, *Mazes and Labyrinths: a general account of their history and development* (Library of Alexandria, USA, 2020), chapter XX.

²⁹ These links are pointed out by Giorgio Colli. Cf.: Giorgio Colli, *Narodziny filozofii*, trans. Stanisław Kasprzyskiak (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1997).

³⁰ Having solved the riddle of the Sphinx, Oedipus is punished by Apollo for having competed with a god. The tragedy of Oedipus is thus grounds for the search for the truth and meaning of things in the realm of the “shadow” which at the same time turns out to be the realm of the tragic.

³¹ According to Peter Szondi, paradox constitutes the heart of the tragic. Cf.: Peter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

³² Cuthbert Alexander John, *Eternity’s unhidden shore: time in the writings of Edwin Muir (1887-1959)* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2012). Glasgow Theses Service, 206.

³³ Deleuze and Guattari introduced into the theory of labyrinths a new concept, *rhizome*, denoting a decentralized, tangled up structure. “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, intermezzo. The tree (the hierarchic labyrinthine structures, M.K.) is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance [...]” Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” in: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 25.

[...]all the roads
 That run through the noisy world, deceiving streets
 That meet and part and meet, and rooms that open
 Into each other — and never a final room
 [...]
 The smooth sea-tracks that open and close again,
 Tracks undiscoverable, indecipherable,
 Paths on the earth and tunnels underground,
 And bird-tracks in the air — all seemed a part
 Of the great labyrinth [...]

Significantly for the complex signification of the poem, in this rhizomatic approach, the labyrinth, a space of the “twilight nothingness” mentioned before, sounding a warm note of childhood, gains the fullness of life, its vegetal exuberance, and relative in-Finity³⁴. The world of our individual existence, which – in accordance with the Platonic vision of things, formulated by the poet – is an illusion, a dream, a flawed copy, at the same time appears as infused with warmth and light, in its harmony of oppositions fulfilling the plans of the gods, whose

[...] eternal dialogue was peace
 Where all these things were woven; and this our life
 Was as a chord deep in that dialogue,
 As easy utterance of harmonious words [...]

Although in this beautiful image echoes of the nothingness symbolized by the maze always resonate (“There have been times when I have heard my footsteps /Still echoing in the maze”), in the notion of the great labyrinth employed here, the Story touches the archetypic Fable, constantly repeated in our individual existences. As Nicole Blair puts it, “[W]hile a maze is “designed to trap and confound,” the labyrinth “serves as a meditative space [...]”³⁵In this spiritual space one may hear the echoes of one of the

³⁴ Eco, among others, points to the following features of a rhizomatic structure: “(a) Every point of the rhizome can and must be connected with every other point. (b) There are no points or positions in a rhizome; there are only lines (this feature is doubtful: intersecting lines make points [...]) (c) The rhizome has its own outside with which it makes another rhizome; therefore, a rhizomatic whole has neither outside nor inside.” Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 81.

³⁵ Nicole Blair, *Pan's Labyrinth: Finding the Center*, accessed March 22, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/4483398/Pans_Labyrinth_Finding_the_Center.

longest pieces in the book *The Labyrinth*, entitled *The Journey Back*,³⁶ in which we read of a journey through time, form, and beings, a story typical of medieval Celtic literature.

For once I was all
That you can name, a child, a woman, a flower,
[...]
I have stood and watched where many have stood
And seen the calamities of an age.

This vision of the eternal wheel of time and eternity, the recurrence of the myth, may be found in Taliesin, as *Taliesin Ben Beirdd*, Chief of Bards³⁷, writing most likely in the 6th century, who, again like Muir centuries later, had “star knowledge from the beginning of Time.”³⁸

In Muir’s narrative the experience of the harmony of the Great Labyrinth is an epiphanic event, towards which one is led by the path of exit from the area of darkness. It is formed again by the structure of the labyrinth itself, subjected to metamorphicity. Muir finds in this a potential similar in its effect to the Baltic labyrinths, referred to – interestingly in the context of Muir’s piece – as Goddess. Here the exit path naturally and gently skips the tedious rings; it is a broad opening, flowing directly from the very centre towards the exterior, towards a rebirth.³⁹

[...] the maze itself [...]
swept me smoothly to its enemy,
The lovely world [...]

