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Because it is not often that the original seed from which a poem grew can be identified, and that growth traced, a single manuscript sentence in an undated notebook among Edwin Muir’s papers in the National Library of Scotland is of particular importance. For that sentence, “Now I lie down and wrap the night about me,”¹ is manifestly the seed out of which developed the entire poem, “Day and Night,” printed in Muir’s last collection, One Foot in Eden. But merely to say this, of course, is not enough. The case requires proof. Just how did the poem emerge from this beginning? How did its three stanzas unfold, image by image and syllable by syllable, from this one sentence? Naturally, there is now no way to reconstruct the process of composition in Muir’s mind; yet from careful study of both poem and sentence, as well as of Muir’s other writings—particularly his Collected Poems and the two versions of his autobiography—it is possible to show a pattern of development from manuscript to poem, from seed to final flower.

Obviously, no proof is needed to show the likeness between the original sentence and the first two lines of the poem: “I wrap the blanket of the

¹Undated manuscript note, Muir Collection, Department of Manuscripts, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.
night / About me, fold on fold."

The two are almost identical. But once the poem continues, different ideas and images inevitably appear. Take the four lines:

And remember how as a child
Lost in the newness of the light
I first discovered what is old
From the night and the soft night wind.

Now there is a child, there is daylight and a contrast of day with night and new with old, none of which were apparently present in that first sentence. Yet when carefully considered, that sentence does contain all these elements in latent form. For although it mentions no child, it definitely suggests a child’s action in wrapping the night, like a security blanket, about him. More, the first lines of the poem confirm this suggestion. Both sentence and poem evoke a childhood scene, with the child lying bundled in bed, secure and warm. Again, the first clause of the manuscript sentence—"Now I lie down"—points plainly to a child’s world and a child’s trust in the protection of sleep, since these are words that echo the traditional children’s bedtime prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep, / I pray the Lord my soul to keep." When the child himself materializes in the third line of the poem, therefore, his appearance simply makes explicit what was implicit in the original note.

So, too, are the other major themes and structural patterns which determine the course of the poem implicit in that note. For instance, the image of night as the child’s blanket, a source of warmth and comfort, readily leads to the contrasting idea that the day is somehow less trustworthy, while this in turn leads both to the child’s daytime confusion in the poem’s fourth line and to the continuing opposition, throughout the poem, of day and night, light and dark. What is more, diction and structure of the manuscript sentence indicate that the speaker, the "I," is not a child. Rather, it is an adult—indeed, according to the third stanza, an old man—who by repeating a childhood gesture recaptures the child he used to be. As the poem’s third line states, he “remembers” that child’s feelings, and by this remembering, which is rooted in the manuscript note, he sets up the contrast between man and child, present and past, which becomes another ongoing pattern in the poem, reflected not only in the imagery but even in the syntax, in the alternation of present and past tenses.

Still another pair of opposites—new and old—likewise develops logically from that original sentence, since where present and past are implied,
as we have just seen, there must necessarily be new and old. According to ancient tradition, too, there must also be new and old where there are day and night. For in all creation myths the day is secondary. Night is primary, pre-existent; the day is made new. Yet here a paradox develops. Although day and the present suggest the new, and night and the past the old, it is the old man in the poem who is nevertheless associated with the new, and the child with the old. Is the thread of argument tangled? No; what seems a tangle is actually a prefiguring of the poem’s eventual reconciliation of the opposite poles on which it is structured. As in so many of his poems, here too in “Day and Night” Muir has used paradox to arrive at the final harmony his vision perceived; and the discernible presence of paradox in the very germ of the poem is simply one more proof that the shape of the whole is indeed there, in that germ.

Yet the seed is not the whole, only the beginning. The next step, therefore, is to follow the poem as it grows by attracting related images from Muir’s entire range of experience, memory, and dream into the pattern preordained in the seed. The child, for example, who already in the manuscript sentence was safely folded in the night and by implication lost in the day, is very much an embodiment of Muir’s own childhood experience, as he recorded it in An Autobiography. Seeking the cause of his early sense of closeness to little things, such as certain flowers and leaves, lichen on rocks, even a yellow toy whistle, he suggests that a “reasonable” explanation might be the “fact that every object is new to a child, that he sees it without understanding it, or understands it with a different understanding from that of experience...” What, indeed, then, could be more bewildering than the multitude of strange objects from an adult world that the child sees all around him, and sees moreover, as Muir points out (p. 20), from a level of only two or three feet from the ground? No wonder he is, in the poem’s fourth line, “Lost in the newness of the light,” not at home in a country where he lacks experience to judge things, and where the only relationship to be found is with things as small as himself.

