

1963

Eda Lou Walton's Use of Her Native Scene

David Greenhood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Greenhood, David. "Eda Lou Walton's Use of Her Native Scene." *New Mexico Quarterly* 33, 3 (1963).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol33/iss3/2>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

David Greenhood
 EDA LOU WALTON'S
 USE OF HER NATIVE SCENE

Although Eda Lou Walton moved to places far from her native scene, it never vanished from its special residence within her. Instead of making her poetry "regional," affording it the easements of the picturesque, the inner scene became for her a concretion of the tragical. It committed her unrelentingly to facing the universal portent however personal the anguish. She knew well how to realize that the New Mexico landscape is large—larger than many visitors can endure—and that it belittles all of a person but his vision, outer and inner.

She was born in Deming on January 19, 1894. Her father, William Bell Walton, was of old Quaker stock and had come from Pennsylvania. Her mother, the daughter of Singleton M. Ashenfelter, a prominent Territorial lawyer, was born in Las Cruces, which is the setting of "The Blue Room."¹ Eda Lou was their first of three children. Silver City, where they grew up, seems not to have figured in the inner scene. Nor does the fact that her father was the editor of a newspaper² there and President of the Board of Regents of the New Mexico Normal School.

But there were elements in his personality that figured in hers. Plucky-humored, broad-minded "Billy" Walton was one of the four Democrats in the Territorial Legislature,³ and one of the very few in the first State Senate. In the Constitutional Convention he chided the Republicans for apportioning too many of their party as members of the new Legislature, but he ended by saying that "were the situation reversed," he was "inclined to the opinion that we, the Demo-

1. *Jane Matthew and Other Poems*, pp. 79-111.

2. William B. Walton bought *The Independent* in 1895 and sold it in 1934, when it became *The Daily Press*.

3. Governor Miguel Antonio Otero, in his book (*My Nine Years as Governor of the Territory of New Mexico, 1897-1906*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1940, p. 74), accorded Walton first mention as "one of the very best" of legislators, and said that he "never allowed politics to enter into his work." In 1916, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and he served on such welfare committees as Public Lands, Irrigation, and Indian Affairs.

crats, might have done likewise!"⁴ He repeatedly put himself out on a limb with unblenching proposals for education, workmen's compensation, and inheritance tax. Like him, his eldest child had a ready humor, even in the midst of reporting her grievances: an ability to admit that "were the situation reversed" she too "might have done likewise." She had a readiness, also, for outright merriment: an unforgettable bird-trill laugh to greet any least occasion of fun or to cast off any amiable folly in herself or others.

Her poems, however, are mostly grave to a degree more intense than many poetry readers, especially the beauty-as-anodyne kind, are willing to contemplate. She had her father's political fervor, and gave far too much of her vitality and working time to it, and to helping her friends and relatives, which was for her a kind of political zeal—in fact, among the scores of poets I have known personally, no one with anywhere nearly as much reason as she had for being a poet did so much to hinder himself in the fulfillment. But her poems contain scarcely the least hint of altruistic or political zeal. Why not? Was her poetic intent too "esthetic"? I do not believe so.

Rather, it seems to have been this: the native scene that persisted made her articulate on another plane than that of the political, just as it did on another than the regional. Not a "higher" plane, necessarily, and even less so a repudiatory one, but a different one, one in which a laughing humor cannot sing the part truly enough, and only the unlaughing kind, if any at all, might.

Garlanded in summer's day
Sing we death a roundelay,
Round and round and round
On all-hallowed ground.⁵

She is not mocking; she means it. No bitter irony. But probably a smile. For she is aware of the ironies: the more available ones, which are usually fashionable and which would only have a *tottentanz* here, but also the less noticed ones—those obversions of fact to feeling and feeling to fact which go on manifolding more than we ordinarily are prone to watch. This poem begins with

4. Thomas C. Donnelly, *The Government of New Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1953, p. 47; quoting from *The Albuquerque Journal*, Nov. 16, 1910.

5. From "An Old Song," *Poetry*, Vol. 91, Nov. 1957, p. 86.

Death that lessens and besets
 Everything man living gets,
 Also shadows sunlight so
 He may of existence know.

And "all-hallowed ground" is such not only for our readily guessed reason, that our dead lie so still in it, but for hers, that in her native scene the Indian's earth is, deep under, the original home of jolly gods.

She saw no need to contrive ironies for nuance or point; none of the many ironies in her experience does she even focus upon. However afflictive they may have been, they were in her mind, apparently, incidental—one of the ways of events in their raw state of occurrence, not her way of utterance. She faced the ill music but sang her own air.

