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References to Darkness

A study of darkness in a selection of poems by Wendell Berry

Lars Norén

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Supervisor: Kiki Lindell

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Abstract

The writer, farmer, Christian pacifist, and “eco-poet” Wendell Berry has written and published novels, essays, and poetry since early 1960s. Examples of recurring themes in Berry’s literary work are the close relationship between farmer and the earth, the importance of belonging to a place/community, and having trust in the Creation. Examples of imagery in his poetry are song/singing, birds, trees – and darkness. The literal meaning of darkness is ‘absence of light’, and assuming that the figurative meaning of darkness in Berry’s poetry on some level also refers to the earth/soil, this essay examines the imagery of darkness in a selection of Berry’s poems. Using close reading, the cluster of meanings referred to by the word ‘dark’ or any of its derivations has been studied in nine poems from seven poetry collections from 1964 to 1994. The conclusion shows that darkness is rarely just ‘absence of light’, but refers to a wide range of figurative meanings, the most prominent being the dark soil/earth with its potentiality to transform death into new life.

Introduction

The American writer, novelist, farmer, environmental activist, Christian pacifist, and “eco-poet” Wendell Berry was born on August 5, 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky. He comes from a long line of farmers in Kentucky, but he began his professional career as an academic and writer in New York, and it was not until he was in his thirties that he also became a farmer.

Berry studied English at University of Kentucky where he completed his M.A. in 1957. The year after, he went to Stanford University’s creative writing program. He lived in Italy and France during 1961. He taught English at New York University from 1962 to 1964, when he began teaching creative writing at the University of Kentucky. He published his first novel in 1960, *Nathan Coulter*, and his first poem in 1964, *November Twenty Six Nineteen Hundred Sixty Three*.

In 1965 Berry left the literary life of New York and a promising position at New York University, to return to where he was born and become a farmer on Lane’s Landing, a small farm in Henry County, Kentucky. At the time, there was a belief among intellectuals that living outside the urban, literary context would lead to an “intellectual death; cut off from the cultural springs of the metropolis” (“A Native Hill” 6). His colleagues tried to convince him to stay in New York, but Berry had never really left Kentucky, was still writing about it, and felt that it “was my fate [...] one that I could not leave behind simply by going to another place” (“A Native Hill” 5). The move to become a farmer, besides being a writer, and with it the choice to stay and work in one place for the rest of his life, fertilized Berry’s authorship and enriched his writing: “My language increased and strengthened, and sent my mind into the place like a live root system. [...] my mind became the root of my life rather than its sublimation” (“A Native Hill” 7).

Berry has written articles for Rodale Press (for example in *Organic Gardening and Farming* and *The New Farm*), sixteen volumes of essays, eight novels, fifty-one short stories, and twenty-five books of poetry. His essays and articles cover subjects like sustainable farming, the relation between agriculture and culture, belonging to a place, death as part of life, and Christianity. Berry’s novels are written over a long period of time, and read as a whole they form a chronicle and an exploration of the characters in an imaginary town called Port William. Berry published his first poetry collection *The Broken Ground* in 1964, and to date he has published another ten collections, the last one *Leavings* in 2010.

The themes and imagery in Berry's poetry are very much rooted in his life as a farmer and inspired by his faith: the returning seasons, the inevitability of death as part of life, the fertility of the soil, trusting the wild in the Creation. Previous related research deals with, for example, Berry's ideas and thoughts on the importance of belonging to a community and devote oneself to a place (John E. McEntyre, "Practicing Resurrection: Community and Continuity in Wendell Berry's 'A Place on Earth'"), the farmer as a husband to the earth (Jack Hicks, "Wendell Berry's Husband to the World: A Place on Earth"), and the theology in his Sabbath poems (Lucas Nossaman, "The Wisdom of 'The Farm': Sabbath Theology And Wendell Berry's Pastoralism").

The topic for this essay is the imagery of darkness in the poetry of Berry. The literal and figurative meanings of the word 'dark' and its different derivations (hereafter: dark/-ness¹) will be studied in a selection of poems from *New Collected Poems*, a compilation from 2012 of Berry's previous poetry collections.

Darkness is one example of the recurring imagery in Berry's poetry. Others are trees, birds, singing, and dancing. They are powerful and intriguing images, which invite the reader to reread the poems to discern further meanings beyond the immediate reference of a word. In a rationally ideal language, like a computer language, each word would refer to only one meaning, but "the word, as the poet uses it, has to be conceived of, not as a discrete particle of meaning, but as a potential of meaning, a nexus or cluster of meanings" (Brooks 210). The literal meaning of dark/-ness is 'absence of light'. However, figuratively it has the potential to refer to many other meanings.

When it comes to dark/-ness in Berry's poetry, this seems to be very much true. Sometimes it is obvious that it is used in its literal meaning, like in the following lines from the poem "Before Dark":

The splashes went on out of hearing.
It was dark then. Somewhere
15 the night had accommodated him

Other times it seems that dark/-ness is used figuratively and refers to something else, like in the first five lines of the poem "The Snake":

1 At the end of October
I found on the floor of the woods
a small snake whose back

¹ When I refer to the 'word dark or any of its derivations', I use: dark/-ness. When I refer to darkness as a phenomenon, like any other phenomena, I use the appropriate word. When I quote, I use quotation marks, for example: "dark".

was patterned with the dark
5 of the dead leaves he lay on.

What does “the dark / of the dead leaves” mean in this poem? Assuming that “the dark” refers to its literal meaning, absence of light, it could mean that the shadows of the leaves form a pattern on the snake’s back. However, dark/-ness can also refer figuratively to the earth, in this poem the decay of the dead leaves, which forms a pattern on the back of the snake. It makes sense; the snake is probably on his way down into the earth for the Winter sleep, which is implicated later in the poem when the speaker continues his walk: “I think of him [the snake] / lying below the frost,” (16–17).

As previously mentioned, the literal meaning of darkness is ‘absence of light’, and on one level it always refers to this meaning. However, dealing with a figurative and multi-layered language like poetry, and considering Berry’s background and occupation as a farmer, and the recurring themes and imagery of farming in his poetry, I think it is feasible to assume that darkness in Berry’s poetry, on some level, also has a figurative reference to the earth/soil.

