

The Enriching Dark

by Rod Jellema

James Wright's last book, *This Journey*, marks the end of a journey he takes us on into more and more light. But we should notice: although the book moves steadily toward light, like a vine-root pushing its way out of a bucket of wet leaves, the poems offer almost none of the usual disparagement of the dark encountered along the way. His use of the dark as a positive value, like the painter Rothko's, or like Van Gogh's late use of black cypress trunks or ravens, is strange and exceptional in a culture which for centuries has associated darkness with evil, fear, ignorance, treachery, and the unknown. Wright can see something else:

It is dusk.
It is the good darkness
Of women's hands that touch loaves.

Wright loved the dark almost as much as the light. There is in his work nothing of the old Manichean battle between dark and light as symbolic of evil vs. good. Shadows fascinate him. He will even (as below) dare to reverse the values of dark and light, so that dark is the mind's depth and light is what endangers it. For James Wright, the dark is the medium in which we imagine and dream. "Sleep is black."

Near Mansfield, enormous dobbins enter dark barns in Autumn,
Where they can be lazy, where they can munch little apples,
Or sleep long.

Sleep being a cousin to imagination, darkness is what slows us down from the quickness of the glimpse into the slow drift of contemplation.

* * *

Very early in his life as a poet, in one of the 200 sonnets he had written before graduation from high school, Wright challenges convention, says his biographer, by "locating his own muse in darkness." It's not that he was unfamiliar with the negative meaning of darkness. He knew it and used it—but in a very general, conversational way.

In an early letter to Robert Bly, Ohioan Wright talks about Minnesota darkness as “a dark you can see beyond, into a deep place here and there.” Here and there may seem merely incidental. The opening line to his poem “A Blessing” simply gives us a location: “Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota.” That could suggest the awful daily life-and-death rhythms at the nearby Mayo Clinic, but it’s really the next word that ignites the rest of the poem: Twilight. A slight dimming over the field where two ponies graze; their eyes “darken with kindness.” They “begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness,” and just then we begin to experience what is being “softly” revealed in the darkness. The poem is not so much about two ponies in a pasture; it’s about the speaker’s unguarded moment of deep longing and loneliness and sexual need. The sadness is deeply human enough to be somehow life-affirming.

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl’s wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

The darkness here is not the poem’s setting; it is the poem’s blessing.

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But James Wright can also complete the turning of the tables by showing us light as the shining, aggressive enemy to the living undercurrent of darkness. In “Eisenhower’s Visit to Franco, 1959”—a poem terribly applicable to our era of Trump, sixty years later—things that shine are the threat to “all dark things [that] will be hunted down.” Eisenhower

has flown through the very light of heaven
And come down in the slow dusk
Of Spain.

. . . .

Smiles glitter in Madrid.
Eisenhower has touched hands with Franco, embracing
In a glare of photographers.

Clean new bombers from America muffle their engines
And glide down now.
Their wings shine in the searchlights
Of bare fields,
In Spain.

And the darkness that is ever with us? It is a few lines back, in a timeless image, prevailing
against the shine and glare that tries to destroy it:

Wine darkens in stone jars in villages.
Wine sleeps in the mouths of old men, it is a dark red color.

Darkest, deepest myth and memory are close to Franco's final nemesis: the church's
miraculous changing of wine into blood.