Thus a close friend and fellow lyricist, Léonie Adams, has observed, "Yet though the tone [of the poems] is somber or wry, and well served by the desert-cactus-agonist imagery of her New Mexico background, the final position is a modest stoicism, hardily loyal to human and cherished things."⁶

EDA LOU WALTON made two removes from her native background. The first was to Berkeley, the second to New York. In both, the original scene fed forth into her imagination. For, unlike many of the other young writers, who were seeking something vague which they believed was "freedom," she was not "getting away from" a place of origin and was not "trying to find herself." She had herself well in hand—too much so, she probably sometimes felt—and what she went out to get was simply an adequate education, a livelihood, and the kind of fair hearing she could respect. Nothing more mystical than that. She already brooded, in her own right, enough mysticism for several poets. As for glamor and glory, I knew her for forty years and did not once see in her eyes or letters or poems the least yen for such. She did not write or love poetry in order to show that her sorrows were more worthy of applause than anybody else's.

When I met her at the University of California in the autumn of 1917, she was a frail, wearily toiling little woman who freshened, though, at once to any kinship of mind. This she continued to be throughout our long friendship. I too was poor, earning my way through college, trying to find out what presumably a poet ought to

6. "Spinning Singular," *Poetry*, Vol. 85, Nov. 1954, p. 117.

know; and the mere factuality of this brave and delicate person was but the beginning of a one-way helpfulness that never ceased. The current of this out-giving was so continuous that I never succeeded in opposing it with reciprocation. Nor did anybody else; it became later, when she was in the faculty of New York University, her hidden fame among those she helped to be outspreadingly famous.

Except for this bravery, with the boost I felt from it, and her interest in Southwestern Indian chants and poetics, there was nothing ostensibly New Mexican about her—no Navajo silver and turquoise on her wrists, and on her lips no verbal decorations from the Spanish. Her autochthony she carried within. And shared it willingly. At the time, for example, I was much interested in the "sense rhythms" of the Old Testament, which had been long before observed by Bishop Lowth and more recently by Professor Moulton; she matched this with a verse system based on parallel phrasings and structures, in the poetics of the Navajo, which she was exploring almost entirely on her own.

When Witter Bynner formed his verse-writing class, in the spring of 1919, she was the least conspicuous member, but he saw in her the largest prospect. Looking back upon the group a few years later, he said, "Eda Lou Walton's highly distinctive short lines have become familiar to magazine-readers. With her quiet humanness and individual style, she has always seemed to me sure of a place in the poetry of her time,—thus far, if my other students will forgive me, the most likely of them all. Her translations of songs from the Navajos and Blackfeet are, in my judgment, by all odds the finest Indian poems that have been produced in English, the nearest to the spirit of their source. This may be because Miss Walton grew up among the people she is interpreting: an Indian nurse sang the songs into the little poet's heart."7 Incidentally, when Bynner wrote this he had exchanged homeplaces with her: he in New Mexico, she in New York.

In 1919, also, she won the University's chief honor for poetry written by a student, the Emily Chamberlain Cook Prize. The next year she completed her doctorate, presenting as her dissertation "Navajo Traditional Poetry, Its Content and Form." It was probably one of the first doctoral studies combining English literature and anthropology (or, at least, this specialty of cultural anthropology) in Ameri-

7. "On Teaching the Young Laurel to Shoot," *The New Republic*, Vol. 37, Dec. 5, 1923 (Part II) pp. 5-7.



EDA LOU WALTON, circa 1930

Photograph courtesy of Ben Belitt

can scholarship. The anthropologists A. L. Kroeber and T. T. Waterman were two of the five members of the examining committee.

Waterman five years later collaborated with her in writing a paper emphasizing the unsentimental, sternly classical, and significantly structural character of Indian poetry, or song. For this and the three other essays (which she wrote independently) on the subject,⁸ she had familiarized herself with more than one hundred fifty Navajo songs.

As I reread these four articles and the preface to *Dawn Boy*, her book of Indian songs, I am impressed by their implicative value. It is good to be reminded, for instance, that what may seem just formal can have the power of a ritual function, a power that only those can feel who have experienced this function as being a part of the way they live. And that also, in a seeming opposition to ritualistic form, the imagination is then all the more enlivened in us by the accumulated connotations of images.

To be sure, if all of us writing and reading English were one tribe inhabiting the same landscape and meditating for the words of our mouths the same symbolical scenes in our hearts, our accepted poems would be ever so much easier to understand than to compose. They would then be obscure only to other tribes, however adroit the translators and explicators.