The aim of this essay is to study the imagery of darkness in a selection of Berry’s poetry by examining the cluster of literal and figurative meanings referred to by dark/-ness. To do this, I am going to use close reading. It is a method of careful, attentive, and repeated reading of literature, which “extends our appreciation of the aesthetic features of a work, shows us something about what it may mean, and opens it up for critical debate” (Frederico 6). I think that corresponds well to the aim of this essay and the subject of the study being poetry. Further, “[c]lose reading is essentially about understanding different levels of coherence in written communication” (Frederico 10), which I think makes it suitable for studying different layers of literal and figurative meanings.

There are eleven poetry collections from 1964 to 2010 in *New Collected Poems* from 2012. I have chosen nine poems from seven collections to include in this study. The first criterion for the selection is that the poem contains at least one occurrence of dark/-ness. The second criterion is that I as a reader respond to the use of dark/-ness in the poem from a first reading. The rationale for this is my belief that a poem is an expression of an individual soul – to another: “literary reading is still fundamentally relational, or *intersubjective*: a self-to-other, self-to-world, and even self-to-self experience” (Frederico 10). When reading poetry, I am primarily relating to another soul, which “must return to us the unity

of the experience itself as man knows it in his own experience. The poem [is] an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience” (Brooks 212–213). The reason for a poet to use a word figuratively, is a desire to create a feeling in the reader, and that feeling, that response, is a good indicator for which poems to include in the study. That is also why I have excluded poems from the collections *Clearing* from 1977, *A Part* from 1980, *Given* from 2005, and *Leavings* from 2010; because darkness in these collections did not cause a response in me. Thirdly, keeping in mind the first two criteria, I have chosen at least one poem from each of the seven other collections from 1964 to 1994, to get an overview over time.

The selected poems (in full-length or selected stanzas) will be presented together with corresponding close readings and discussion in the following section, beginning with two stanzas from the poem “Elegy” from *The Broken Ground*, 1964, following the order they appear in *New Collected Poems*.

Selected poems

The convention of the titles in this section: “[title of poem]”. [*name of collection*, its publication year]. ([page in *New Collected Poems, NCP*]). There is no numbering of lines in the primary source, it is added here for convenience, unless the poem is shorter than five lines.

“Elegy”. *The Broken Ground*, 1964. (NCP 3)

This free verse poem consists of five stanzas and stretches over two and a half pages. It is dedicated to Berry’s paternal grandfather Pryor Thomas Berry. It describes his death and the following funeral. For this essay, I have chosen to read stanza 2 and 4.

The second stanza consists of six lines. Dark/-ness occurs once, in line 4, but the whole stanza seems dense with it. Every line is heavy with meaning; no words are there just for rhymes or for fun or for creating double meaning or ambiguity, and besides “dark”, the words “night” and “shadow” signify darkness. Also “sleep” and “silence” merge into the same sphere of reference and take on a quality of darkness:

2.

- 1 We sleep; he only wakes
Who is unshapen in a night of snow.
His shadow in the shadow of the earth
Moves the dark to wholeness.
- 5 We wait beside his body here, his image
Shape of silence in the room.

The dead man is “unshapen” (2); without shape. The soul has just left his body, which is described in the first stanza: “At nightfall our father turned his eyes away”. Our living soul seems to be what gives us shape as distinctive individuals with different characteristics, rather than our physical bodies. This shapeless state makes him “more like the land [and] less separated from the earth [...] In death, he is waking to full communion with the earth” (Collins 16). While the living sleep, the dead wakes, into the earth. This is an example of the recurring imagery of the intimate relationship between earth/soil and death in Berry’s poetry. Other examples can be found in “To Know The Dark” and “Enriching The Earth” in this essay.

What moves the dark is “His shadow in the shadow of the earth” (3). The dead body is a shadow of the person alive, and the body will soon be buried in the ground: the shadow of the earth. The dead body serves fertilizing the soil, the more dead things in it,

the more alive it is: “If a healthy soil is full of death it is also full of life [...] Eventually this dead matter becomes soluble, available as food for plants, and life begins to rise up again, out of the soil into the light” (“The Use of Energy” 90). This relationship between man and earth is expressed by the same word, “shadow”, for both, but with different figurative meanings.

A cycle of birth, life, and death closes with the funeral. The specific individual is dead, but life continues, because of death. Realizing this, “[m]oves the dark to wholeness” (4). Death is no longer a dark, abstract idea – a horrifying, pointless end of life – but a transformation into new life: “he is going to his final marriage, a union with the world through death which will help bring forth the fruit of another season” (Collins 16–17). The dark soil gets its full meaning, reaches its full potential, when it receives the dead which will rebirth into new life – the dark is whole. This image of the darkness as a mediator of life and death is a recurrent theme, both in the next stanza and in the following poems.

The fourth stanza is seventeen lines long. It describes how the memory of the dead feels: “His words / Are sharp to memory as cold rain” (2–3); that the cycle of life and death is complete: “There is no more to add / To this perfection” (6–7); and how the world holds everything (line 12):

4.

1 River and earth and sun and wind disjoint,
Over his silence flow apart. His words
Are sharp to memory as cold rain
But are not ours.

5 We stare dumb
Upon the fulcrum dust, across which death
Lifts up our love. There is no more to add
To this perfection. We turn away
Into the shadow of his death.

10 Time in blossom and fruit and seed,
Time in the dust huddles in his darkness.
The world, spun in its shadow, holds all.
Until the morning comes his death is ours.

Until morning comes say of the blind bird:

15 His feet are netted with darkness, or he flies
His heart’s distance in the darkness of his eyes.
A season’s sun will light him no tree green.