On the other hand—and until the end there is always an “other hand” in this poem, since it grows by swinging from one pole to its contrary—the night is a refuge from this newness; and in the sixth and seventh lines: “I first discovered what is old / From the night and the soft night wind,” the poem shifts back from the day to the protecting dark. But more than a shift to an opposite pole takes place here. Because the night has now become teacher as well as protector, there is a crucial change in the character of the poem. Mystery enters, suspense develops, the pace quickens, all as a result of the question suggested in these two lines: What is it that is “old,” that the night teaches? To increase the suspense and the
pace and compound the mystery, the poem provides no immediate answer. Instead, it veers back once more to the day and for the remaining five lines of the stanza elaborates on a child’s experience of the day, as Muir remembered it:

For in the daytime all was new,
Moving in the light and in the mind
All at once, thought, shape and hue.
Extravagant novelty too wild
For the new eyes of a child.

But underneath these lines, the question of the preceding lines goes on working, accelerating the drive to the second stanza, with its powerful, provocative opening line: “The night, the night alone is old,” and intensifying the force of the answer that stanza gives.

All the while, too, the sound pattern of the poem accentuates and channels this drive towards the second stanza. The “fold/child” rhyme of the first quatrain of course refers back to the manuscript association of the child with the protective character of the night, but it also leads forward to the crucial “old” of the fifth line, where the question of what the night teaches is first posed. Then the “wild/child” rhyme of the first stanza’s final couplet joins in, to make a persistent chiming that points directly to the first line of the second stanza, where “old” is the rhyme word once more.

Clearly, this line is charged with a special significance, which its own distinctive arrangement of sounds makes even clearer. There are the emphatically repeated “night”, the alliteration of “night” with the “n” of “alone,” and the echoing vowels in “alone” and “old.” With all this, there can be no doubt but that something important is to be said.

What is said, however, depends on two very special areas of Muir’s life—his childhood in the Orkney Islands and his dreams. We have seen that he retained from his early years the feeling of what is was like to be little and lost in adult surroundings. But he retained as well a rather contrary memory, which he believed is every child’s heritage: an original vision of existence, a sense of being in a place where he is at home and where, according to An Autobiography, “the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life of every human being are related to the sky overarching them, as if the sky fitted the earth and the earth the sky” (p. 33). This is of course an image of the Orkney Muir knew, but it was also, for him, the world as it was first created; it was Eden. Since Eden is already lost, however, although as Muir observed, the child does not realize this until he grows into adolescence, it is really a world that lies far back in time, both in the child’s past and in the history of the race. It is “old” in the very special sense of the word peculiar to Muir. For what “old” connotes in this sense and in the poem is neither “ancient” nor “outworn,” but something
altogether different, derived from Muir’s feelings about a child’s first perceptions of the life around him. This “old” evokes the world as it was in the beginning, before the Fall.

Along with this childhood sense of an unfallen world, Muir’s dream experiences enter the poem. Most adults, he recognized, no longer remember their early intuition of the world, nor would Muir perhaps have remembered, despite his recollection of so many childhood impressions, were it not for his dreams. Throughout his life, they kept that first vision alive for him, as repeated passages in An Autobiography tell us. “Certain dreams,” he wrote, convinced him that every “child has this vision, in which there is a completer harmony of all things with each other than he will ever know again” (p. 33). Or later, “Sleep tells us things both about ourselves and the world which we could not discover otherwise” (p. 54). Dreams, sleep, the night, in other words, played a part in Muir’s life that most of us never imagine. They taught him about that part of reality that the waking day keeps hidden; and when we see this, we see what lies behind the mysterious transition in the poem, from night as protector to night as teacher and guide. For Muir, night and dreams were the source of buried knowledge, a connection with the “old” first world; and it is this world, that still remains beneath the conscious business of daily living, that is invoked in Muir’s repeated use of the word “old” and in the content of the entire second stanza:

The night, the night alone is old
And showed me only what I knew
Knew, yet never had been told:
A speech that from the darkness grew
Too deep for daily tongues to say,
Archaic dialogue of a few
Upon the sixth of the seventh day.
And shapes too simple for a place
In the day’s shrill complexity
Came, and were more natural, more
Expected than my father’s face
Smiling across the open door,
More simple than the sanded floor
In unexplained simplicity.