But these estrangements do not invalidate the fact that form and idea are excellent parents of poems, anywhere you may go and listen. And you can note the form when you cannot the idea. Indeed, the form itself might be idea enough for you.

The ritual of form makes good theater as well as temple. Rhythm, which is form, is a universal language. Or, at least, "appeal." Rhythm is also the poem's own ritual, an essential part of its way of being a poem. Parallelism, too, of structure or detail is a rhythm. (Our "tribe's" rhymes are a species of parallelism, and so although an Indian poem may not have rhymes, our translation of its subtler parallels may be gratifyingly betokened by rhymes, as with some of the songs Eda Lou Walton translated in *Dawn Boy*.) In any language the repetition of even senseless sounds can help them to rhyme themselves into a pattern that makes sense; and in any music the recurrences of an odd tone, alien to the listener, can grow into a serenifying datum of familiarity.

The tribes of the West have in their landscapes and skylines

8. See published writings of Eda Lou Walton listed below.

plenty of authority for the parallelistic repetitions of lines, images, or ideas. Mesa after mesa after mesa, each with its repetition of horizontal beds, each mesa paralleling the tilt of its strata with those of its neighbor; or plateaus rising in steps one above the other to form terraces gradually varying in their parallelings; or in a mountain range the parade of accordant hill shapes; or a sky wide enough to hold entire clans of cloud forms. And so:

I enter into the House of the Red Rock
 Made holy by visiting gods,
 And into the House of Blue Water
 I am come.
 Enter me, Spirit of my forgotten Grandmother,
 That curtains of rain may hang
 All dark before me,
 That tall corn may shake itself
 Above my head.

("Prayer for Harvest," *Dawn Boy*, p. 72)

It is only when we go from one kind of country to another that change becomes more notable than accordance, the new landscape's own "language" is a different one, and the "ritual" of the old seems abandoned. But in a true poet, the old scene sings in a strange land. This is what happened with Eda Lou Walton when she went East. And when, before that, she made an anthropological study of Indian prosody, hoping to know it as she did the English, it was not for erudition but for kinship. The contact points of affinity were what she was always seeking everywhere in everybody. In presenting *Dawn Boy*, she knew better than any of the reviewers what was untranslatable, and wherein (though untranslatableness was almost all they descanted on, unnecessarily—like most reviewers of translations), but she knew also how to discern the intimations, as must any poet who is constantly having to translate even the stranger within himself.

Dawn Boy, her first book to be published, appeared several years after she had moved to New York, but it would have come out anyhow if she had not moved.⁹ *The City Day*, however, would not have.

9. During her early years in New York she, along with several other poets, including Léonie Adams, Louise Bogan, and Genevieve Taggard, carried on a lively association with

It was a college textbook which as an anthology astutely used the urban scene as the ground of approach to modern American poetry. Her critical commentary in it still has its sharp focus, for although the home-changing movement now is away from town, the emigrants are urbanizing every part they reach.¹⁰

When the first book of Eda Lou Walton's own verse, *Jane Matthew and Other Poems*, appeared, Genevieve Taggard (who as editor of the college literary magazine in California and as fellow student in Bynner's class, had some personal insight) remarked that she was "an austere poet" and that she showed in this book "a kinship with Emily Brontë."¹¹ This was not merely an inevitable impressionistic comparison. The darksome moorlands and the sun-bedazzled desert have here at least two elements in common for us: ruggedness of terrain and the two delicate women braving the tragic significance, "where," as Brontë wrote, "the wild wind blows on the mountain-side."

In the vicinity of "The Organ Mountains, background, fire-played, World of delirious color", during a bad March wind storm,

Everything shifts, even

Houses lean low against the dreary sound.
All roads are blotted out, sands advance
In tidal dunes across each field and round
Each greenish meadow, in frenzy play and dance
Over each roof. The tumble weeds are loosed
And whirl aloft, or gather to the fences,
The chickens fly toward the nearest roost,
Huddle in squawking balls. Now all pretenses
Of conversation cease, each person waiting
Day after day the terrible wind's abating.

the anthropologists Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Edward Sapir, who were earnestly interested in poetry and wrote poems for publication. (See *An Anthropologist at Work—Writings of Ruth Benedict*, by Margaret Mead, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.) Another important anthropologist who at that time was seriously attracted to the writing of verse and to poets was Robert H. Lowie; he regularly attended the French restaurant meetings of San Francisco and University poets who had what some of us there called "a mutual castigation society."

10. For an article, written shortly later, about the effect of the urban scene on poetry, see her "Intolerable Towers." See also the poem "She Enters the City," in *Jane Matthew and Other Poems*, pp. 122-23.