The time of youth, power, and fruitfulness (line 10) contrasts the time he will be buried in

the dust (line 11). The time buried is not forever, it “huddles in his darkness” (11), as if waiting to blossom into new life again. The darkness seems to take on a figurative meaning of earth/soil, that holds both death and life, like the earth holds the living and the dead. This is a poem that “considers death, implicitly at least, in terms of farming and the seasonal death and rebirth of the crops” (Triggs 281). There are some general terms for growth, like “blossom and fruit and seed” (10), but no obvious specific terms of farming like “harvest”, “plowing”, or “sowing” in the fourth stanza. However, death does not seem to be final, but more a rebirth and a passage through the fertile darkness from one life to another.

Dark/-ness in lines 15 and 16 are different from line 11. Here, dark/-ness seem to refer to the utter ‘absence of light’: blindness; no sight. A bird without sight cannot fly, he would sit quietly on a twig, his feet “netted with darkness” (15), which renders darkness a quality of being limiting; captivating. If the bird does fly, carried by a blind trust, he has done a leap of faith that seems to transform the darkness from what nets his feet, into “the darkness of his eyes”. It might refer to blindness, or dark eyes, but also to a kind of intuitive sight by which he is flying “[h]is heart’s distance” (16).

The figurative meanings of dark/-ness are intriguing in these two stanzas. In the second stanza, “the dark” seems to refer to the earth/soil, which is moved to wholeness by the burying of the dead. It can also refer to a frightening idea of death as the final end of life, which transforms into an acceptance of death as an inevitable part of the cycle of life. The reference to the earth/soil seems to be found in the fourth stanza as well. This imagery of death and the soil with its capacity for transforming death into new life is found in both stanzas, and it also recurs in other poems like “To Know The Dark” and “Enriching The Earth”. This supports the overall claim made in the introduction that Berry’s darkness on some level also refers figuratively to earth/soil. The last two occurrences of dark/-ness, however, refer to blindness. They are rather different from the dark/-ness referring to the soil, which is more tangible and present, while the other is more absent. But they share the potentiality for transformation: in the first case from death to life, in the second from something limiting to something that seems like an intuitive sight or vision.

“The Design of The House: Ideal And Hard Time”. *Findings*, 1969. (NCP 33)

This is a free verse poem of ten stanzas that stretches over six and a half pages. For this essay, I have chosen to read the third stanza of fifteen lines. It resembles “Elegy” in its use

of disjointed, careful observations that do not always follow the expected chain of events but form an impression with its own logic. Further they resemble each other in that this stanza also depicts winter, snow, darkness, a quiet house, and in the end some sort of trust/faith:

3.

- 1 Winter nights the house sleeps,
a dry seedhead in the snow
falling and fallen, the white
and dark and depth of it, continuing
5 slow impact of silence.
- The dark
- rooms hold our heads on pillows, waiting
day, through the snow falling and fallen
in the darkness between inconsecutive
10 dreams. The brain burrows in its earth
and sleeps,
trusting dawn, though the sun's
light is a light without precedent, never
proved ahead of its coming, waited for
15 by the law that hope has made it.

With two different verb forms, “falling and fallen” (3), Berry sketches a dark and silent landscape heavy with snow. The first occurrence of dark/-ness is found in line 4, where “dark” seems to be used in its literal meaning, describing the darker shades of snow during a night of snowfall. A figurative meaning of “dark” could be that it refers to oblivion: the deeper the snow is, the deeper of what is beneath it falls into the darkness of our memories.

The use of enjambment, when “the meaning runs over from one poetic line to the next [and] the delay of meaning creates a tension [from] the pause of the line-end” (Wikipedia), plays an important part in the next occurrence of dark/-ness. It is prominent already in the previous lines. The delays of meaning between “the snow / falling and fallen” (2–3), and “continuing / slow impact of silence” (4–5), are powerful in themselves; but they also create a dynamic tension in relation to the quietness of this stanza. However, the most powerful use of enjambment is perhaps in line 5. The silence emitting from the ending of line 5, “silence.”, and the space preceding “The dark” in line 6 seem to create a longer pause than usual between the lines. This highlights “The dark” strongly. At the same time, the reading wants to continue directly down to line 6, without the pause of the line-end, because of the position of “The dark” in line 6.

The enjambment in line 6 affects my interpretation of “The dark”. In the pause of

the line-end and the delay of meaning, I search for a figurative meaning of a noun, before my reading continues in the next line, where the grammatical function shifts to an adjective modifying the “rooms” (7). As a modifier, the meaning of “The dark” seems to be primarily literal: absence of light.

The last occurrence of dark/-ness is found in line 9. The image of the snowfall is reinforced by the repetition in the previous line, “falling and fallen” (8), the same construction as earlier, in line 3. The snow keeps falling “in the darkness” (9), in its literal sense referring to absence of light: the dark night. It could also refer figuratively to the sleep itself; the dreamless sleep “between inconsecutive / dreams” (9–10). In that sense, “darkness” (9) takes on a quality of nothingness or oblivion. And “falling and fallen” (8) seems to extend its reference to those sleeping; falling deeper into the darkness of sleep.

In the last lines (12–15), the darkness in this stanza is contrasted by a trust in the returning light of dawn. The darkness seems to encompass everything in this stanza, even the trust that the light will return in the morning, as it has done so far. The hope for the returning light seems like a seed of light in the dark, which gives the darkness a transforming quality, however not quite the same as the soil’s capacity for turning death into new life.

Though there are some resemblances in style and contents between this stanza and “Elegy”, dark/-ness has not the same figurative reference to earth and death in this poem. It seems to refer mostly to its literal meaning: absence of light. However, the first occurrence of dark/-ness, the “dark and depth of it [the snow]” (4) can have a figurative meaning of oblivion. The third occurrence, “darkness between inconsecutive / dreams” (9–10) can also take on a similar, figurative meaning of oblivion, or a kind of nothingness; emptiness. The references of dark/-ness in this poem do not support the overall claim in the introduction.

“The Want of Peace”. *Openings*, 1968. (NCP 78)

This is a free verse poem of 16 lines and two stanzas in which the speaker reflects on the simple things he desires, like “the fisherman’s silence” (6), or “the gardner’s musing on rows” (8), as opposed to the feeling of lacking the same things:

- 1 All goes back to the earth,
and so I do not desire
pride of excess or power,
but the contentments made
- 5 by men who have had little:
the fisherman’s silence

receiving the river's grace,
the gardner's musing on rows.