Because it is this “old” world that a child naturally inhabits until he enters the world of experience, of the “day’s shrill complexity,” he is completely at home in this first, simple place. It is a place of which he already “Knew, yet never had been told.” Further, the language spoken there, the “Speech that from the darkness grew / Too deep for daily tongues to say,” is already familiar to him, too. For although in one sense
this language of the dark is the language of dreams, the speech Muir referred to when he wrote that “our dreams and ancestral memories speak a different language” (p. 48) from that of the waking world, and tell us different things, in another sense it is far more. It is also the language spoken on the “sixth or the seventh day” of Creation, since from “Ballad of the Soul” in his *First Poems* to an entire sequence in his last volume, the question of what the world was like in the beginning continued to fascinate Muir. He experimented with it in poem after poem. No wonder, then, that when the child’s perception of the “old,” the early world, took shape in “Day and Night,” Muir’s own preoccupation with the Genesis theme should be drawn into the poem too, and with marvelous effect. When the two trisyllabic Greek derivatives, “archaic dialogue,” of the fifth line in this second stanza suddenly break into the slow march of Anglo-Saxon monosyllables in the preceding lines, it is as if the tongues of those few creatures inhabiting Eden then had miraculously for the first time broken into speech.

In the remaining lines of this stanza there is yet another instance of the accretion of dream and memory around the poem’s central seed, since what these lines present is a clearer picture of the “old” world, the child’s country where everything is accepted because everything is familiar and expected. The miracle of speech astonishes the reader, but not, apparently, the child. In his mind, the way things are is the way they should be, because that is how they have always been. Whatever the “shapes” about him, they are naturally a part of this original society. They are more simple and reassuring than his own father’s smiling face, because it was actually as such images of immemorial changelessness and simplicity, Muir remembered in *An Autobiography*, that he first saw his father and mother. Looking back over the years when he knew them “as a man and a woman, like, or almost like, other men and women,” Muir recalled that as a child he did not see them this way. To him then “they were fixed allegorical figures in a timeless landscape.” Further, “their allegorical changelessness made them more, not less solid, as if they were condensed into something more real than humanity....” (p. 24). As if, indeed, they were the primeval “shapes” of Eden, so that in the poem’s movement back in time, back beyond father or mother, both parents are naturally displaced by their own images, and the undefined “shapes” assume their simplicity, solidity, and timeless.

From that farthest point in the past and the dark, however, the poem now swings back once more to the light and returns to the present where it began. In the last stanza, it is again the adult speaker of the first few lines who is speaking, again looking back on his childhood:
A man now, gone with time so long—
My youth to myself grown fabulous
As an old land's memories, a song
To trouble or to pleasure us—
I try to fit that world to this,
The hidden to the visible play,
Would have them both, would nothing miss,
Learn from the shepherd of the dark,
Here in the light, the paths to know
That thread the labyrinthine park,
And the great Roman roads that go
Striding across the untrodden day

But now there is a difference. Now instead of trying to recover his childhood in his imagination, he steps back to view his youth from the distance of age, and with this shift in perspective attracts to the poem still another cluster of perceptions that are peculiarly Muir's, and that need to be recognized as such to be fully understood. When the speaker calls his youth "fabulous," for example, in the line: "My youth to myself grown fabulous," he uses a word that not only bears Muir's signature but carries his particular slant of meaning. "Fabulous" to him was not "fantastic," as it is often understood, but more real that everyday reality. The title of the first version of An Autobiography, for instance, was The Story and the Fable, with the story referring to the narrative of surface events and the fable to the underlying universal reality revealed, as we have seen in discussing this poem, in childhood, in dreams, and in moments of vision. In a famous passage in An Autobiography, where he describes the Orkneys where he was born, he says they were "a place where there was no great distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous" (p. 14); and again the "fabulous" is not unreal, but an extension of reality—an extension now being lost, Muir grieved, "under the pressure of compulsory [and therefore standardized] education" (p. 14). To give just one more example: in his 1946 collection, The Voyage, a poem called "The Myth" applies this approximate synonym of "fable" to his childhood: "My childhood all a myth / Enacted in a distant isle."4 But there too the myth is the true reality; it is what endures. After the passage of a lifetime, "Unshakeable arise alone / The reverie and the name." Thus although the "fabulous" in "Day and Night," so smoothly equated to a "song" or an "old land's memories," may seem at first glance to dissolve the speaker's youth into mere shadow, in terms of Muir's usage it does quite the opposite. Both "song" and "memories," indeed, like "fable," are the stuff of the timeless reality that underlies time.

