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# You Can Say That Again. (Or Can You?)

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Sandra McPherson

Once upon a time a little old man and a little old woman lived  
in a pleasant cottage around which ran a little white fence . . .

This is the beginning of *The Gingerbread Man* as retold by Wallace C. Wadsworth. The cast of characters includes a big black dog, a big yellow cow, a big tall horse, little boys, little girls, and of course the little gingerbread man. Part of the charm is the simplicity of diction, though when I read the story aloud I tend to cut out the *littles* after a while as unnecessary, already suggested.

*Silence in the Snowy Fields* by Robert Bly was published in 1962 by Wesleyan; *The Branch Will Not Break*, by James Wright, about the same time by the same publisher. The dictional similarities between the work in the two books are so obvious on casual reading that it is not my intent here to prove the men influenced each other. What I am looking into is their use of certain catch words—*dark, sleep, old, alone, heavy, silence, small*, and their synonyms; I hope to ask some questions that every writer will have to answer for himself as he writes his own poems.

First of all, Bly and Wright believe in the value of repetition. Let me quote the instances of *dark* and related forms alone:

*Robert Bly:*

“dark telephone poles”  
“the darkness drifts down like snow”  
“driving toward Chicago, near dark”  
“dark fish”  
“this new strength whispers of the darkness of death”  
“the viscous darkness”  
“the darkening roof of earth”  
“some slight fear of the dark”  
“the corn is wandering in dark corridors”  
“bathed in dark water”  
“darkness buried in snow”  
“darkness is falling . . . a darkness in which thieves shudder”  
“oak roots staining the waters dark”  
“a tunnel softly hurtling into darkness”

“darkness, darkness in the grass, darkness in trees”  
“bodies give off darkness, and chrysanthemums are dark”  
“dark air is moving”  
“dark tears”  
“sad rustle of darkened armies”  
“we are falling, falling into the open mouths of darkness”  
“our dark lives”  
“I want to go back among the dark roots”  
“after seeing many dark rivers”  
“fence posts have stopped being a part of the darkness”  
“I look up angrily at the light”  
“dark car tracks move in out of the darkness”  
“the horse of darkness”  
“dark weeds”  
“dark gold”  
“a pirate ship ploughing through dark flowers”  
“this water dark”  
“you dark boat”  
“dark treasures”  
“a dark thing hopped near me”  
“the human face shines like a dark sky”  
“the little houses of the grass are growing dark”  
“I could take handfuls of darkness”  
“a darkness was always there, which we never noticed”

*James Wright:*

“great terrible oak tree darkening with winter”  
“evening darkens and comes on”  
“my bones turn to dark emeralds”  
“the hallway of a dark leaf”  
“when the moon went dark”  
“the dark hands of Chicago”  
“the dark grass”  
“the moon that dangles cold on a dark vine”  
“enormous dobbins enter dark barns”  
“dark furrows of the sea”  
“dark church”  
“dark as a drowsy woodchuck”  
“dark green moss”  
“dark elm trees”  
“the poolroom goes dark”  
“the forces of darkness”  
“all dark things will be hunted down”  
“wine darkens”  
“a dark red color”

“the dark waters of the spirit”  
 “dark green crevices of my childhood”  
 “shopping centers empty and darken”  
 “a dark cricket”  
 “darkening stallion”  
 “darkening combers of the ground”  
 “waiting for dark”  
 “dark wheat listens”  
 “the wheat leans back toward its own darkness”  
 “dark rivers and leaves”  
 “crying in its dark thorns”  
 “the good darkness of women’s hands”  
 “after dark near the South Dakota border”  
 “wings and dark faces”  
 “the moon darkens”  
 “flashlights drift over dark trees”  
 “grove flies up into the darkness”  
 “green mountains in the darkness”  
 “eyes . . . darken with kindness”  
 “munching . . . in the darkness”  
 “small dark eyes”  
 “a dark building”

In one poem Bly uses the word eight times; Wright’s limit is three. But such statistics are weak if they don’t add that the remainder of the poem that is not “dark” is loaded with other words that the poets like and find heavy with suggestion. What is the value of saying *dark dark dark dark*? In poems without rhymes the repeated word serves as something for the reader to remember. If Bly was in a cornfield you can bet there was something dark in his experience. But maybe the word *dark* serves the poet better than it serves his readers. He can always hide there, betrayed only by his shining eyes. To use an idea of Eliot’s from his essay on Swinburne, it is a most general word, it dispenses with focus. Perhaps two or three times it was the only word to choose: the play on it in “Eisenhower’s Visit to Franco, 1959” and in the first stanza of “As I Step Over a Puddle . . .”:

Po-Chu-i, balding old politician,  
 What’s the use?  
 I think of you,  
 Uneasily entering the gorges of the Yang-Tze,  
 When you were being towed up the rapids  
 Toward some political job or other  
 In the city of Chungshou.  
 You made it, I guess,  
 By dark.

In the other forty it was the easiest, a quick way to add depth to the image, to any image. Dark is not a quality that a writer can make his own, not even if he uses it more than anyone else.

Before *dark* asks all the questions, let's study another atmospheric the two poets use a lot, though other poets I can think of are equally partial to the word: *old*. Or *ancient*: "I am happy in this ancient place," "old snow shall whisper of concierges in France," "my body hung about me like an old grain elevator," "grass lifts . . . like the ancient wing of a bird" (all Bly); "old fire would quicken," "old Indians, who wanted to kill me," "the cellars of haunted houses are like ancient cities," "the old grasshoppers" (Wright). Bly uses *old* or *ancient* 13 times in the 44 poems of *Silence*; Wright 14 for 43. Though a usage like Wright's "old bat" is perfectly natural speech, more often than not the word is unnecessary (Bly—"an old Model A") or affected ("ancient wing of a bird") or ultimately predictable (Wright—"winter . . . an old man").

