**Edwin Muir and the Question of Modernism: *We Moderns*, Nietzsche, and Anti-Humanism**

Edwin Muir and the question of modernism can be looked at from different ends of the critical telescope. Looked at in one way, there is the question as to whether Muir himself was or was not a modernist. Margery Palmer McCulloch, writing of Muir’s earlier poetry (his *First Poems* was published in 1925), argues that ‘Muir may at times seem to be a reluctant modernist’ who found it impossible to embrace the anti-humanism of modernism.[[1]](#footnote-1) Writing of Muir’s later work, McCulloch points out that Muir’s poetry did not come to maturity until the 1940s, arguably after modernism, and therefore he might be considered as an ‘“illicit” modernist’.[[2]](#footnote-2) As such, McCulloch stretches her chronological definition of Scottish modernism until 1959, the year of Muir’s death, although his last collection, *One Foot in Eden*, was published in 1956 and the first *Collected Poems 1921–1958* emerged in 1960. As a poet, Muir remained quite traditional in formal terms, although his poetry contains themes, such as time, memory, and myth, that are central to modernism. Muir was an often-fascinating critical observer of the modernist period — see, for instance, his book *The Present Age*: *From 1914* (1939), especially the introductory chapter, along with his work for *The New Age* — and in many ways it his *near distance* to modernism that makes him an acute critical voice. With his wife Willa he was translator from the German of two of the most important writers of the modern period, Hermann Broch and Franz Kafka. The understated Edwin Muir was a significant, if undervalued, contributor to modernism.

Looking at this from the other end of the telescope means examining the question of modernism through the lens of Muir and his work, which is especially pertinent in the case of his first book, *We Moderns*. Modernism raises many questions that Muir’s work, and his position as a liminal modernist, makes particularly compelling. One such question is, what is modern? Muir asks in *We Moderns* what constitutes the truly modern as against the merely modern-as-now, and his answer is: a Nietzschean becoming. Modernism was of course always misnamed, as unless we continually transcend the new we cannot be modernist: to *remain* modernist is, or should be, impossible. A second key question of modernism is, ‘what is reality?’. This is asked directly by Virginia Woolf in ‘Character in Fiction’ and signals the epistemological crack that characterises modernism,[[3]](#footnote-3) especially under the strand of modernism influenced by Nietzsche. That questioning of the real and realism would be central to Woolf’s fiction and criticism, and we find this too in Muir’s work; indeed, *We Moderns* pre-empts many of the debates over the apparently outmoded nature of realism in the new age. Another question is, what is modernism’s political legacy? The Nietzscheanism of *We Moderns* reveals the anti-democratic constituent of modernism, one that has a line to fascism. In renouncing *We Moderns*, as Muir effectively did, he also renounced one major strand of Nietzsche-influenced, anti-humanist, anti-democratic modernism. This in part accounts for Muir’s equivocal position as a modernist. A final question that Muir’s work asks us is, was there a Scottish modernism? Scotland’s failure to *become*, instanced in Muir’s books from the 1930s such as *Scottish Journey* (1935) and *Scott and Scotland* (1936), as well as poems such as ‘Scotland 1941’ and ‘Scotland’s Winter’, indicate Muir’s pessimism as to Scotland’s future orientation.

Muir’s equivocal position in a modernist canon is reflected in his ambivalent view of English-language modernism. (He had a more positive view of German modernism, and neoromanticism, that I’ll not be exploring here.) In 1925, during the heat of high modernism, Muir understood that ‘we are in a period of transition’ but found this frustrating as ‘nothing quite full-grown can come to us’ because currently ‘we are striving for what we do not rightly know — in other words, experimenting’.[[4]](#footnote-4)e He

Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press published in 1926 Muir’s *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature*, in which he considered now modernist greats such as Lawrence, Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf herself, alongside Stephen Hudson, Aldous Huxley, Lytton Strachey, Edith Sitwell, and Robert Graves. While a figure such as Hudson has not entered the modernist canon, and Strachey is best-known as a chronicler of the Victorian era, Muir was astute enough to see that he was dealing in *Transition* with a ‘contemporary Zeit Geist [*sic*]’, but one to which he stood too close to define; however, ‘This blindness about itself is not peculiar to our age. It is the fate of every age of transition’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Muir’s insights into modernist writing are flavoured with ambivalence. He sees that Joyce has ‘hammered out a new grammar of literary art in *Ulysses*’ but thinks it a work ‘too continuously in one key’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Writing of what he sees as the isolation of the characters in *Ulysses*, Muir argues that: ‘The disintegration of all thought, sentiment, faith, is carried here to its conclusion. The individual exists in a void. Everything has been pulled down; nothing has been built up again except Mr Bloom’s lonely personality’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Lawrence’s ‘chief title to greatness is that he has brought a new mode of seeing into contemporary literature’, but equally ‘he has never shown us an instinct coloured by the personality which it occupies: he has never drawn a complete character’.[[8]](#footnote-8) He damns Woolf with faint praise when commenting that her mind has the ‘competence to deal with anything which it fixes upon’, and while rating Eliot highly as a critic, he claims that as a poet the author of *The Waste Land* ‘lacks seriousness’.[[9]](#footnote-9) While appreciating some of its technical flair, Muir in *Transition* objects to what he sees as the moral nihilism, the ‘anti-humanistic’ trend, of modernism.[[10]](#footnote-10) This was a point Muir had made previously in the 1923 *Freeman* article ‘The Assault on Humanism’ and to which he returns in the important essay ‘The Natural Man and the Political Man’, called by John Lehmann ‘One of the most remarkable articles I ever published—in fact, I believe one of the most important published anywhere during the war’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Here Muir argues that ‘The history of the modern novel describes the disappearance of man as religion and humanism conceived him’.[[12]](#footnote-12) What Muir terms ‘the natural man’ is the non-religious modern person with no backcloth of tradition, living in a ‘political or sociological’ rather than a ‘moral or religious’ framework.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this society, the only religion of note is the ‘religion of development’, and for the natural man there is nothing beyond the veil, no spiritual foundation or essence.[[14]](#footnote-14) The post-First World War environment sees the proliferation of the ‘frustrated natural man’, such as the characters in Hemingway’s novels, whose development is hampered by social constraints. For Muir, this leads to the evolution of ‘the political man’. Published during the Second World War (1940), Muir sees only violence in the political man, and a tussle between competing totalitarianisms in communism and fascism and he draws a line from the natural man to Nazism.

Muir’s letters show a greater candour in his views of modernism. Woolf he thought ‘not a figure of sufficient importance’,[[15]](#footnote-15) although he would later praise *The Waves* as an authentic and unique masterpiece, which is bound to have an influence on the mind of this generation’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Joyce’s work, after initial enthusiasm for *Ulysses*, he found ‘sham’,[[17]](#footnote-17) and by 1929, five years after that stark assessment, he had ‘given up’ on the Irish novelist.[[18]](#footnote-18) Impressed by notable visionary passages in Lawrence’s novels and short stories, he was nonetheless ‘profoundly repelled by a great many things in his work’,[[19]](#footnote-19) and found the intellectual and philosophical tenor of Wyndham Lewis’s work ‘grotesque’. Gertrude Stein was merely ‘a very simple and stupid woman’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Writing in Nietzschean vein in *Latitudes* (1924), Muir asks: ‘What if all the assumptions on which we have thus far judged art should be — erroneous?’[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet his own views of many of the most prominent English-language modernists have not entirely withstood the test of time. McCulloch explains Muir’s ‘strange judgements’ on modernists as being due to absence of an ‘analytical critical methodology’.[[22]](#footnote-22) I would argue, however, that it is down to his rejection of modernist anti-humanism.

*We Moderns* is Muir’s most self-consciously modernist book. It also illustrates many of the paradoxes of modernism. Written under the influence of Nietzsche, Muir would later renounce *We Moderns*. In his 1954 autobiography, he says ruefully of *We Moderns*: ‘the book is now out of print, I am glad to say’.[[23]](#footnote-23) The 1918 edition of *We Moderns* was written under the pseudonym Edward Moore. Muir reinstated his own name for the 1920 edition, introduced by H. L. Mencken, to whom I’ll return, and published in New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf’s Free-Lance Books series, which included Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist*.