For Muir this is a journey through another dimension, outlined not so much in space as through a vision of a reality lasting outside time, in which the “gods” are seated “[h]igh in the sky above the untroubled sea.” It is therefore delineated by the Platonic perception of time as stretching

³⁶ Edwin Muir, “The Journey Back,” 141.

³⁷ “I have been in many shapes /Before I assumed a constant form./I have been a narrow sword,/A drop in the air,/A shining bright star,/A letter among words, /In the book of origins.[...]” Taliesin, *Cad Goddeu*, in: John Matthews, *Taliesin, The Last Celtic Shaman* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2002), 293.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 299.

³⁹ “The Baltic pattern is the oldest and only recorded design which does not terminate in the center.[...] [It] is also likened to a womb, with the path walker being the seed for conception that effortlessly exits towards birth,” accessed April 9, 2023, <https://sagemountain.org/labyrinth/>.

between what is eternal, resisting change, and what is passing and flawed. At the same time, however, the temporality as such in all of its layers is filtered through the powers of the psyche; it emerges from and immerses itself back into the realm of the dream (“once in a dream or trance I saw the gods”), it speeds up or freezes (“For in the maze time had not been with me;”) or casts the protagonist beyond the awareness of time, in the very eye of the spinning cyclone of things:

I had strayed, it seemed, past sun and season and change,
 Past rest and motion, for I could not tell
 At last if I moved or stayed; the maze itself
 Revolved around me on its hidden axis

And it is this moment of remaining outside time that becomes a transition point towards the “lovely world” in the eternal recurrence of things, in another revolution of the labyrinth.

It is worth remembering that Muir’s perception of reality leads to a slow but significant shifting of accents as part of the same arrangement, perfected meticulously over years, almost like a single work written over the author’s lifetime. He felt, as he put it, “daunted [...] by the fear that I am keeping on writing the same poem.”⁴⁰ Cuthbert reminds us that although the original aim of Muir’s writing was “[to] make clear the pattern of my life as a human being existing in space and moving through time,”⁴¹ in his later output his attention focuses rather on the paradoxical complexity of human existence in the beauty of its impermanence, in the ineffability of its mystery.

Muir had come to recognize the value of the ‘mystery’ on its own terms over the authenticity of any recognizable pattern. He had developed an appreciation of the discordant harmony of life, the dialectic vitality that can no more be transposed into a single musical score than it can be summed up in a poem or an autobiography⁴².

⁴⁰ The fragment of the letter to Norman MacCaig from April 1958 quoted in: Peter H. Butter, “The Evolution of some late poems by Edwin Muir,” *Scottish Literary Journal* 24, no. 2 (1997), 79, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1292873666?fromopenview=true&pq-origsite=gscholar>.

⁴¹ Muir, quoted in: Alexander John Cuthbert, *Eternity’s unhidden shore: time in the writings of Edwin Muir (1887–1959)* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2012), 216, Glasgow Theses Service <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/>.

⁴² *Ibid*, 216.

In *The Labyrinth*, these perspectives are superimposed, creating a fascinating melting pot of interpenetrating images in which the past is visualized as memory and the presence as a chaos of illusion, an endlessly recurring dream. Butter recalls Muir's words, who saw the only possibility for endowing the present with meaning in memory.

'The present' Muir says. 'is a question perpetually running back to find its answer at a place where all is over [...] We cannot see life whole until it has been placed in some kind of past where it discovers its true shape.'⁴³

The plane of reference here is the atemporal vision of harmonious reality ("It is a world, perhaps; but there's another"). Both the past and the vision of the world of the gods are luminous areas in which time lasts rather than runs, being at the same time the real time. In this spiral harmony the future has no reason to come into existence. *The Labyrinth*, like many other of the poet's works, is "journeying to the edge of time in the past rather than the future."⁴⁴

The present, on the other hand, and its dark echoes, a sombre vision of the labyrinth, situated between memory from before time and faith in the Platonic ideal level of being, is subject to the unpredictable effects of temporality, with the proviso that time is a lie, an absence directed towards itself⁴⁵. Consequently, we follow the protagonist into an absurd city with multistorey streets and nooks worthy of Pirandello, with dungeons in which a bloodied bull is lying, and we descend into a Kafkaesque internal time of a nightmare.