11. "An Austere Poet," *The Nation*, Vol. 133, Dec. 23, 1931, pp. 703-04.

Windows are loosened, doors begin to bang,
 Sand taps the window-panes incessantly,
 A tree snaps—boughs lock and clang,
 The cacti claw the wind. Aggressively
 The wind's round rhythm hugs each lonely house
 Nor even at night is stilled, but spins cocoons
 Of sound.

You can feel "the house singing in every board" and the "shilly-shally of sand" is "constant through the sleepless night." And for a long time the mountains are lost from sight.¹²

In this book of poems, many of which she wrote after she had moved to the East, and in her only other volume, *So Many Daughters*, which was composed much later and also in the East, the landscape element she used most often for an impinging image was mountains.

I was a child who knew the mountains well,
 Rode the high ranges daily, watched the sky
 Chime like a bell in the clarity of light

But knowing mountains made me fear the face
 Of my own mother. I saw imaged there
 My certain aging into chiseled stone;

(*"Jane Matthew," in Jane Matthew and
 Other Poems, p. 20*)

Strange that those tiny breasts
 Knew mountains for their pain;

(*"To Her Own Girlhood," Ibid., p. 120*)

Until at last, beyond a sudden turn,
 The meadows were before me like a thought
 Woven with childhood images of search.
 Only the stain of mountains on the sky!

(*"Mountain Meadow," in So Many
 Daughters, p. 45*)

12. "The Blue Room," *Jane Matthew and Other Poems*, pp. 106-07.

Toward what pinnacle climbs the earth?
Where the envisioned breast against a cloud?
From the sunk bottom of the sea the urge
Of waters lifting higher cannot rest
Upon the beach, must climb with loud
Clamour the cliff, must lift the crest
Of tide till wave surge

Over dune and dunes run into hills,
And hills skip mountainward, and mountains fly
Into blue ranges, till the peak fulfills
Its purpose and is carved upon the snow;
(“Pyramidal Earth,” *ibid.*, p. 56)

Another motif image that sprang from her native scene was the rock wren.

... What music played
From those tall throats of rock was never heard
Save by those desert wanderers who stayed
Looking on stone too long. A rock wren stirred
And shrilled to heaven, heaven shrilled to light,
(“The Blue Room,” *Jane Matthew and
Other Poems*, p. 79)

The thin uncanny cutting of the chord,
A rock wren singing on the shrillest note
Ears may encompass, splitting like a sword
The silk that folds a sleeping heart from death.
(“High Meadows,” *ibid.*, p. 115)

And after she had passed the age of sixty:

Rock Wren
What was not meant to hear
By human ear
Suddenly came clear;
Some tiny throat
Note beyond highest note
Gave the piny dusk
Freedom from fear.

The triangle of sound
 Above a rocky mound
 Rang itself round
 But you walked with me,
 Deaf to such bravery,
 Laughing made no response
 To the high litany.¹³

In most of her poetry, especially as her writing matured and firmed, the landscape details that she noted were severely few. This was not because she learned to live in the "city day." Compared with most poets who are identifiable with a landscape because they remain in one even though they may have moved away from it, she used nature imagery sparingly. The mountainous desert persisted within her as a scene that was more of an ideating activity than a backgrounding picture. And nature was not her subject; she did not exploit it, either as its "lover" or hater. Whitehead has said, though in a much more complicated context, "Thought is wider than nature."¹⁴ Where nature as Nature provides the Navajo with deities, company, a rationale, and even with what might be called a rhetoric, it inhabited her inner scene with symbolical animations, and something too of a "rhetoric." That is, she, like the Indian, found in the natural scene a source of articulateness.

I do not mean she made any conscious applications of the Indian's poetics. She did not have to. The parallel recurrences, for example, which she analyzed as a scholar, tallied with what she must have sensed throughout her girlhood as a listener with a superb ear, even though she knew not many of the Indian words. Decades later and thousands of miles away, her ideas and tones plotted themselves toward significances just as much removed perhaps but in accordance with the early modes that had become "second nature" with her.

As she pointed out, "Modern Irish and Scottish poetry, like English songs [emphasis hers], runs strongly to a parallelism similar to that of the Navajo."¹⁵ And likewise, to be sure, in her own verses there are parallelistic passages, and in the verses of other poets too,

13. *Poetry*, Vol. 91, Nov. 1957.

14. *The Concept of Nature*, by Alfred North Whitehead. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957, p. 13.

15. "American Indian Poetry," p. 41.

not necessarily attributable to Indian influence. So let us not deal here with such instances.