4Collected Poems, p. 144.
Once this is understood, the rest of the stanza follows logically, as otherwise it does not. It is because the “fabulous,” the “hidden” world is so real, as the entire poem up to this point has demonstrated, that the speaker wants to fit it together with the world whose reality we all take for granted: the “visible,” the ordinary. A life in which the two worlds are at variance is inevitably fragmented. A life where they are integrated can recover, on a new level which incorporates the shock of experience, the wholeness and harmony of the child’s first vision. And it is the purpose of this final stanza, as was prefigured in the original manuscript sentence, to achieve this reconciliation and recover this vision. In a strong rhythmic pulse, like a wave gathering weaker currents into its rush, the stanza brings all the opposites on which the poem has been built—man and child, present and past, day and dark, new and old—into a final harmony as the speaker seeks “to fit that world to this, / The hidden to the visible play.”

Yet seeking through personal effort alone is not enough. With a sudden lift of tone and an opening of meaning to still wider reaches than have so far been touched, the poem turns from the simple volition implied in “I try to fit” and “Would have them both, would nothing miss,” to a kind of prayer, which recalls the prayer embedded in the manuscript note from which the whole poem has grown. There, in that sentence, was the hint of the child’s “Now I lay me down to sleep.” Here, in the phrase, “shepherd of the dark,” is a hint of the Twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd.” Certainly both are related, so that the poem comes full circle on this level too, as in the return to the present tense. Almost as certainly the second prayer springs from the first. But in any case both acknowledge that the deliberate will is not sufficient to achieve the unity of conscious and unconscious life—of day and night—that the speaker here desires. Only through the power of the hidden reality made known to us in dream and vision can that unity be won; and it is therefore to the “shepherd of the dark,” the night as yet more than teacher—as priest, and even perhaps as Christ, since Muir decided near the end of his life that he was a Christian—that the speaker turns for guidance through both day and night.

Just as the meaning of night is once more enlarged here, so the paths through which the night must guide us are further complicated, since even as the poem draws to its close—curving back to the manuscript prayer and asserting on a deeper level the original need for night—it still continues to exert a magnetic pull on related images in Muir’s mind. With “the paths.../ That thread the labyrinthine park” the whole constellation of labyrinths and mazes, roads running crooked and leading nowhere, that recur over and over in Muir’s poems, particularly in his long poem called “The Labyrinth,” now all enter into this poem too. Yet the case is not the same. Where earlier the labyrinth had no exit, or only a dubious one—even the relatively affirmative “The Labyrinth” concludes with a return of the image in dreams—here there is no question but that a way out does exist. The key to that way can be learned from the shepherd of the dark. What was an image of frustration and despair in other poems now becomes a
measure of this poem's triumph over frustration and despair. Inevitably, that earlier desperation continues to sound here, like background noise, but it serves to emphasize by contrast the speaker's new mood of affirmation, possibly even of faith.

Similarly, the prayer here recalls a much earlier poem, "The Day," from Muir's 1943 volume, The Narrow Place. That too was a prayer for the speaker to be shown the right road, or rather to be given the "clarity and love" to know and choose the already "in eternity written and hidden way" that was his own. And that sense, that the road is there waiting, if one has the "clarity and love," the insight, to recognize it, of course underlies and reinforces the plea in "Day and Night." It is such insight that the speaker would learn from the "shepherd of the dark." At the same time, the concept of an eternally established road on which "The Day" was based, not only foreshadows the tremendous image of the concluding lines in "Day and Night": "...the great Roman roads that go / striding across the untrodden day." but also illustrates a shade of meaning in that image which might not otherwise be apparent: the direction to be followed, the direction that leads out of the endless maze and into a life where day and night fit together in harmony, is a direction imprinted from the beginning on the soul. "Before I took the road, / Direction ravished my soul," Muir wrote in "A Birthday" in The Voyage, and that intimation of a road that is right because it is one's own, of a way clear and straight as any of the Roman roads that can still be seen, cutting across the landscape of contemporary Britain, if one only listens to the true sources of wisdom, brings the whole structure of "Day and Night" to a fitting close.

For the poem too has followed a predestined course, from the original picture of the child lying down at night and praying the Lord his soul to keep from the day's confusion, to the final image of the grown man praying likewise, to the "shepherd of the dark" for the knowledge to keep his soul on the right road through both day and night. All along the way, as Muir's deepest intuitions, memories and dreams have clustered around the original seed noted in his manuscript book, that seed, that sentence: "Now I lie down and wrap the night about me," has determined the pattern in which all the poem's images have been arranged, the meanings they have accumulated, and the direction in which they have led.

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5Ibid., p. 122.

6Ibid., p. 158.