This reference, introduced consciously by Muir – who was, after all, not just a poet, but also a pioneering translator of Kafka's work into English – enables a considerably broader reading of the poem, introducing the search for the truth of existence in what appears to be a place deprived of it. It opens a window, a Heideggerian clearing, in which one can sense the truth. Gabriel Insausti sees the reference to *The Castle* as a central message of *The Labyrinth*.

⁴³ Peter H. Butter, "George Mackay Brown and Edwin Muir," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 17 (1987), 16.

⁴⁴ Butter quotes a fragment of an unfinished piece from the period: "Thoughts that fly to the other side of time/The back of the world, the lonely tumbling waters/ [...] Not far outside the crumbling walls of Eden." Cf.: P. H. Butter, *The Evolution of Some Late Poems*, 79.

⁴⁵ It seems appropriate to mention that in Muir's earlier works, the maze is also an area subject to the past, equipped with temporality, which we are unable to exit. Cf.: Tzougatou, *Labyrinth of Edwin Muir*, 40.

The whole meaning of this poem—that the maze of life is a path and the path is in turn a maze, but the poet nevertheless can have a glimpse of an outer or transcendent reality—might be described therefore as “Kafkaesque” and could be linked with Kafka’s struggle for sense⁴⁶.

In accordance with this assumption, close to Kafka,⁴⁷ the poet moves through the maze carrying with him the memory of another, immaculate world. This peculiar form of memory marks the scale of time. Memory that lasts longer than individual existence, swinging round in a reflection of the ancient idea of the eternal return of things, reaches on the one hand towards the Platonic apriority of knowledge, and on the other, towards images of Muir’s childhood in the Orkneys. Yet it only becomes linear in the rumble of the moving labyrinth. And here, once again, we see another return to the Minoan myth. At this point it is worth recalling Rybicka’s brilliant text, in which she remarks: “One way to discover the source meaning of the work may be an epiphany or a journey ‘toward the within’ of the text, and then the helpful thread of Ariadne is embodied by the myth.”⁴⁸ In Muir, the ordering function of the myth is taken over by memory. It is memory that guides the protagonist towards the exit, becoming the glimmering thread offered to Theseus (the *alter ego* of Dionysus) by the moon princess Ariadne, although Ariadne herself does not become a figure in Muir’s labyrinth.

And although her function is performed by the vision tying temporality together as a ceaseless Now of the gods, in the order of the myth the position is occupied by her, Ariadne, or rather the great Cretan goddess, Arihagne, “absolutely pure,”⁴⁹ Aridela, “most clear” or “most shining.”⁵⁰ In the eternal spiral of being she remains, as the Lady of the Labyrinth, the luminous sister of Minotaur (who, by the way, shines within the Labyrinth as Asterion or Asterios, where *aster* signifies star), and at the same time – apart from those Kafkaesque “stairways and corridors and antechambers” – she is waiting for the return of the one who has apparently left the labyrinth,

⁴⁶ Insausti, *Myth, Form and Intertextuality*, 88.

⁴⁷ Muir wrote thus on Kafka: “In an age obsessed by the time sense, or, as it is called, the historical sense, he has resurrected and made available for contemporary use the timeless story, the archetypal story, in which is the source of all stories.” Cuthbert, *Eternity’s unhidden shore*, 200.

⁴⁸ Rybicka, *Labirynt: temat i model konstrukcyjny*, 71.

⁴⁹ “Ariadne” is derived from Cretan-Greek *arihagne*, absolutely pure. Kerényi, *Dionizos*, 89.

