

Restorative vision: Poetry reading

by [Peggy Rosenthal](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

Wendell Berry has lived as a farmer and writer in Kentucky for a quarter century. In his fiction, essays and poetry, he often meditates on the human relation to the earth. His poem “The Slip” is precipitated by a disaster. A river bank has given way, leaving an acre of farmland swallowed by water. The poet gazes at the devastation and bemoans the utter loss of valued land and the dissolution of the farmer’s plans for it. The poem is describing a calamity, yet a profound calm pervades it.

I’m intrigued by how Berry has pulled this off. His blank-verse voice certainly helps. Iambic pentameter is English poetry’s most grounded rhythm. And all the lines run over into each other like the river overflowing the land—except for four lines that are complete sentences. These are the poem’s anchors, the lines that hold the poem still at key points.

There’s a calming, too, in the incantatory effect of repeated words. The river “leaves nothing” . . . “nothing is there” . . . “nothing will stay.” “All human plans dissolve” . . . “all will be lost” . . . “this nothing is the seed of all.” Mere repetition may not be calming. Repeated words can be hammered out, as in political rhetoric, or they can drone on in a dull discourse. What creates this poem’s restorative quiet is the vision that grows within the repeated words. With each repetition, a word receives a new and increasingly biblical and salvific dimension.

This begins with a hint of the Genesis creation in “As before the beginning, nothing is there.” This is the poem’s second whole-sentence line. The first presented nature as a force that devours itself and leaves “nothing”—absolute negative absence. But with creation’s beginning, this “nothing” gets a touch of hope. Biblical language becomes explicit when Berry describes the earth as “like a flower, so soon passeth it away.” Nature’s force, however devastating, becomes part of the earth’s transience, which the psalms contrast to God’s enduring love. In the poem, God is not named; in God’s place as the renewing, staying power is “this nothing.” But “nothing,” instead of being a negative absence, is now filled with regenerative content: “this nothing / is the seed of all—the clear eye / of Heaven, where all the worlds appear.” The poem

is dissolving our usual opposition of all or nothing.

And it is all good. The “perfect” that “begins its struggle to return” and “the good gift” that “begins again its descent”: Christian readers will recognize this perfect good gift as Christ. But Berry’s own gift is to reenvision the Christian story in terms that are accessible and compelling for non-Christians. Any reader can see that a transcendent power has taken over nature’s role as the world’s active force, and is reversing nature’s self-devouring.

Our human part in the poem’s re-imagining of the Christian story is merged throughout with nature’s. The disastrous slip is presented as nature’s doing (or undoing); yet the poet says outright that “human wrong is in the cause.” Berry is careful not to name any specific human error, for he wants us to see the “wrong” more broadly: as our imperfect human condition, our Fall, our slip. We are one with nature in the slip. We devour ourselves, just as “the river takes the land.” And we are one with nature in the dark water beneath which “the maker moves” to stir the soul to new possibility. All creation, groaning in bondage, eagerly awaits the revelation of the children of God.

Berry sees our slips made good by God in Christ, the seed that falls into the earth and dies, in whose death we are made whole. But we have our part to play in the regeneration. “There is nothing / to do,” the poet teases, but then challenges: “Learn and wait, return to work / on what remains . . . Seed will sprout in the scar.”

Poetry is like prayer, writes poet Debra Bruce. In both, “one returns empty-handed, yet full.” “The sonic patterns of words,” she adds, “open up for me the deepest portals, biological and spiritual, into this flickering, oscillating sense of something lost, something restored.”