Edward Moore is a curious creation. Willa Muir would write in *Belonging*, her memoir of her life with Edwin, that ‘His extreme admiration for Nietzsche put me off’, especially in regard to Nietzsche’s sexism, which is sometimes echoed in *We Moderns*. However, on meeting the author of *We Moderns*, Willa ‘liked Edwin Muir much better than Edward Moore, his pseudonymous self’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Edward Moore was born of personal crisis in Muir’s life, which he recounts in *An Autobiography*. Describing himself as being ‘deep in the study of Nietzsche’ in this period, he recounts an experience on a Glasgow tramcar in which he had a Swiftian vision of people as merely animals.[[25]](#footnote-25) This was in 1919, after the publication of *We Moderns*, but he would later connect this, for him, nihilistic vision, to the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy and his sense then that the soul was not immortal. This personal crisis can also be read as being symptomatically modernist, in the manner in which Eliot’s breakdown informed *The Waste Land*. What Muir calls the ‘drastic stimulus’ of reading Nietzsche in this period was psychological and emotional ‘compensation’ for Muir’s unsatisfying life as a clerk, and through Nietzsche’s writing he ‘took refuge in the fantasy of the Superman’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Muir’s double-life as Nietzschean clerk is paradigmatically modernist and finds poetic ancestry in John Davidson’s ‘Thirty Bob a Week’, a poem whose urban authenticity would influence Eliot and modernism. Davidson’s poem recounts the trials of late-nineteenth-century white-collar poverty from a starkly Darwinian perspective.[[27]](#footnote-27) Muir attacks the industrial system in *We Moderns*, calling it ‘the greatest modern example of man’s enslavement’.[[28]](#footnote-28) To view art in the ‘wildernesses of dirt, ugliness and obscenity’ that are ‘our industrial towns’ is ‘at once ludicrous and pathetic, like something delicate and lovely sprawling in the gutter, or an angel with a dirty face’.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, his more serious gripe against industrial society is that it does not grant the artist sufficient leisure to dream and contemplate: ‘Idleness’, he claims, ‘is as necessary for the production of a work of art as labour’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Artists, as special people, should be exempt from the diktats of the time-money machine. Muir recognises that if artists are to be truly liberated then there must be ‘economic emancipation first!’.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, he never outlines how this freedom from capital will be won, and, as he would later acknowledge, ‘My Socialism and Nietzscheanism were quite incompatible’.[[32]](#footnote-32) This was a circle Muir could never square and was not only a component of his personal problems in this period, but an aspect in his renunciation of an anti-humanist modernism.

Georg Brandes characterised Nietzsche’s philosophy as ‘aristocratic radicalism’, and, for Bruce Detwiler, ‘Nietzsche becomes Western philosophy’s first avowed atheist of the far Right’.[[33]](#footnote-33) In *We Moderns*, Muir exemplifies an aristocratic Nietzscheanism: ‘Artists must always be privileged creatures. It is privileges, and not rights, that they want’.[[34]](#footnote-34) Muir’s hit at a rights-based society implies the anti-democratic nature of his Nietzschean thinking. What emerges from this elitist ethos is the modernist spectre of the ‘average man’. As a good Nietzschean, Muir makes sport of the average man, while also seeing him as a threat to the average man’s antithesis, the artist and the superman. One root of Muir’s opposition to the average man in *We Moderns* arises from the Nietzschean dislike and fear of equality and democracy. In an entry entitled ‘Uniformity’, Muir claims that ‘Equality and humility are the great fosterers of the mediocre’, but that mediocrity only really flourishes in the democratic polity of ‘an egalitarian régime’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Under such conditions, in which, for the Nietzschean, democracy equates to bland uniformity and the discouragement of the exceptional, great art is suppressed, not by the state, but before it is even produced, through the civic humbling of the personal ambition and arrogance required to produce it. Therefore, Muir argues, ‘we must deny equality; we must affirm aristocracy’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Aristocracy, in these Nietzschean terms, is not merely defined as the perpetuation of power and tradition through hereditary wealth and privilege, but the spiritual aristocracy, sensibility, self-command, and aptitude for self-denial that is born in certain individuals under government by nobility. Government by the few, for the few, creates some refined individuals who can create great art – art that is not for the average man.