⁵⁰ Cf.: Ninada Vinci Nichols, *Ariadne Lives* (London: Teaneck, 1995), 152.

to hand to him the thread once again and invite him into the interior. Insausti refers directly to Kafka when he points out the impossibility of ever completing the journey: “The Labyrinth” recycles Kafka’s motif of the ironic impossibility of the hero to get to his destination, as in “Before the Law,” “The Castle,” “A Message from the Palace,” and other stories.”⁵¹

And yet some ways do exist, interestingly, even within the message of the Minoan myth itself. Kerenyi reminds us that Ariadne also means an enclosed space within whose centre there is death and a space of dance, which, in its turn, as *kentron*⁵² is the place of a sacrificial ritual. In this reading, both memory and an intuitive vision open the gates of the labyrinth through death,⁵³ revealed by the concentric dance led by Theseus, known in ancient Greece as *geranos*⁵⁴. The *geranos* or crane dance, through the motion of dancers holding each other’s hands, draws the labyrinthine spirals of life, death⁵⁵ and renewed life, known to world mythologies and employed by Jungian psychoanalysis in describing the processes of constructing the Self. It is therefore worth exploring in the following section how the speaking “self” is represented in *The Labyrinth*.

3. Centre or the subject and an Absent One – Theseus

In the classic labyrinth, and Muir is referring to one here, there were certain fixed elements. The first is the assignation of space, mentioned above, making it at once closed and partially open, deprived of light and motion, and consequently deprived of time, which is to say: existing in the darkness and – simultaneously – non-existent. The deviation of this paradoxical balance towards motion and existence, and consequently light, is a function of the one who enters the labyrinth. It is only then that the other fixed elements become activated: entrance/exit, the possible interchangeability of directions of motion, and, above all, the Centre. As a

⁵¹ Insausti, *Myth, Form and Intertextuality*, 88.

⁵² Cf.: Kerenyi, *Dionizos*, 71.

⁵³ The sign of the Cretan labyrinth was frequently placed next to burial chambers.

⁵⁴ “Geranos was a chthonic maze dance, around a horned altar, in honor of a female divinity. [...] The geranos form had a tremendous influence on the Greek dance, and may be traced through Roman, mediaeval, and Renaissance times down to the present.” Lillian Brady Lawler, “The Geranos Dance: A New Interpretation,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 77 (1946), 112, accessed April 11, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/283449?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents.

⁵⁵ Cf.: Lucie Šimůnková, *Dance in Ancient Greece*, 32, accessed April 15, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/36534599/Dance_in_ancient_Greece_text.

timeless, metaphysical space within the time measured out by the journey – it is the Centre that maintains the motion of the paths spinning around it. This is why in some labyrinths, the centre was additionally stamped with a sign invoking the ultimate reality, which could be the head of a monster, or, on the contrary, the sun, the Hindu swastika, the Christian symbol of the dove, the outline of Jerusalem, or the representation of Theseus with the Minotaur, as was the case with the cathedral in Chartres, to which I will return later.

Muir uses the symbolic power of the centre, again building a complex structure of interpenetrating meanings, often questioning the logic of the myth. Above all, in the drama of the life and death struggle between the hero and what is monstrous, the first lines of the poem takes place “everywhere and nowhere,” on the unclear level of things – on the margins of time, space, and, above all, the identity of the hero:

After the straw ceased rustling and the bull
Lay dead upon the straw and I remained,
Blood-splashed, if dead or alive I could not tell
In the twilight nothingness [...]

Time becomes immobilised, the bull’s body lies abandoned “upon the straw” in “nothingness,” and as a consequence it appears that the Centre is constituted by a “blood-splashed [...] I,” remaining at once alive and dead, even though the task of the myth was to order life and death through separation. It is therefore interesting to trace the consequences of Muir’s decision.