Closely associated with excessive love of the old is the tendency of both poets to enervate the landscape. Motion is slow or soft. Insects are heavy. For Wright, "twilight bounds softly forth on the grass," "dew . . . gathers slowly," a cloud is a "slow whale," horses neigh "softly through the night," "latches click softly in the trees," "white mares . . . trot softly." Even the "bees drag their high garlands, heavily" and grasshoppers "leap heavily." Bly perceives "the exhausted dusk," "weeping in the pueblos of the lily," "plaintive orisons of the stones," "farm groves like heavy green smoke," "tragic pastures," "stupendous burdens of the foreign trees." All is pitiful. He claims that "a lassitude enters into the diamonds of the body" and that "north of Columbus there is a sort of torpid joy." He slows things down like slow-motion film only less believably, or with unintended comedy: "telephone poles . . . slowly leap on the gray sky," "a tunnel softly hurtling into darkness."

So in this slow dark heavy old world one of the best things to do is to sleep. These poets write some of the sleepest surrealism around. Count ducks: "rafts of ducks drift like closed eyes" (Bly). "Businessmen fall on their knees in the dungeons of sleep" (Bly). "I dream, as I lean over the edge, of a crawdad's mouth" (Wright). "I have been dreaming of green butterflies" (Wright). "Asleep I had gazed east" and "I lie in a bed near the lake, and dream of moles with golden wings" (Bly). The poems are populated with horses, "American women," "men and women I love," wine, ground, a "bootlegger and his wife," the poets themselves, sand, lilacs, leaves, plants, "even wood made into a casket" all falling asleep or sleeping. The somnambulistic rhetoric is hypnotic, catchy in the way that yawns are. Can we speak of a poet's vision here? With eyelids drooping.

I worry that a study of repeated words will become monotonous, satiating. Yet repetition is an old and sometimes powerful device of poetry and it is important for one's own writing to know when he has a chance to use it well. The words Bly and Wright like to repeat have an elemental quality. Often things are *black* or *white*, *falling* or *rising*, *bare*, *cold*, *great*, *terrible* and *strange*. Such language suggests going back to an earlier or younger consciousness and Bly actually does say, "I want to go back among the dark roots" and

We want to go back, to return to the sea,  
The sea of solitary corridors,  
And halls of wild nights,  
Explosions of grief,  
Diving into the sea of death,  
Like the stars of the wheeling Bear.

A simplification of consciousness is illustrated by a reduced vocabulary.

Reduction is the essence of the last three words I'd like to deal with: *alone*, *small*, and *silence*.

Both poets venerate the solitary but for Wright especially the alone suffers loneliness. Words like *private* (Bly—"a private snow") and *secret* (Wright—"pressed in a secret box," "secret shelters of sparrow feathers") appeal to them. Bly uses *alone*, *lonely*, *solitude*, *loneliness*, *solitary*, 14 times. "The mind has shed leaves alone for years," he says; and "I sit alone surrounded by dry corn"; and "this joy . . . like the harsh grasses on lonely beaches." Wright uses *loneliness* and *alone* 10 times: "the tall ashes of loneliness," "the sea, that once solved the whole loneliness of the Midwest." I like the last example, it seems broad and compassionate in a way that constantly saying you are alone ("I am alone here," "I stand alone," "I go on, living, alone, alone," "I sit here, doing nothing alone") does not.

If the poets are often alone, they like to diminish the rest of creation also. Or are they simply attached to words like *tiny*, *frail*, *small*? Or both? They collect miniatures: "small creatures," "virgins with frail clothes," "the frail skiff lost in the giant cave," "small weeds," "small towns," a "small bridge," "the tiny slaves in the prisons of bark," a "small farmhouse," "houses with small observatories on top," "small mainstreets abandoned," "tiny birds," "tiny bits of granite," "tiny snail shells," a "tiny box-elder bug," and "little houses of the grass," among those used by Bly. He says, "I want to see nothing more than two feet high." Wright tends to demonstrate agreement; he sees "little apples," "small fires," "shadows so frail," "the everlasting happiness of small winds," "delicate creatures from the other side of the world." Both writers are seduced by the often precious word *delicate*. Wright employs it six times in such images as "little boys lie still . . . delicate little boxes of dust" and "grappling hooks drag delicately about." How would the poems read without these adjectives? In many cases perfectly clearly. And daintiness would have been avoided.

*Silence* is the appropriate last pet word I would like to treat in this twin survey. It is one of *the* magic words of much poetry written in the sixties. Silence can be profound; but the moony uses of it apparent in these two books, though to a lesser extent in James Wright, seem to assume a kind of automatic value in the word. "A cave of silent children" and "huge, silent buffaloes" in Wright aspire to be poetic. "Only the cornstalks now can make a noise" decrees Bly. He finds "bare branches silently lying on the floor" as if they could otherwise lie there and make a noise. Explicitly he wants "to go down and rest in the black earth of silence."

This work is clearly not a study of the individual poems in these two well-known books. Some poems in *Silence* I find enjoyable and many in *The Branch*

are stunning, extraordinary. And since their publication, the effort of both poets has broadened, reached new heights and perceptions. But the influence of the earlier books continues among younger poets. I have meant mainly to explore my personal dislike for the repetition, for the words the poets chose to repeat, and for the point system of word employment. These words have worn out their welcome. They distract. I like to see each subject come to freshly, the same vocabulary does not fit every experience. If we really loved language would we make it sleep with every poem?