I lack the peace of simple things.
10 I am never wholly in place.
I find no peace or grace.
We sell the world to buy fire,
our way lighted by burning men,
and that has bent my mind
15 and made me think of darkness
and wish for the dumb life of roots.

The first stanza describes the speaker's desire for the simple things in life. It has a calm; gentle tone, supported by words like "contentments" (4), "little" (5), "silence" (6), "receiving" (7), "grace" (7), and "musing" (8). The second stanza contrasts the first in describing the want of the simple things and how that feels. It begins with a rhythmic repetition in the first three lines: "I lack...", "I am never...", "I find no..." (9, 10, 11). It creates a feeling of being disconnected, not rooted, not at home. The next two lines are a more general statement about mankind's relation to nature: "We sell the world to buy fire, / our way lighted by burning men," (12–13). The last three lines shifts focus back to the individual, and there is a similar rhythmic repetition as in the first three lines: "and that has...", "and made me...", "and wish for..." (14, 15, 16). This creates a kind of circular movement, in which the last three lines seem to echo the first three in this stanza.

Darkness is mentioned once, in line 15. The darkness is something the speaker is made to think of, as a counter reaction to the burning men. In its literal meaning, absence of light, "darkness" seems to contrast the "way lighted by burning men" (13). However, in the light of the last line, the darkness seems to refer figuratively to the earth/soil where the roots are. If one thinks of the soil as dark, moist and cool, it could be argued that the darkness stands in opposition to the light, dry and hot fire. This figurative meaning of darkness seems to be supported by the opening "All goes back to the earth" (1).

The darkness might also refer to the dark (as in 'bad') side of humanity, an ignorance, or a spiritual darkness, which makes us follow the burning men and "sell the world to buy fire" (12). That seems to be what makes the speaker's mind bend "away from the world [...] because the mess that men and the designs of consciousness have made of the world" (Collins 40). But if the human consciousness is what making a mess of the world, the darkness might signify a want for less intellectual light, which can find support in the

speaker's "wish for the dumb life of roots" (16). Or, rather, we need a wider perspective and to relate our consciousness to the world as whole:

[W]hen creatures have reached the level of consciousness, as men have, they must become conscious of the creation; [or else] the spirit of the creation will go out of them, and they will become destructive; the very earth will depart from them and go where they cannot follow.
(“A Native Hill” 18–19)

We cannot follow the “way lighted by burning men”; it is a destructive path. We need to get back to the darkness of the earth. We need a re-connection with the creation and the simple life, in order to be in place, have peace and feel the grace of nature.

Though only mentioned once in this poem, the darkness attracts a lot of attention, mainly through its obscurity: what is the speaker referring to when he is made to “think of darkness” (15)? The literal meaning, absence of light, does not seem to make complete sense. A figurative meaning, earth/soil, is possible; it is the place for the dumb roots, and it seems to be supported by the opening of the poem: “All goes back to the earth” (1). There is no reference to death or the soil’s capacity for transformation into new life here, as in “Elegy”. However, I think the figurative reference to the earth/soil supports the overall claim. Another possible meaning of darkness is an ignorance, or a kind of spiritual darkness, whether it applies to the speaker’s own state of mind or mankind’s disposition to follow the burning men. The darkness might also refer to a want for less intellectual light.

“To Know The Dark”. *Farming: A Hand Book*, 1970. (NCP 121)

This is a short, rhymed poem of four lines about knowing the dark. It begins with a clear contrast between the dark and the light but continues into something more complex where the dark is more than a simple opposite to the light:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

The opposition between dark and light is reflected in the sound of the poem. The end rhymes light/sight, sings/wings have a light sound to them, while the beginnings of the lines have a darker sound: “To go in the dark ... / To know the dark ...”, “and find that the dark ... / and is traveled by dark ...”. This creates a distinctive rhythm and a sound that corresponds to the dark-light theme.

The dark-light contrast in the first line can work on many levels and refer to more than one opposition between dark and light. In its literal meaning, “the dark” seems to relate to the “light” the same way when walking in a dark night with a flashlight: one sees only the things that are lit, and the light only makes the dark darker. “[T]o *know* the light” (1) (emphasis added) shifts the reference of “light” to a figurative meaning of ‘light of reason’, and darkness might be what we do not know. The light of reason/knowledge can have the same effect on something unknown as the light in the dark: you tend to see and understand what makes sense in relation to what you already know. More knowledge tends to expand the sphere of what you do not know – the dark gets darker.

The dark-light contrast continues in line two, on a literal level as well as on a figurative. “To know the dark, go dark” (2) can refer to the simple fact that night vision gets impoverished by light, and if you want to see in the dark, turn off the light: “Go without sight” (2). However, a figurative meaning of “dark”, signifying something we cannot understand with sight, contrasts the light’s figurative meaning of reason/knowledge. In that sense, the dark seems to be a non-intellectual knowledge, perhaps intuition, at least something that one cannot relate to objectively. It does not let itself to external investigation by light or by sight. If you want to know it, you have to give yourself to the dark – you are either part of the dark or not.

If one has the faith to “go dark”, one may discover in line three that the dark is “an organic, integral part of the world. It blooms and sings” (Collins 45). The dark does seem to refer figuratively to earth/soil, because it blooms and sings. The singing is an interesting image that recurs in other poems in this essay, such as “The Long Hunter” and “Enriching The Earth”. In the latter, the song seems to have a figurative meaning of rebirth of new life: “After death, willing or not, the body serves, / entering the earth. And so what was heaviest / and most mute is at last raised up into song” (15–17). Assuming the singing has the same figurative meaning in this poem, “the dark” in line three takes on a quality of having a transforming potency of turning death into new life.

It does not say what kind of creatures have “dark feet and dark wings” (4) in the last line of the poem, but “dark” seems to be used in its literal meaning. The last line can be a reference to the death that rebirths into new life in the soil. The singing darkness is an integral part in the exchange of different forms of biological energy that “goes on and on, round and round, the Wheel of Life rising out of the soil, descending into it, through the

bodies of creatures” (“The Use of Energy” 89–90).