‘Inequality’, according to Muir, turning modern thinking on its head, ‘is the source of all advancement’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Such a view, along with the denial of democratic rights for the majority of the population in the name of aristocratic rule, opposes the fundamental basis of Enlightenment modernity. Such thinking would be central to modernism. [More on this: John Carey] Like Nietzsche, the Muir of *We Moderns* is against democracy on mainly aesthetic grounds: that it does not promote the beautiful but, instead, the average. He is also concerned, somewhat nebulously, with the future. In § 41, ‘Equality’, he claims:

To those who believe in the future, inequality is a holy thing; their pledge that greatness shall not disappear from the earth; the rainbow assuring them that Man shall not go down beneath the vast tide of mankind. All great men are to them at once forerunners and sacrifices; the imperfect forms which the Future has shattered in trying to incarnate itself; the sublime ruins of *future* greatness.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Muir distinguishes between those he addresses, with Nietzschean waspishness, as ‘*you*, my dear moderns, who live so complacently in your provincial present’, and those *true* moderns who live for the future and believe in human potentiality.[[39]](#footnote-39) The likes of Goethe, Heine, Nietzsche, and Ibsen were liberators in and of their time. But were they alive in the early twentieth century, they would oppose the complacency of the eternal present that is the Orcadian’s pessimistic vision of modern life and continue to advocate for human emancipation. Muir’s definition of what such emancipation looks like, and what it is *from*, is no less impressionistic that his previously noted description of economic freedom. Instead, Muir relies on a Nietzschean rhetoric of prophecy. Considering as if from the vantagepoint of the future what the late-nineteenth century ‘historical sense’ might mean, Nietzsche writes expectantly in *The Gay Science*: ‘We of the present day [which can also be rendered ‘We moderns’] are only just beginning to form the chain of a very powerful future feeling, link for link — we hardly know what we are doing. It almost seems to us as if it were not a matter of a new feeling but rather a decrease in all old feelings’.[[40]](#footnote-40) Muir’s Nietzschean nightmare, however, is that the end of history, the end of becoming, terminates in liberal democracy, and that the last man is the average man praised by G. K. Chesterton.

Chesterton, author of *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), stands for Muir as the archetype of populist anti-modernism, and the Englishman is cruelly sent-up in Hugh MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926).[[41]](#footnote-41) Yet, for Muir, Chesterton is disingenuous in his approval of ordinariness, being himself a ‘genius’ who ‘is not read by the average man, but by intellectuals and the non-conformist middle-class’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Chesterton recognises that the modern period is one of what Muir calls ‘Decadence’ and ‘a new disintegration of values’ (a phrase Muir and his wife Willa would use for the ‘disintegration of values’ sections of their 1932 translation of Hermann Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers*).[[43]](#footnote-43) However, a return to ‘old dogmas’, such as Chesterton’s Catholicism, is not the solution to modernity’s maladies; for Muir, ‘we should have strained on towards the new’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Chesterton replied in his *Fancies versus Fads* to Muir’s attack, gently condemning the elitism of *We Moderns* by pointing out that we are all equal in death. He also paid Muir the backhanded compliment of calling *We Moderns* ‘very well written’ and so casting doubt on the Orcadian’s modernist credentials: ‘the author did himself some injustice in insisting on his own modernity; for he was not so very modern after all, but really quite lucid and coherent’.[[45]](#footnote-45)

While Chesterton provides Muir with a well-known figure through which he can launch his Nietzschean attack on the average man, the real enemy of exceptionality and the future, according to Muir, is the realist novelist: ‘The true prophets of the average man are the popular realistic novelists’.[[46]](#footnote-46) *We Moderns* might aptly have been titled ‘Against Realism’. Muir’s attack on realism forms one of the more concerted themes of the book, as well as marking out a modernist aesthetic. Realism was conceived for readers with ‘no eye for what is written between the lines — for symbolism, idealization, “literature”’.[[47]](#footnote-47) One of the sins of realism, as far as Muir is concerned, is its blindness to the future: it ‘is just the portrayal of present-day men *as* present-day men; nothing more, therefore, than “contemporary art”; an appendage of the present, a triviality’.[[48]](#footnote-48) Yet, for all his future-orientedness, Muir disliked the punk attitude of the Futurists, those ‘most self-conscious heirs of modernity’, because they refuse the immortal and transcendental in art in favour of ephemerality.[[49]](#footnote-49) *We Moderns* rejects ‘vitality’ in literature, so putting paid to Lawrence and Bergson, and advocates restraint in form.[[50]](#footnote-50) Indeed, before Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Muir promotes the importance to the modern writer of tradition, claiming that to attain future immortality one must have a live connection to the past.