Muir opens his work with a moment that suggests the beginning of a certain narrative in which he “emerged from the labyrinth” like the solar hero, only, contrary to the myth, to return to it in the end (“Last night I dreamt I was in the labyrinth,/And woke far on. I did not know the place”). And how could we miss the fundamental difference with the heroic monomyth, in which the journey “begins in the human world, ventures aided and abetted by helpers and hinderers into the Otherworld where it [...] performs a task and changes the journeyer and finally returns to this world.”⁵⁶ Muir’s protagonist reverses this spatial arrangement,

⁵⁶ Corelyn F. Senn, “Journeying as Religious Education: the Shaman, the Hero, the Pilgrim, and the Labyrinth Walker,” *Religious Education* 97, no. 2 (2002), 125.

and not only remains imprisoned in the darkness of illusion, but is also deprived of the possibility of performing the basic functions of the hero, whose purpose is to subdue and integrate chaos, to establish an order of things, and, consequently, to guarantee the survival of the community.

The mythical hero thus returns to the world of people after struggling with the one who came to face him from the darkness of the corridors, and whose blood – according to the eternal rules of the heroic monomyth – should not only bring to the victor power, fertility, and full participation in the world, but should also seal the gates of the labyrinth again. Another name for these gifts was the “kingdom” that Goux wrote about⁵⁷ – a community of nature, humans, and their gods, spread all over the chaosmos, the realm of darkness interpenetrating with the realm of light. Campbell spoke of this in the context of the “Master of Two Worlds.”⁵⁸ This means that the victory over monstrosity, accepting it into the limits of our own self, similar to the Jungian interpretation, is much more than simply removing the threat. The gifts that were bestowed on the hero through his clash with the “monstrous twin,”⁵⁹ that is the new identity, with the power and fertility assigned to it, were almost literal – like in the case of the mythical Siegfried, or the blood of Medusa, raising the dead: a transfusion of reviving blood.

In Muir’s version, the anonymous subject of the poem seems to receive none of these boons. There is no monster but an ordinary dead animal, whose blood has been spilled in an absurd act of violence, and the killer, stained with that blood, remains suspended in a dream vision. What is more, emerging from the labyrinth, this unstable “I” immediately draws a path of return through its own doubleness, and at the same time through the antithetic character of its two figurations: “I’d meet myself [...] myself or my ghost.” In the inverted order of the tale, the ring composition of the piece pushes them, both in the initial and in the final verses, back into the trap, the un-Reality⁶⁰. On the other hand, in the central point of the ring being described above, the “I” and its “bad spirit” – a voice mocked by the

⁵⁷ Cf.: Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus, Philosophe*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 7-8.

⁵⁸ Cf.: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

⁵⁹ Cf.: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 160.

⁶⁰ By the principle of paradoxical assumptions of oppositions, so significant to Muir, places of powerful tensions, one might develop here a Lacanian analysis.

voice in the schizophrenic picture of the psyche – move in parallel ways in an almost intimate proximity.

I'd tell myself, "You need not hurry. This
Is the firm good earth. All roads lie free before you."
But my bad spirit would sneer, "No, do not hurry."

At this turning point of the poem, the monstrosity that was lacking in the carcass of the bull reveals its permanent presence as another "I," a demonic shadow, a disfigured echo born out of the darkness of the labyrinth. Muir thus not only leaves out the figure of Ariadne: in the tale, written in the first person, we also will not find her ungrateful lover, the killer of the Minotaur, Theseus, even though in the original manuscript his name constituted the title of the poem. Abandoning the name is no accident; in the realm of the "twilight nothingness," "I" functions at the same time as No One and Everyone; an eternal representation of human fate, illuminated by the cold light of nihilism. Muir's choice here is significant in simultaneously connecting the narrative at the level of the myth with the level of the fable. As the eminent scholar of myths Walter Burkert wrote, "[A] clear [...] indication of difference between myth and tale is the appearance of names.[...] From the viewpoint of tale structure, the persons are blank entities, left nameless [...]"⁶¹.

But while on the level of the Fable everything that is, including the human "I," is part of one fabric ("Where all these things were woven; and this our life/Was as a chord deep in that dialogue"), the situation of the poem's speaker is closer to the subject of modern philosophy, standing beyond the dynamics of phenomena. The conception of the subject growing out of the thought of Kant, and then out of phenomenology, invariably places it beyond being, outside of being. Consequently, as Levinas puts it:

There is in me a possibility of solitude, despite [...] the world's presence for me. Precisely as a thought I am a monad, an always possible monad in an always possible remove from my involvements. I am always in a process of going toward the whole in which I am, for I am always outside, entrenched in my thoughts⁶².