This short poem is dense with darkness, which is mentioned six times in four lines, and once in the title. In the first two lines, “dark” and “light” contrast each other, both literally and figuratively. Below the layer of literal meaning, they revolve around what one can know, and how to acquire that knowledge: “To know the dark, go dark.” (2). However without revealing what one knows when knowing the dark. Perhaps it is a question of having trust and dare to “[g]o without sight” (2). The poem does seem like “a confession of faith in the goodness of darkness” (Johnson 178). What there is to know in the darkness, or what makes it good, is perhaps answered in the last two lines. There, “the dark” seems to refer to the earth/soil which “blooms and sings” (3). Assuming the singing refers figuratively to the rebirth into new life, which it seems to do in the next poem, “Enriching The Earth”, the soil has the same transforming capacity to turn death into new life as it does in “Elegy”. This figurative meaning of darkness supports the overall claim.

“Enriching The Earth”. *Farming: A Hand Book, 1970. (NCP 125)*

This poem in free verse of seventeen lines describes how a farmer enriches the earth by sowing certain winter crops and plowing decay into the ground. There is meaning to this work, as it serves the earth and makes “its yield increase” (7), and ultimately the farmer’s own death will also enrich the earth when his body is buried:

- 1 To enrich the earth I have sowed clover and grass
to grow and die. I have plowed in the seeds
of winter grains and of various legumes,
their growth to be plowed in to enrich the earth.
- 5 I have stirred into the ground the offal
and the decay of the growth of past seasons
and so mended the earth and made its yield increase.
All this serves the dark. I am slowly falling
into the fund of things. And yet to serve the earth,
- 10 not knowing what I serve, gives a wideness
and a delight to the air, and my days
do not wholly pass. It is the mind’s service,
for when the will fails so do the hands
and one lives at the expense of life.
- 15 After death, willing or not, the body serves,
entering the earth. And so what was heaviest
and most mute is at last raised up into song.

Dark/-ness occurs once, almost in the middle of the poem: “All this serves the dark” (8).

What serves, seems to be the farmer's work to enrich the earth: "I have sowed clover and grass [...] I have plowed in the seeds / of winter grains and of various legumes [...] I have stirred into the ground the offal / and the decay [...] and so mended the earth" (1–7). This gives "the dark" a figurative meaning of earth/soil. However, the same service seems to be referred to in the next line, but then the farmer serves the earth: "And yet to serve the earth" (9). This makes the figurative meaning of "dark" change into something else, something more, than just earth/soil.

As a caretaker of the earth, the farmer's ultimate service to the dark is his own death, because "[s]erving the dark means serving the earth, not only by tilling the ground but by entering it at death" (Knott 136). And when his body enters the earth, it will enrich "the soils 'dark' and wild lovemaking, from which his own life came." (Bilbro 300). The rebirth of new life is described as song in the last lines of the poem: "And so what was heaviest / and most mute is at last raised up into song" (16–17). This is perhaps what is referred to by "the dark" (8): not only the earth/soil, but the Wheel of Life, that constantly transforms death and decay, as well as the farmer's dead body, into new life – as a kind of lovemaking or singing in the dark. Here, the figurative meaning of "dark" expands into the soil's capacity for transforming death into new life.

The poem shifts focus after mentioning the dark. At the beginning, it has a focus on the life, development, and yield of the earth, supported by words like "growth" (4, 6), "enrich" (1, 4), and "increase" (7). After "dark" in line 8, it turns to describe the farmer's mortality and his own decay: "I am slowly falling / into the fund of things" (8–9); and what his final service will be: "After death, willing or not, the body serves, / entering the earth" (15–16). The farmer serves the earth, knowing that he might not live to see the fruit of his labour, because the final service is his own dying into the ground, which will also enrich the earth. However, this is not discomfoting: "not knowing what I serve, gives a wideness / and a delight to the air" (10–11). It seems to be a question of faith: believing that "soil is a marvel" and choosing to "cooperate with the dark processes at work within it – die into it – recognizing that in the midst of this darkness life is made out of death" (Wirzba 268). The farmer's service seems to enrich, not only the soil, but also the faith in it. This trust in the dark, and the commitment to the relationship with the earth/soil, gives the "dark" a figurative meaning of faith/trust.

Though only mentioned once, "the dark" (8) seems to permeate the whole poem.

As if “All this” (8) refers to the whole poem without disclosing what it “serves”, more than “the dark” (8). It stands as a kind of mystery in the middle of the poem, like a dark gravitational center around which the rest of the poem revolves. On one level, “the dark” has a figurative meaning of earth/soil. The soil’s capacity for turning death into new life, which is particularly prominent in this poem, gives the “dark” a transforming quality as well. This resembles the image of darkness in “Elegy” and “To Know The Dark”: the dark as grave and cradle, keeper of death and life. However, the tone in this poem is lighter, as if the speaker has reconciled his ultimate service: to die into the earth and rebirth, singing, into new life. There is a strong sense of faith in this poem, and on one level, the farmer’s service to the earth seems to enrich his faith in the soil as well as the soil itself. This gives the “dark” a quality of faith/trust. The figurative reference to earth/soil supports the overall claim in the introduction.

“The Current”. *Farming: A Hand Book*, 1970. (NCP 136)

This free verse poem of twenty-three lines describes the intimate relationship between a farmer and the piece of land he chooses to take care of, a relationship that is portrayed like a marriage in the first lines. The following lines develop this image beyond a metaphor for marriage and describes how the farmer is closely connected with previous and future farmers of the same place by a current that runs in the earth:

- 1 Having once put his hand into the ground,
seeding there what he hopes will outlast him,
a man has made a marriage with his place,
and if he leaves it his flesh will ache to go back.
- 5 His hand has given up its birdlife in the air.
It has reached into the dark like a root
and begun to wake, quick and mortal, in timelessness,
a flickering sap coursing upward into his head
so that he sees the old tribespeople bend
- 10 in the sun, digging with sticks, the forest opening
to receive their hills of corn, squash, and beans,
their lodges and graves, and closing again.
He is made their descendant, what they left
in the earth rising into him like a seasonal juice.
- 15 And he sees the bearers of his own blood arriving,
the forest burrowing into the earth as they come,
their hands gathering the stones up into walls,
and relaxing, the stones crawling back into the ground
to lie still under the black wheels of machines.