If modernism be a vital thing it must needs have roots in the past and be an essential expression of humanity, to be traced, therefore, in the history of humanity: in short, it can only be a tradition. The true modern is a continuator of tradition as much as the Christian or the conservative: the true fight between progress and stagnation is always a fight between antagonistic *traditions*. To battle against tradition *as such* is, therefore, not the task of the modern; but rather to enter the conflict — an eternal one — for his tradition against its opposite: Nietzsche found for his antithesis the symbolism of Dionysus and Apollo. Does such a tradition of modernity exist?[[51]](#footnote-51)

Muir identifies the Janus-faced identity of modernism, looking as it does at once to the past and the future. We also see here the seeds of Muir’s rejection of a Nietzschean line in his belief that modernism should be ‘an essential expression of humanity’. Muir anticipates Woolf’s ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’ [expand] when he asks ‘how weak must a generation be which is not strong enough to challenge and supersede Arnold Bennett’.[[52]](#footnote-52) Muir contends in a 1925 essay on Bennett that his work suffers from ‘the illusions of the practical man’, and that in belonging fundamentally to the late Victorian period, Bennett ‘is the representative of an era of almost universal and absolutely naive optimism, which is now past’.[[53]](#footnote-53) Bennett, in Muir’s assessment, is neither truly an artist nor truly modern. As Woolf would do, Muir proposes a spiritual as opposed to a materialistic literature. Art must find connection with ‘Religion’ and the ‘symbolic’ if it is to challenge realism and be renewed.[[54]](#footnote-54) Most paradigmatically modernist of all, art, for Muir, must turn ‘from Realism to Myth’.[[55]](#footnote-55)

*We Moderns* first appeared periodically in A. R. Orage’s *The New Age* from November 1916 to September 1917. Muir contributed to *The New Age* from 1913 to 1924, including working as Orage’s editorial assistant. As such, ‘Muir played an important role in helping to define what it was to be modern for a generation of readers’, according to Alexander J. Cuthbert.[[56]](#footnote-56) Muir wrote that ‘*The New Age* gave me an adequate picture of contemporary politics and literature, a thing I badly needed, and with a few vigorous blows shortened a process which would otherwise have taken a long time’.[[57]](#footnote-57) Orage it was who encouraged Muir to find greater intellectual and emotional direction through studying the complete works of one writer, and mentioned the *Mahabharata* which he himself was studying. Muir chose Nietzsche, whom he had read in *The New Age*, and whose works were available in an inexpensive English translation (1909–12) by Oscar Levy. In spite of Muir’s subsequent regret over Nietzsche’s influence on his worldview and writing style, Muir’s immersion in Nietzsche is, for Cuthbert, ‘one of the most significant contributing factors in his development as a writer’.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Nietzsche’s influence on modernism was profound. According to Franz Kuna,

Nietzsche fed the sense of confrontation with anarchistic forces; beneath the surface of modern life, dominated by knowledge and science, he discerned vital energies which were wild, primitive and completely merciless. At the appropriate hour, man, he proposed, would raise himself to titanic proportions and conquer his own civilization; the vital forces will be released in revenge, and produce a new barbarism. Promethean man will appear once more on the scene, carrying a single-minded vision to its inevitable and terrifying conclusion, and blotting out all distinctions between absolute idealism and absolute barbarism. In all of this, he proposed much that is keeping with the themes and the very forms of modernistic art.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Kuna’s prose, with its own Nietzschean rhetorical tenor, refuses to focus on just what ‘a new barbarism’ might mean in reality. Nietzsche’s defenders have long claimed that his thought has no genealogical link to Nazism, and that Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who was a supporter of National Socialism (Hitler attended her funeral in 1935), perverted Nietzsche’s legacy to make it a forerunner of fascist values. Nietzsche was almost certainly no *Blut und Boden* German nationalist, and his greatest scorn was often reserved for those Germans who were. He writes in *The Gay Science* (1882),

We who are homeless are too manifold and mixed racially and in our descent, being ‘modern men’, and consequently do not feel tempted to participate in the mendacious racial self-admiration and racial indecency that parades in Germany today as a sign of a German way of thinking and that is doubly false and obscene among the people of the ‘historical sense’.[[60]](#footnote-60)