⁶¹ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 25.

⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. R. Cohen, M. B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 84.

The subject, just like the subject of Muir's poem, takes upon itself the task of carrying the whole that is Being, and subjectivity appears to be the power to grant rights and establish the idea of the world to which it can itself refer. However, Being – as the great Outside – remains an uncertainty, and things and matters appear to us “in multiplicity of aspects. In principle, each new aspect can contradict and thus destroy what seemed already acquired.”⁶³ The subject, especially one mediated by poetry, is therefore left with a specific form of “vigilance – awakening rising up within awakening,”⁶⁴ which enables one to notice that which is Other to the subject – the world. In *The Labyrinth*, however, these successive attempts at awakening (“I [...] woke far on. I did not know the place”), ultimately become intertwined into a Kafkaesque immersion of the multiplying “I” into the obscurity and fragmentariness of perception through the ceaselessly recurring state of dreaming. Muir's Everyman is one who struggles, wading through dream visions, and awakens in the internal labyrinth, at the same time dreaming of another world, sensing a superior harmony of things. Thus, “[A] maze does not need a Minotaur: it is its own Minotaur: in other words, the Minotaur is the visitor's trial-and-error process.”⁶⁵

So if we accept that in the splitting space and temporality of *The Labyrinth* the only waypoint, the only centre, constitutes the drifting, unstable “I,” we must remember that in accordance with the paradoxical logic of the poem, and its author's own convictions, this maze remains at once a labyrinth, which “[u]nlike a maze, [...] is about finding, not losing, your way [...]”⁶⁶ The labyrinth exists precisely in order to defend and shield the centre as the point of direct encounter with sanctity and absolute reality⁶⁷.

Moreover, as the labyrinth's centre, the split “I,” the mental space of the mythical clash of opposing forces, is also the space of the *arrheton*–the sinister⁶⁸ secret of life, death, and revival, inaccessible to language.

⁶³ Levinas, *Discovering*, 83.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶⁵ Eco, *Semiotics*, 81.

⁶⁶ Del Toro in: Kuhu Tanvir, *Pan's Labyrinth: The Labyrinth of History*, 3, accessed May, 1, 2023, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26617727_Pan's_Labyrinth_The_Labyrinth_of_History.

⁶⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii* (Warszawa: Aletheia, 1966), 376.

⁶⁸ The entry for *arrheton* in Sud's dictionary (the Byzantine lexicon) gives a meaning related to the word 'sinister', referring to Sophocles' drama Ajax.

Considering Muir's creative instruments, we should remember that this "space" is to be found not only in myth and in Greek mystery cults, but also in Christianity,⁶⁹ in the Christian idea of the spiritual metanoia at the centre of the labyrinth of things divine and human. It is no accident that labyrinths were created on the floorings of Gothic cathedrals. In the most famous, the Chartres cathedral, doubtless familiar to Muir, the labyrinth includes a window and the light falling through the great stained glass of the rosette, connecting the earth with the heavens⁷⁰. Perhaps we should agree with the eminent Muir scholar Wiseman, who writes: "Muir's poem is not about the labyrinth [...] rather it *enacts* the symbolic journey through the Dark in terms of the vision of Light."⁷¹

Final remarks – toward tragic vision

As I conclude my explorations, I wish to pay attention to the possibility that emerges from them of placing the poetic message of *The Labyrinth* in a much broader context, namely in the current of the tragic that reappears throughout almost the entire history of the culture derived from the Mediterranean traditions. The distorted mythical journey through the labyrinth described here – which is at the same time a metonymic allegory of external reality, with reference to Muir's biography, and a fragmentary map of wanderings through the dark corridors of the psyche, between the memory of an Edenic past and a premonition of the harmony of the divine world – has all the features of the tragic vision in its symbiotic relation with the Christian tradition.