20 The current flowing to him through the earth
flows past him, and he sees one descended from him,
a young man who has reached into the ground,
his hand held in the dark as by a hand.

Darkness is mentioned two times, both in the context of hands reaching into the earth. The first occurrence is at the beginning of the poem: “It has reached into the dark like a root / and begun to wake” (6–7). Here, it seems obvious that the figurative meaning of “dark” is earth/soil. The hand seems to wake up into mortality, like it has not really been alive before. Or perhaps it wakes up from an illusion of immortality, to take part in the timeless work of farming and the cycle of birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay, that continuously takes place in the dark soil: “The hope of the nurturer against the impermanence of mortal life lies in this mystical connection through the land with the generations gone and to come. What remains, permanent in its cycles, is the land itself, the natural order” (Triggs 280). This natural order of life and death is more alive than the illusion of immortality; it is something you “wake up” to when you put your hand in the dark and start farming.

The speaker reaches into the dark “like a root”, but the dark has a figurative meaning of being something more than the earth/soil where plants with roots grow: “[t]he soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all” (“The Use of Energy” 90). The dark is indeed alive, mediating the current that transcends time and connects different generations of farmers in an intimate relation of work, life, and death: “He is made their descendant, what they left / in the earth rising into him like a seasonal juice” (13–14). The figurative meaning of “dark” takes on a quality of an intimate bond that ties the different generations of farmers together. He is not their descendant by blood, but by choosing to farm and live from the same piece of land they have worked, and are buried in. They are descendants by soil, by dark.

This intimate connection deepens in the poem’s last line where dark/-ness occurs the second time: “a young man who has reached into the ground, / his hand held in the dark as by a hand” (22–23). A scene that might border on the unpleasant: what is lurking in the dark, holding the young man’s hand? But rather it is a powerful image that seems to connect to the first line of the poem, where the speaker “[h]aving once put his hand into the ground” (1). However, it is perhaps not the speaker and this future farmer that “reach into the earth, into the dark, to hold hands via the rich soil” (Bilbro 298). It is the mystical current in the soil, running like “a flickering sap coursing upward into his head” (8), that holds the future

farmer in the dark “as by a hand” (23). This figurative meaning of “dark” seems like a “final human relationship [that] approaches the erotic” (Bilbro 298). Though perhaps not a sexual act, the relation between the farmers and the earth/soil can be seen as a sort of dance “in which the partners are always at opposite sexual poles, and the lead keeps changing; the farmer, as seed-bearer, causes growth; the land, as seed-bearer, causes the harvest” (“The Unsettling of America” 10). The dark has the creative power to transform death and decay into new life in the dance with the farmer, in the Wheel of Life we are all part of and depending on.

Darkness has a strong, figurative reference to earth/soil in this poem. There is an intimate relationship between man and darkness which resembles that in other poems, like “Elegy”, “To Know The Dark”, and especially “Enriching The Earth”. But here, the current that connects different generations of farmers makes it more intimate, more alive and borders on the erotic. Darkness holds both dead and alive, and it has the capacity to transform death into life, but there is less explicit focus on death in this poem. This figurative use of darkness supports the overall claim made in the introduction. There is also a theme of trust/faith in this poem: “seeding there what he hopes will outlast him” (2), which there are other examples of in “The Design of the House”, “To Know The Dark”, and in “Enriching The Earth”.

“The Long Hunter”. *The Country of Marriage*, 1973. (NCP 196)

This is a free verse poem of fifteen lines, describing how a hunter walks into an unknown area, like a forest, following the sound of animals to a destination not known to him, letting blind trust lead him through the darkness, to walk out in the light and finally see a green and welcoming opening. Dark/-ness occurs three times. The first occurrence is found in line 1, and followed by words like “unknown”, “beasts”, and “strange” it sets a rather dark tone:

- 1 Passed through the dark wall,
set foot in the unknown track,
paths locked in the minds of beasts
and in strange tongues. Footfall
- 5 led him where he did not know.
There was a dark country where
only blind trust could go.
Some joyous animal paced the woods
ahead of him and filled the air

10 with steepling song to make a way.
Step by step the darkness bore
the light. The shadow opened
like a pod, and from the height
he saw a place green as welcome
15 on whose still water the sky lay white.

The use of disjointed impressions, and a non-explicit subject in the first two lines, creates a dreamlike quality. The hunter does not use a doorway or a gate in the dark wall, he passes through it and seems to transcend into another world, which makes the wall seem more like a membrane than a concrete wall. However, considering the title, and the reference to “the woods” (8), it seems reasonable that “the wall” refers to a wall-like border of trees marking the beginning of the woods. Then, “dark” refers literally to the wall being dark, not light. A more figurative meaning of “dark” is also possible; referring to the foreign world on the other side of the wall, giving “dark” a quality of something unknown, strange.

The image of a dark and foreign world develops in the following lines, where the second occurrence of dark/-ness is found in line 6. The hunter follows the sound of an animal’s footsteps which leads him to “a dark country” (6). In its literal meaning, “dark” can refer to the night. It seems plausible, the hunter is led there by the sound of footsteps, not sight, and the woods is probably a very different world during the night, like another, dark, country. But it is also a country not known, which makes the “dark” seem to, again, refer figuratively to the unknown and foreign. An impression that is reinforced by that only “blind trust” (7) can go there. The dark country is not a place found by sight, but blind trust seems to be the only way to find it, and perhaps it is also the only thing that can guide one in the darkness.