Let us consider instead another process. "First Day of Autumn" begins

Haze gone and the outlines clear;
Each tree its own extension and its round,¹⁶

Here is the *idea* of self-reproduction; it is put forth without the aid of repetition as expressive form. But in "Sun Dial"¹⁷ actual repetition is used to express the idea of a momentous repetition, and she achieves a kind of parallelism that is her own:

Those sleeping in the valley have not seen
Light on the mountains, mountains green
With the pale blades of daylight.
They waken late and test an hour
Where like a shadow of a tower on a tower
Mountain over mountain passes.

The phenomenon of reflection also enables her marvelously in this conceptual parallelism of hers:

Across this mirror, sculpturesque, a swan
Moves with motion, centered, light enscrolled,
Sings until death, black swan on swan of gold,
Doubles the dark scythe in the dawn.
(*"The Black Swan," So Many Daughters, p. 24*)

And in "Twin Mirror":

The portioned is always bitter;
Lips waste not!
But facing both ways, yet
Unable to forget
Either the hand or its veins,

16. *So Many Daughters, p. 34.*

17. *Ibid., p. 18.* An earlier version appears in *Jane Matthew and Other Poems, p. 142.*

Grow well acquainted so
 With what you may not know:
 Watch how the body can define
 No longer the line,
 How face is foe:
 Till night alone is doubled in the mirror
 And every candle blows its image out.

(*So Many Daughters*, p. 20)

"On the Lake" also reduplicates toward a stunning consummation:

Where star within a wetter star is fallen,
 Till in an inexactitude of wonder,
 Eye within eye, within an eye—
 Heaven is no more over us than under.

(*So Many Daughters*, p. 57)

Though this happens on the calm surface of water instead of in the depths of a rocky desert, it is probably not far from the Navajo's (and the Pueblo Indian's) way of thinking.

I have given in these comments her leafage rather than her full flowering. For an expression of this I must defer to Ben Belitt's tribute made in the spring following Eda Lou Walton's death in December 1961.

The Published Writings of Eda Lou Walton*

BOOKS

Dawn Boy—Blackfoot and Navajo Songs. With an Introduction by Witter Bynner. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1926.

The City Day—An Anthology of Recent American Poetry. New York: Ronald Press, 1929.

Jane Matthew and Other Poems. New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1931.

Turquoise Boy and White Shell Girl. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1933.

This Generation—A Selection of British and American Literature from 1914 to the Present with Historical and Critical Essays. (George Kummer Anderson, co-author.) Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1939. Second edition, 1949.

So Many Daughters. New York: Bookman Associates, 1952.

ARTICLES

"Navajo Poetry, An Interpretation." *Texas Review*, Vol. 7, April 1922, pp. 192-210.

"Navaho Verse Rhythms." *Poetry*, Vol. 24, April 1924, pp. 40-44.

"American Indian Poetry." [T. T. Waterman, co-author.] *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 27, Jan.-Mar. 1925, pp. 25-52.

"Navajo Song Patterning." *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 43, 1930, pp. 105-18.

"Intolerable Towers." *The English Journal*, Vol. 19, April 1930, pp. 267-81.

"Death in the Desert." *Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. 10, Aug. 26, 1933, pp. 61-63.

POEMS IN PERIODICALS SINCE LAST VOLUME, "SO MANY DAUGHTERS"

"Precarious Scene." *The Nation*, Vol. 185, Sept. 7, 1957, p. 115.

"Those Whom Death Leaves," "Golden Anniversary," "An Old Song," "Portrait," "Now Must the Mind Write," "Rock Wren," "At Bay." *Poetry*, Vol. 91, Nov. 1957, pp. 84-88.

"First Snow." *The Commonweal*, Vol. 161, Dec. 6, 1957, p. 253.

"Third Stair." *The Nation*, Vol. 188, Jan. 31, 1959, p. 104.

"Clock and Three Candles," "Epitaph (For a Bedlington Terrier)," "In Passage Tropical." *Poetry*, Vol. 94, May 1959, pp. 89-91.

"Harvest." *The New Yorker*, Vol. 35, Nov. 28, 1959, p. 47.

"Mid Winter." *The Commonweal*, Vol. 7, Dec. 18, 1959, p. 342.

"A Necessary Miracle." *The New Yorker*, Vol. 36, Feb. 20, 1960, p. 120.

"From the Top Down," "To Render Harmless." *Poetry*, Vol. 99, Feb. 1962, pp. 304-05.

*Suzanne Henig is compiling a complete bibliography to be included in her book-length biographical and critical study, now in preparation. The lists will include titles of the poems (over a hundred) that have been published in periodicals and of the (approximately three hundred) book reviews.