In the history of research on the tragic from around the start of the previous century we have been paying more and more attention not so much to tragedy constituting the foundation of a considerable part of

⁶⁹ Platten writes about Muir's religiosity thus: "As with any number of poets who embrace Christianity, there is a very significant element of struggle with the forces of both dark and light." Stephen Platten, "One Foot in Eden. Edwin Muir and Religion Outside Paradise," *The Way* 51, no. 4 (2012), 61.

⁷⁰ "The rosette in the western window [...] is equal in size to the labyrinth. The centre of the labyrinth, the entrance of the cathedral and centre of the rosette form a triangle, the line between the two centers forming the hypotenuse. The horizontal line between the entrance and the centre of the labyrinth represents the earth while the vertical line between the entrance and the rosette in the window represents heaven. The hypotenuse between the rosette in the window and the rosette in the centre of the labyrinth represent the human link between heaven and earth." Jelle Spijker Sr., *The Labyrinth*, trans. and ed. by Jelle Spijker Jr., 2008, 7; accessed May 12, 2019, <https://sites.ualberta.ca/~cbidwell/SITES/Labyrinth.pdf>.

⁷¹ Wiseman, *Beyond the Labyrinth*, 66.

post-Kantian philosophy, but rather to a specific way of perceiving the world – towards the so-called tragic vision. Tragic vision is linked with specific conceptions derived from Miguel de Unamuno's proposals which were especially characteristic of the previous century, but today's scholars search for its traces in the long development of Western thought – both philosophic, emanating from works of literature, and that which we consider the domain of theology – often broadening its scope so much⁷² that it becomes possible to conclude that “true metaphysical speech is always tragic.”⁷³ This intuition of the immanent tragic note of the human world concerns, as Muir's work emphasizes, the way of experiencing existence itself, the *praxis* of life, but above all the realm of cognition. The latter is marked in the poem by three elements: a yearning for the truth, the barrier of representation (illusion, lie, deceit), and “the tragic motif of illusions concerning the human capacity for obtaining it”⁷⁴ that Iwona Lorenc wrote about. In *The Labyrinth*, the mythical solar hero, Theseus, will never leave its murky corridors, and in “twilight nothingness” will lose his name, living in the *limes* of time, space, and his own identity – in “constant incompleteness.”⁷⁵

However, while – as Prokopski claims – in the philosophy of existence the tragic is born “because of nothingness lurking (at us),” and our existence appears to be “finite in the ‘labyrinth of darkness,’ [...] in the finitude of the labyrinth of the world, where no path leads to the exit,”⁷⁶ the stance offered by the ‘tragic theologies’ is somewhat different, as it introduces the tragic into the realm of the Christian vision of reality. Today we find their elements present in the thought of St. Augustine,⁷⁷ John Chrysostom, and even at the very root, in the Gospel of St. Mark⁷⁸. Their traces are also

⁷² Cf.: Ferenc Fehér, “The Pan-Tragic Vision: The Metaphysics of Tragedy,” *New Literary History* 11, no. 2 (1980), 245–254.

⁷³ Donald Phillip Verene, *Metaphysics and the Modern World* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 28.

⁷⁴ Iwona Lorenc, *Świadomość i obraz. Studia z filozofii przedstawienia* [*Consciousness and Image. Studies in Philosophy of Representation*] (Warszawa: Scholar, 2001), 16.

⁷⁵ Jacek Aleksander Prokopski, *Egzystencja i tragizm. Dialektyka ludzkiej skończoności* [*Existence and Tragedy. Dialectics of Human Finitude*] (Kęty: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, 2007), 32, 365.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Cf.: Paul M. Bowers, “Augustine's Tragic Vision,” *Journal of Religion and Society: Augustine on Heart and Life. Essays in Memory of William Harmless S.J.*, no. 15, ed. J. J. O'Keefe and M. Cameron, *Journal of Religion and Society* (2018).

⁷⁸ Louis A. Ruprecht, *This Tragic Gospel: How John Corrupted the Heart of Christianity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 76.

present in *The Labyrinth*, where the allegory of the great labyrinth in which the human being falls in their imperfection, is leaning against Sense. Thus the protagonist of the poem in his internal conflict remains immersed in the paradoxical current of things, within which “goodness and light, meaning and faith, are synchronous with meaninglessness and unknowing”⁷⁹ and from this perspective invariably gazes towards the light.