After mentioning “blind trust” in line 7, the tone becomes lighter, supported by words like “joyous” (8), “air” (9), “height” (13), and “green” (14). The first and only time “light” is mentioned, is in line 12, after the last occurrence of dark/-ness in line 11. It was a beast that led the hunter to the dark country, but it is a “joyous animal” (8), filling the air “with steepling song” (10), that leads him further through the woods, until “[s]tep by step the darkness bore / the light” (11–12). As if the darkness is pregnant with light. And with the emerging light, the darkness transforms into a “shadow” (12), an aspect of both dark and light. On a literal level, this might be an image of dawn, and how the night turns into day at sunrise. But it is also possible that it is a figurative reference to the fertile soil bearing the seed of new life, which opens “like a pod” (13) into a “place green as welcome” (14)

by a water in which “the sky lay white” (15). The last lines of the poem seem like a homecoming, and they contrast the first lines of darkness where the hunter passes through the dark wall and sets out on unknown tracks.

The first occurrence of dark/-ness in this poem seems to have a figurative meaning of something foreign and unknown, which is not found in the other poems in this essay. The “dark country” in line 6 can have a literal meaning of the woods during the night, but it can also deepen the figurative meaning of something foreign and strange, as it is an unknown place which can be found only by blind trust. The last occurrence of dark/-ness can have a literal meaning of dawn and night turning to day at sunrise. There is also a possible figurative meaning of the dark soil bearing the light of new life, which would support the overall claim.

“Returning”. *The Wheel*, 1982. (NCP 289)

This free verse poem of sixteen lines describes a returning. It begins with the speaker walking through a dark valley, up on a hilltop in the morning light, and finally arriving at his home by the river:

- 1 I was walking in a dark valley
and above me the tops of the hills
had caught the morning light.
I heard the light singing as it went
- 5 among the grassblades and the leaves.
I waded upward through the shadow
until my head emerged,
my shoulders were mantled with the light,
and my whole body came up
- 10 out of the darkness, and stood
on the new shore of the day.
Where I had come was home,
for my own house stood white
where the dark river wore the earth.
- 15 The sheen of bounty was on the grass,
and the spring of the year had come.

There are three occurrences of dark/-ness. As in the previous poem, “The Long Hunter”, “dark” is mentioned already in line 1, but here it is contrasted with “light” in line 3, striking a lighter tone. The first occurrence of dark/-ness seems to have a rather straight-forward literal use in describing the valley as dark in the meaning: absence of light. But furt-

her reading reveals an interesting play between dark and light – night and day. One usually thinks of time as what separates night and day; after so many hours of night, the day breaks. However, in the following scene, it is the altitude that separates the night (darkness) from the day (morning light):

1 I was walking in a dark valley
and above me the tops of the hills
had caught the morning light.

The night still lingers down in the dark valley, while the day breaks up on the surrounding hilltops – at the same time. Night and day, dark and light, transform from different points in time into different vertical positions. This image is further developed in the following scene, where the second occurrence of dark/-ness is found in line 10. It is not primarily the evolving time that changes the scene from night to day, but the movement of the persona walking up the hill and leaving the darkness of the night behind him as he enters the light of day: “I waded upward through the shadow / [...] / and my whole body came up / out of the darkness” (6, 9–10).

Apart from “I waded”, where there is an explicit subject, the movement is described with how different parts of the body move from the darkness to the light: “my head” (7), “my shoulders” (8), and “my whole body” (9). This creates a sense of that the body is being moved by something other than the persona, the “I”, who becomes more of a witness. This – together with words like “waded” (6), “emerged” (7), “mantled” (8), and “the new shore” (11) – gives the scene a religious tone, as if the speaker is rising up from the water after being baptized, rather than just walking through the grass of a hillside one morning. It is a powerful image suggesting that “darkness” might refer figuratively to something more than just the absence of light. In this case it might be a spiritual darkness, or a darkness of the soul, from which the persona is born again.

The third and last occurrence of dark/-ness is found in line 14: “the dark river wore the earth”. The white house by the river is not moving anywhere; it is a manifestation of being in a place, a home to return to. The dark river, on the other hand, is constant flow; it is always moving in the landscape, sometimes flooding it, and changing it by wearing the earth. The literal meaning of “dark” describes the river as such: dark. But it can also have a figurative meaning of earth/soil, and something disturbing. The river wears the earth that the house stands on: “the attraction of sea level dwells in this country as an ideal dwells in

a man's mind. All our rains go in search of [the sea] and, departing, they have carved the land in a shape that is fluent and falling" ("A Native Hill" 15). It seems inevitable, and perhaps in a sense ideal, that the river wears the earth down, bit by bit.

There is a movement in this poem that resembles "The Long Hunter", where the speaker moves from a darkness and emerges into the light and arrives at an open and light place. The first occurrence of dark/-ness in this poem seems to have a clear literal meaning, describing the valley as having no daylight. The second occurrence of dark/-ness seems to refer to the same literal meaning: absence of daylight in the valley. But it can also have a figurative reference to a kind of spiritual darkness, which there is an other example of in "The Want of Peace", but in this poem there is an apparent movement from the darkness into the light. The third occurrence of dark/-ness seems to be used primarily in its literal sense, "the dark river" (14), but it can also have a figurative meaning of soil/earth. That would support the overall claim.

"Duality". *Entries*, 1994. (NCP 328)

This is a free verse poem of nine stanzas. It opens the third part, out of four, in the collection *Entries*. The poem begins with an epigraph quoting "Genesis" 1:27 from the Bible:

So God created man in his
own image, in the image of God
created he him; male and female
created he them.

This quote sets the tone for the whole poem. It is a beautiful poem with a lyrical tone of voice, describing both the difficulties and joys of life and love between man and woman. It speaks of the duality of love and suffering, giving and taking, living and loving. For this essay, I have chosen to read stanza V and VI.

The fifth stanza consists of nine lines. Dark/-ness occurs in line 7, where it is part of an interesting interplay between look and touch:

V

- 1 You look at me, you give
a light, which I bear and return,
and we are held, and all
our time is held, in this
- 5 touching look – this touch
that, pressed against the touch
returning in the dark,

is almost sight. We burn
and see by our own light.