However, despite his rejection here of racial ideologies, Nietzsche’s work returns frequently to the Jewish question. Nietzsche may have pointed out Christ’s Jewishness in order to expose the anti-Semitism of many nineteenth-century Christians,[[61]](#footnote-61) but he ultimately blamed the Jews for introducing what he regarded as the slave morality of equalitarianism.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Robert O. Paxton cautions against rushing to denounce Nietzsche as fascism’s founding-father, pointing out in *The Anatomy of Fascism* that the philosopher

exerted a powerful intellectual and aesthetic influence across the political spectrum, from activist nationalists like Mussolini and Maurice Barrès to nonconformists like Stefan George and André Gide, to both Nazis and anti-Nazis, and to several later generations of French iconoclasts from Sartre to Foucault.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Paxton’s interest is in Nietzsche’s intellectual influence on particular thinkers; because Nietzsche has been championed by liberals and some on the left, as well as the right and hard-right, Paxton believes the case against him as fascism’s philosophical forebear is unclear. However, this neglects to assess the overwhelming cultural and political meta-influence of several of Nietzsche’s signature themes from the wider perspective of twentieth-century history, and is odd considering that Paxton’s list of factors most likely to contribute to the formation of fascism includes several ideas elaborated by Nietzsche, such as ‘the right of the chosen people to dominate others without restraint from any kind of human or divine law, right being decided by the sole criterion of the group’s prowess within a Darwinian struggle’.[[64]](#footnote-64) For Nietzsche secular modernity is essentially decadent. In such conditions, the danger is falling into nihilism and pessimism. To transcend this, Nietzsche creates a new myth in Zarathustra, the eternal Yeasayer from whom the future shall be born. As Roger Griffin argues, ‘modernism can be seen as an attempted rebellion against Modernity carried out in order to inaugurate a new modernity’.[[65]](#footnote-65) Modernism is a revolt against decadence, and so a revolt against the modern – hence Muir’s discrimination between true moderns of the future and mere moderns of the present, which he sees as a ‘diseased’, decadent, and ‘self-conscious age’.[[66]](#footnote-66) The palingenetic project of modernism seeks forms of rebirth, be they societal or spiritual. One of the most fundamentally modernist embodiments of rebirth, born from modernist revolt against decadence, is fascism. Nietzsche’s distaste for democracy, his elitist concept of the Overman, attraction to irrational, Dionysian forces, contempt for pity, Christian or otherwise, and desire to rid the world of ‘the bungled and the botched’ (surely the most disturbing phrase in all modern Continental philosophy), all foreshadow the collapse of humanism that would characterise modernism, as well as easing the philosophical path to fascism.

Nietzsche’s anti-democracy was shared by H. L. Mencken, who published Muir’s *We Moderns* in the United States. Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956) was one of the most prolific American writers of his age, one of whose earliest books was *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908). For Mencken, ‘There is no escaping Nietzsche. […] He has colored the thought and literature, the speculation and theorizing, the politics and superstition of the time’.[[67]](#footnote-67) While on the whole a straightforward compendium of Nietzsche’s main themes, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* does contain some interesting claims, such as Mencken’s contention that Nietzsche, proponent of the *Übermensch*, was essentially an anarchist: ‘Ideal anarchy […] would insure the success of those men who were wisest mentally and strongest physically, and the race would make rapid progress’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Such a claim allows Mencken to advance his own political position: ‘It is evident that the communistic and socialistic forms of government at present in fashion in the world oppose such a consummation as often as they facilitate it’.[[69]](#footnote-69) For Mencken, the ‘ideal government’ is one of minimal state interference and his approving mentions of Herbert Spencer imply a society where only the fittest survive.[[70]](#footnote-70) In the model Nietzschean society, ‘The strong man – which means the intelligent, ingenious and far-seeing man – would acknowledge no authority but his own will and no morality but his own advantage’.[[71]](#footnote-71) This would encourage, according to Mencken, the restoration of ‘the law of natural selection firmly upon its disputed throne, and so the strong would grow ever stronger and more efficient, and the weak would grow ever more obedient and tractile’.[[72]](#footnote-72) Mencken attempts to rebut objections by ‘those in the socialist camp’ that this will lead to rule by finance, claiming that, on the contrary, those who seek to break the rules, ‘our criminals and transvaluers and breakers of the law’, are not the Rockefellers of the world but the likes of ‘Huxley, Lincoln, Bismarck, Darwin, Virchow, Haeckel, Hobbes, Macchiavelli [*sic*], Harvey, and Jenner, the father of vaccination’.[[73]](#footnote-73) However, in Mencken’s hands, the philosopher for free spirits becomes the philosophical buttress of the free market.