The theological formula closest to this attitude was proposed by the eminent Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and his impassioned desire to represent God’s involvement in the world He created in a way which makes it impossible to turn away from the overwhelming, ubiquitous reality of evil. Balthasar’s attitude stems from a specific vision of the drama of human life, fall, struggle, and salvation. This vision of the Christian life absorbs the tragedy of the world with full gravity and humility as “tragedy under Grace,” tragedy irradiated by disinterested beauty allowing one to touch, just like in Muir’s poem, infinity, God’s world, in order to become for a moment “[an]easy utterance of harmonious words.” This beauty, according to Balthasar, is forgotten by today’s theology and religion, and preserved by human intuition, sensitivity, and – as Edwin Muir’s work demonstrates – poetry. And here, through references to the symbolism of opposition developed through successive historical periods and – on a more profound level – constituting a harmony of the self-contradictory Unity, the voice of the poet guides us towards the “sym-phony of sounds,” so often invoked by Balthasar⁸⁰, towards the “quidditatis – the internal essence of things.”⁸¹

In this broadened perspective, Muir’s tragic vision becomes, as Merton wrote, “a profound metaphysical concern;”⁸² chiselled out over successive poems, it is as multilayered – and at the same time simple – as the symbolism of the labyrinth. The poet guides his reader through the

⁷⁹ Aitchison quoted in: Irina Brantner, “Three Labyrinths and One Maze. The Motif of the Labyrinth in European Poetry of the First Half of XX Century,” in: *Volume IV The Rhetoric of Topics and Forms*, ed. G. Zocco, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2021), 336; accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110642032-026/html>.

⁸⁰ Cf.: Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 1; B. D. Potter, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Phenomenology of Art. Broken Open by Beauty*, (London: Lanham, 2022).

⁸¹ The striving towards the scholastic *quidditatis* in the sense-making centre of the labyrinth is discussed by Rybicka. Cf.: Rybicka, *Labirynt: temati model konstrukcyjny*, 71.

⁸² Thomas Merton, “The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir,” *The Sewanee Review* 75, no. 2 (1967), 317.

spiral, adding layer after layer in a hermeneutic circuit; as a consequence, the seemingly post-tragic Kafkaesque absurd gains a deeper reading. His “frustrated hero” continues to circle in the trap of the “irreconcilability of divine and human law,” but humans are after all able to reach towards the harmony of the two⁸³. Ariadne, a marginal, and yet tragic figure in the Minoan myth, dying alone on the island of Kos, in the poem, as Memory, remains the Lady of the Labyrinth, guiding the protagonist towards the light. Theseus-Everyman, the fragmented, nameless “I,” returns to the unknown corridors, undertakes another human journey, another “tragedy under Grace,” a Story in the Fable.

Maria Korusiewicz

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to apply selected classical and contemporary conceptions of the labyrinth in a hermeneutic interpretation of the poem *The Labyrinth* by the Scottish poet Edwin Muir with reference to its conception of space and time, and the notion of subjectivity as the centre of the labyrinth/maze, as well as to point to the poem’s multilayer intertextuality, whose most significant tropes are elaborate transformations of the Minoan myth and modernist inspiration in the work of Kafka. The final part of the article presents the possibility of continuing research on the specificity of the tragic vision presented in the poem in reference to the approach proposed by Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Keywords: labyrinth/maze, the tragic, myth, intertextuality

Słowa kluczowe: labirynt, tragizm, mit, intertekstualność

⁸³ Full quote: “What Muir finds most universally apposite in Kafka’s stories of the ‘frustrated hero’ is that the struggles of his heroes are always the product of the ‘irreconcilability of divine and human law; a subtle yet immeasurable disparity’. For Muir, laws that are drafted beyond time can never be fully comprehended from inside it, but as ‘The Labyrinth’ suggests, knowledge of the reality in which they exist is possible and the quest for this knowledge is innately human.” Cuthbert, *Eternity’s unhidden shore*, 207.