There is a circular movement in this stanza, from the look of love to the kinetic wisdom of touches returning in the dark and back to something that “is almost sight” (8). The look referred to in line 1 is described in the last lines of the previous stanza: “Look at me / with the look that anger / and pain have taught you, / the gaze in which nothing / is guarded, nothing withheld.” (5–9 stanza IV). In this stanza, the “touching look” (5) – that intimate connection between the two lovers that holds them and all their time – transforms into “this touch” (5), which is returned by another touch in “the dark” (7). A look so intense and present, it seems to touch the one you are looking at, not just emotionally but physically. In its literal meaning, “dark” can refer to the darkness during night, when the two lovers exchange their loving touch. The literal meaning seems to contrast “light” and “sight”. At the same time, the returning of touch in the dark is “almost sight” (8). This seems to be due to the “dark”, which gives it a figurative meaning of transformation, as if the darkness has a potentiality to reveal a deeper layer of meaning in the touch, or the returning of it.

The sixth stanza is nine lines long. Dark/-ness is found in an interesting conjunction with Paradise:

VI

- 1 Eyes looking into eyes looking
into eyes, touches that see
in the dark, remember Paradise,
our true home. God’s image
- 5 recalls us to Itself. We move
with motion not or own,
light upon light, day and
night, sway as two trees
in the same wind sway.

The duality of touch and sight, that takes place in the dark, is found also in this stanza: “touches that see / in the dark” (2–3). In its literal sense, “dark” can refer to the darkness during night, as in the previous stanza, or having no sight. Touching with one’s eyes closed is often a significantly stronger sensation than with eyes open; it is like having one’s eyes in the hands and the sight in the touch. The figurative meaning of “dark” seems to be the same here as in the previous stanza: something with a potentiality to transform touch into sight. At the same time, the enjambment in line 2 dissolves the continuity in the meaning, and “touches that see in the dark” can also be read: “in the dark, remember Paradise”. Then,

given a figurative meaning of something strange and foreign, “the dark” stands in opposition to “Paradise” / our true home” (3–4). But then again, if “touches that see / in the dark” (2–3) is what “remember Paradise”, the dark seems to be what makes it possible for the touches to see and remember Paradise, as if the dark has not only a figurative meaning of something that transforms touch into sight, but a potentiality of enabling a kind of kinetic vision of “our true home” (4).

The image of dark/-ness is different in these two stanzas than in the other poems in this essay. Dark/-ness has a cluster of meanings that seems to be less tangible, more absent. The literal meaning of dark/-ness is much more significant than in, for example, “The Current”, where it does not seem to make any sense at all. Here, it plays an important part in the duality of touch and sight, whether it refers to the absence of light during the night or from closing one’s eyes. However, dark/-ness has also a figurative meaning of a potentiality to transform touch into sight, “the touch / returning in the dark, / is almost sight” (6–8 stanza V), or a kind of kinetic vision of “Paradise / our true home” (3–4 stanza VI). There is no reference to earth/soil in these stanzas, and the use of dark/-ness does not support the overall claim.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the imagery of darkness in a selection of poems by Wendell Berry using close readings to study the cluster of literal and figurative meanings referred to by the word 'dark' or any of its derivations (dark/-ness) in nine poems (full-length or selected stanzas) from seven different poetry collections from between 1964 and 1994, included in the collection *New Selected Poems* from 2012.

Poetry is a figurative and multilayered language, and in Berry's poetry, dark/-ness refers rarely just to its literal meaning, but more often to different figurative meanings, for example: the foreign, unknown in "The Long Hunter"; sleep, oblivion in "The Design of The House"; knowledge, how to know in "To Know The Dark"; ignorance, spiritual darkness in "The Want of Peace" and "Returning"; blindness in "Elegy" 4; and faith, trust in "Enriching The Earth".

There is no single meaning or cluster of meanings that occurs in every poem, but the most prominent and powerful figurative meaning of dark/-ness is the reference to the earth/soil that holds both living and dead and has the capacity to transform death into new life. It is found in "Elegy", where it also is the realization of that transformation; death as a prerequisite for life. In "Enriching The Earth", the soil's potency to turn death into new life is especially prominent. In "The Current", focus is on the intimate relation between farmer and the earth. If one has faith to go dark in "To Know The Dark", one will find that the darkness, too, "blooms and sings" (4). In "The Long Hunter", the darkness transforms into light and takes on a possible figurative meaning of earth/soil. In "The Want of Peace" the speaker seems to wish for the "dumb life of roots" (16) in the darkness of the earth.

The results of this study does not fully support the claim made in the introduction: that besides the literal meaning of darkness, 'absence of light', the figurative meaning on some level also refers to the earth/soil. Berry's darkness does often refer figuratively to earth/soil, but not always. The three poems "To Know The Dark", "Enriching The Earth", and "The Current" from *Farming: A Hand Book* have, not surprisingly, a strong figurative reference to earth/soil. In "Elegy" and "The Want of Peace", there are rather clear examples of dark/-ness having a figurative meaning of earth/soil. In "The Long Hunter" and "Returning", dark/-ness might have a figurative meaning of earth/soil, but they are not completely convincing. And though a figurative use of dark/-ness is most common in the poems in this essay, there are examples of literal use, like in "The Design of The House", "To Know The

Dark”, “The Long Hunter”, “Returning”, and especially in the last poem “Duality”, where the literal meaning of dark/-ness seems to play an important part of an interplay between touch and sight.

If there is one trait that pervades the different meanings of dark/-ness, both literal and figurative – though with one exception for “The Want of Peace” – I think it is the transforming capacity of the darkness. The earth/soil in “Elegy” has the capacity to turn death into new life; the darkness in “The Design of The House” holds a deep trust in the returning light; the dark blooms and sings of new life in “To Know The Dark”; the soil’s potentiality for transforming death into new life is especially prominent in “Enriching The Earth”; in “The Current”, it transcends time and ties different generations of farmers together; in “The Long Hunter” and “Returning”, it seems to manifest as a turning point in a kind of spiritual darkness from where the persona moves into the light; and it transforms touch into sight in “Duality”. The dark is never completely dark or final – there is always a seed of light or change in the dark with this transforming capacity.

And it makes sense, that a farmer, Christian, and poet with a fine-tuned sensibility and a philosophical mind, finds the ultimate creative power and the miracle of life in the darkness of the soil:

Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine – which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes. (“Christianity And The Survival of Creation” 311)

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