One could argue that it would be an error, in light of the above, to read Nietzsche metaphorically,[[74]](#footnote-74) yet modernism often does so. In *We Moderns* Muir says that Nietzsche is primarily ‘a great tragic poet’.[[75]](#footnote-75) He writes later in *Latitudes* that Nietzsche’s pronouncement of God’s death ‘is for us now only a curious piece of literary history’, while the Overman ‘is no longer an ideal, but a character in fiction’.[[76]](#footnote-76) Published in 1924, ‘A Note on Friedrich Nietzsche’ from *Latitudes* is ostensibly a review of Janko Lavrin’s *Nietzsche and Modern Consciousness: A Psycho-Critical Study* (1922). (Lavrin would write other books on Nietzsche, including *Nietzsche: An Approach* (1948).) Muir is critical of Lavrin’s tendency to focus on Nietzsche’s failures rather than his achievements but admits that ‘We shall probably have to throw away half the more systematic part of Nietzsche’s thought’.[[77]](#footnote-77) This essay is much less hagiographic than *We Moderns*, with Nietzsche becoming almost a figure of pity. However, Nietzsche is still ‘the most beautiful figure in modern literature’, and Muir compares Nietzsche with Milton for nobility of soul.[[78]](#footnote-78) Nietzsche ‘brought a new atmosphere into European thought, an atmosphere cold glittering and free; and any thinker in our time who has not breathed in it has, by that accident, some nuance of mediocrity and timidity which is displeasing’.[[79]](#footnote-79) Muir describes Nietzsche as trying to ‘shape’ Europe and failing, but he was writing before Nietzschean thought shaped Europe catastrophically.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Nietzsche’s thought is alluring not just metaphorically but formally, too. His epigrammatic style is one Muir follows in *We Moderns*. The poet Don Paterson makes the point in his book of aphorisms *The Book of Shadows* that aphorism is a non-democratic genre: ‘Not enough to say that aphorism is not for everyone. It is the elite form nonpareil, being for precisely *no one*’.[[81]](#footnote-81) This certainly fits with Nietzsche’s inegalitarianism. Muir, however, wrote many of the aphorisms of *We Moderns* while at his clerking work, according to Willa Muir, ‘on slips of paper hidden among the pages of his ledgers’.[[82]](#footnote-82) Writing to Mencken from Glasgow in 1919, Muir says percipiently that with *We Moderns* he has found ‘a provisional medium of expression’, as if he knew then that he would subsequently jettison the book’s style of Nietzschean pastiche.[[83]](#footnote-83) That ‘provisional’ also indicates the conditions of his working life, in which time was short in which to write creatively. *We Moderns* is, then, elitist in tenor but written by a working man under ordinary, white-collar conditions, speaking to the paradox of Muir’s Nietzscheanism and many of the tensions of modernism.

As pointed to previously, the phrase ‘We Moderns’ is taken from Nietzsche and signals a future-oriented philosophy that objects to aspects of modernity as decadent. If aphorism is characteristically Nietzschean, so too is that ‘we’. ‘We’ is both inclusive and exclusive: inclusive of the select set of free-spirited readers who understand and approve of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and exclusive of the rest. But this creates a problem when reading Nietzsche. As Malcolm Bull points out, flattery is central to Nietzsche’s strategy, for ‘who, in the privacy of reading, can fail to find within themselves some of those qualities of honesty and courage and loftiness of soul that Nietzsche describes?’.[[84]](#footnote-84) This creates certain ironies, such as the mediocrity who believes himself to be an Overman, and admirers of a philosophy of becoming who see no need to transcend that very philosophy. Muir is perhaps aware of such potential traps when proclaiming in § 161 of *We Moderns*: ‘The Superman is something that must be surpassed!’.[[85]](#footnote-85) The Nietzschean ‘we’ speaks, on the one hand, of Nietzsche’s need for readers in order to confirm the significance of his philosophy, in particular the post-Christian myth-making of Zarathustra, while, on the other, ‘we’ accentuates that very lack of an audience, as well as the man’s personal isolation. As Stephen Kern writes, ‘in the end there was no we; he had to vanquish loneliness ironically and tragically by himself’.[[86]](#footnote-86) In speaking to the future, Nietzsche’s ‘we’ is the echo of a man speaking to himself. Yet Edwin Muir and others would hear that echo in modernist anti-humanism and the interwar crisis of democracy leading to the Second World War.

1. Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts 1918–1959: Literature, National Identity and Cultural Exchange* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. McCulloch, *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts*, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Virginia Woolf, ‘Character in Fiction’, *Virginia Woolf:* *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 37-54 (p. 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Letter to Stephen Hudson, 28 February 1925, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Edwin Muir, *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1926), pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Muir, *Transition*, pp. 37, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Muir, *Transition*, pp. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Muir, *Transition*, pp. 62, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Muir, *Transition*, pp. 82, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Muir, *Transition*, p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Quoted in Paul Piazza, *Christopher Isherwood: Myth and Anti-Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Edwin Muir, ‘The Natural Man and the Political Man’, *Essays on Literature and Society*, revised and enlarged edition (London: The Hogarth Press, 1965), pp. 150-64 (p. 150). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Muir, ‘The Natural Man and the Political Man’, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Letter to Stephen Hudson, 8 May 1925, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Edwin Muir, ‘Virginia Woolf’, *Bookman* (New York) LXXIV, December 1931, 362-7, reprinted in *The Truth of Imagination*, pp. 19-25 (p. 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Letter to Stephen Hudson, 6 October 1924, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Letter to Stephen Hudson, 8 July 1929, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Letter to Stephen Hudson, 1 January 1925, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Letter to Stephen Hudson, 19 April 1927, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Edwin Muir, *Latitudes* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1924), p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Margery McCulloch, *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1993), p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Willa Muir, *Belonging: A Memoir* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), pp. 13, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *An Autobiography*, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *An Autobiography*, pp. 110, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See *The Wider Domain of Evolutionary Thought*. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Edwin Muir, *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), p. 34 (§ 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *We Moderns*, pp. 50-1 (§ 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *We Moderns*, p. 124 (§ 85). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *We Moderns*, p. 35 (§ 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *An Autobiography*, pp. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 189, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *We Moderns*, p. 124 (§ 85). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *We Moderns*, p. 162 (§ 119). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *We Moderns*, p. 170 (§ 129). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *We Moderns*, p. 74 (§ 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *We Moderns*, p. 74 (§ 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *We Moderns*, p. 133 (§ 93). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Michael Shallcross, *Rethinking G. K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018) for a reconfiguration of the relationship between Chesterton and modernism. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *We Moderns*, p. 43 (§ 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *We Moderns*, p. 65 (§ 37). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *We Moderns*, p. 66 (§ 37). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. G. K. Chesterton, *Fancies versus Fads* (London: Methuen, 1923), p. 117. Muir comments that Chesterton ‘has rather broad-mindedly blessed the book’ in a letter to H. L. Mencken regarding *We Moderns*, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, pp. 20-22 (p. 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *We Moderns*, p. 43 (§ 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *We Moderns*, p. 39 (§ 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *We Moderns*, pp. 135-6 (§ 94). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *We Moderns*, p. 141 (§ 97). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See *We Moderns*, pp. 51-2 (§ 27 & § 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See *We Moderns*, pp. 138-9 (§ 96). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *We Moderns*, p. 44 (§ 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Edwin Muir, ‘Arnold Bennett’, *Calendar of Modern Letters* I, No. 4, June 1925, 290-6, reprinted in *The Truth of Imagination: Some Uncollected Reviews and Essays by Edwin Muir*, ed. by P. H. Butter (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 6-11 (pp. 9, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *We Moderns*, p. 182 (§ 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *We Moderns*, p. 170 (§ 129). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Alexander J. Cuthbert, ‘Edwin Muir and *The New Age’*, in *Scottish and International Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations*, ed. by Emma Dymock and Margery Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow, Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2011), pp. 63-74 (p. 63). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. *An Autobiography*, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Cuthbert, *Scottish and International Modernisms*, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
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60. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 340 (§ 377). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
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62. See Stephen Kern, *Modernism After the Death of God: Christianity, Fragmentation, and Unification* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *We Moderns*, p. 149 (§ 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Henry L. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908), p. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. The political dangers of reading Nietzsche metaphorically are examined in Geoff Waite, *Nietzsche’s Corps/e: Aesthetics, Politics, Prophecy, or, the Spectacular Technoculture of Everyday Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996) and Fredrick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *We Moderns*, p. 241(§ 205). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Edwin Muir, *Latitudes* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1924), p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Muir, *Latitudes*, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Muir, *Latitudes*, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Muir, *Latitudes*, p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Muir, *Latitudes*, p. 90-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
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82. *Belonging*, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Letter to H. L. Mencken, 13 July 1919, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir*, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Malcolm Bull, *Anti-Nietzsche* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *We Moderns*, p. 206 (§ 161). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Kern, *Modernism After the Death of God*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)