Moving the Dark to Wholeness: The Elegies of Wendell Berry

by Jeffery Triggs

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With each year, Wendell Berry claims a more significant position among contemporary American poets.[1] From his common beginnings as one of a generation of poets trained in the precepts of the New Criticism he has pursued his own "path," as he calls it, with uncommon intellectual rigor and poetic sensitivity. In our age of weak religious faith, many poets, faced with death and the threat of nuclear devastation, have fallen into sterility or despair. Berry, however, over the course of his career has come to terms with death and made its acceptance central to his philosophy of affirmation. For him, acceptance of death makes possible human love, fidelity, and the perpetuation of the community of men on earth.

Like so many poets of his generation, Berry has developed as an artist by escaping the ubiquitous enchantment of *Understanding Poetry*. Under the influence of Brooks and Warren, Berry began his career writing individual, "well-made" lyrics that emphasized paradox and irony, and drew for inspiration from the Elizabethans by way of Yeats and T. S. Eliot. A former Kentucky farm boy "exiled" to the freshman writing department of New York University, Berry found in the new critical approach a distancing irony to protect his sensibility from the city's hostile, alien environment:

> In the empty lot — a place
> not natural, but wild — among
> the trash of human absence,
> the slough and shamble
> of the city's seasons, a few

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old locusts bloom.
—"The Wild," *Poems* (19)

Berry has never "outgrown" the theme of the evils of the modern, industrial world, but he was not content for long to express himself in the manner of "The Wild."

In 1964, Berry made the most important move of his career, when he returned to Kentucky to teach and bought a small farm near Port Royal where his family had lived for generations. Indeed, his activities as a farmer have come gradually to dominate his life and work. Since his return home, urban imagery has faded almost completely from Berry's writing. Increasingly, he has come to emphasize history and place, a seeking of roots, and a refusal to separate literature from life's larger concerns. Berry has made himself the kind of poet, at once vatic and sane, who finds the creation of good literature inseparable from the creation of a good life. He has practiced and written about the spiritual discipline of the farmer's life. Such marriage to the land and fidelity to a place in the world involve, necessarily, the acceptance of death as part of accepting one's place in what he calls the "system of systems" (*Standing by Words* 46). It is, for Berry, the condition of our salvation.

Berry's elegies are vital to his work because they provide focus for his typical themes, such as his recurring metaphors that link past and future generations through their common working of the land. In "The Current," for instance, a complex poem about "marriage" to a place and the subtle relations of the generations involved in that place, the marriage is made by a man's "having put his hand into the ground I seeding there what he hopes will outlast him." The man thus becomes the "descendant" of all those who once worked this land, even the "old tribespeople" bending

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 part of the "current" of their lives and the life of the land that flows

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. (119)

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.

As early as *The Broken Ground* (1964), farming began providing Berry with the central metaphor of the life and death cycle, though in the early poetry his use of the metaphor is tentative. The "Elegy" for his paternal grandfather, Pryor Thomas Berry, shows Berry working toward his characteristic vein. The poem considers death, implicitly at least, in terms of farming and the seasonal death and rebirth of the crops. The title of this volume is a complex pun suggesting at once burial, the plowing up of fields for planting, and even the breaking of new "literary ground" as Berry's first book of poems. The poem's imagery, however, is still relatively abstract in a manner typical of the late fifties and early sixties. For instance, the conversational free verse and the delicate touches of surreal imagery are reminiscent of the early Robert Bly:

> All day our eyes could find no resting place.
> Over a flood of snow sight came back
> Empty to the mind. The sun
> In a shutter of clouds, light
> Staggered down the fall of snow.
> All circling surfaces of earth were white.
> No shape or shadow moved the flight
> Of winter birds. Snow held the earth its silence.
> We could pick no birdsong from the wind.
> At nightfall our father turned his eyes away.
> It was the storm of silence shook out his ghost.
> —*Poems* (3)

This poem, despite its beauty, is conventionally lyrical in its emphasis on local effects of imagery, the heated expression of syntactically disconnected personal impressions. The snowy landscape offers the poem whatever unity it can, as well as the ironic contrast of its "light" with the "darkness" of the death it shrouds:

> he only wakes
> Who is unshapen in a night of snow.
> His shadow in the shadow of the earth
> Moves the dark to wholeness.
> —*Poems* (3)

Here is an embryonic form of the light/dark paradox so important in much of Berry's poetry about death, suggesting mystery beyond human comprehension and hinting at the possibility of some form of resurrection. As the "Elegy" progresses, the farm metaphor takes shape, though fitfully and by hints. Berry speaks,

for instance, of adorning "the shuck of him / With flowers as for a bridal" (4). The word "shuck," used here for the body, suggests a pod or husk containing the seeds of future life.

Indeed, there is something of the traditional elegy here, with funeral "strewings," burning lamps, even what seems an appropriate response of nature to the event, the snowstorm. The language has a proprietous, at times even a quaint stateliness ("Snow held the earth its silence"), suggesting an acquaintance with Elizabethan habits of diction and syntax. And there is also the implication that death shall bring forth sweetness and new life, like Virgil's golden bees that swarmed from the bodies of eight sacrificed cattle (see Speer Morgan 869). The landscape, however, is not Arcadian. It is the farm country that in increasing detail will take on a dominant role in Berry's poetry, as in his life. This setting emerges in the bleak winter landscape and the "winter rain" that "breaks the corners / Of our father's house, quickens / On the downslope to noise" (*Poems* 4). On a metaphorical level, the ethos of farming is suggested by the "shuck" of the body and in one of the final lines: "The church heals our father in" (5). The word "heal," with its implications of restoration and cure, going back to the Germanic "*hailaz*," meaning whole, implies some hope of a resurrection. More specifically, "healing in" is a farming and gardening expression meaning to lay a plant in contact with the earth from which it will gain some sustenance before actual planting. Although the hope in "Elegy" is still only implicit, the language of farming, inaugurated here, leads Berry to increasingly firm assertions of such hope.

Berry's second book of poems, *Openings* (1969), greatly expands the consideration of death in terms of farming. Again the title puns on what might be "openings" for planting, for graves, and for literary development. A set of "Three Elegiac Poems" for Harry Erdman Perry, Berry's maternal grandfather, develops the metaphor suggested in the Pryor Berry elegy. The first poem takes the form of a prayer that Perry be freed into death from "hospital and doctor, / the manners and odors of strange places, / the dispassionate skills of experts," from all the torture chamber apparatus of modern medical technology with its "tubes and needles" and "public corridors" (49). If the hospital offers "the possibility of life without / possibility of joy, let him give it up" (50). Natural death, to Berry, is the joyous and preferred ending of a life. Thus the speaker asks that Perry be allowed "to die in one of the old rooms / of his living, no stranger near him," and that

> the final
> time and light of his life's place be
> last seen before his eyes' slow

opening in the earth.

This way, the dying man, "like one familiar with the way," will go into the "furrowed" hill over which he lived and help sustain the land's future. Explicitly here, the "furrows" of planting are equated with the "furrow" of the grave.

The second poem in the set shifts from the subjunctive of the first poem's "prayer" to the dramatic present tense, using the speaker's personal point of view to describe the scene of the old man's dying.

> I stand at the cistern in front of the old barn
> in the darkness, in the dead of winter,
> the night strangely warm, the wind blowing,
> rattling an unlatched door.
> I draw the cold water up out of the ground, and drink.
>
> At the house the light is still waiting.
> An old man I've loved all my life is dying
> in his bed there. He is going
> slowly down from himself.
> In final obedience to his life, he follows
> his body out of our knowing.
> Only his hands, quiet on the sheet, keep
> a painful resemblance to what they no longer are. (50)

The poem interestingly contrasts the "normal" activity of the speaker drinking well water near the farm with the extraordinary event taking place "at the house." But though the event is extraordinary, nature does not go sympathetically awry as it would in a classical elegy; the death is ordained and natural: "In final obedience to his life, he follows / his body out of our knowing." Death is a mysterious but natural metamorphosis, after which the dying man simply and quietly passes "out of our knowing." What disturbs the speaker is not so much the act of dying as the "painful resemblance" of the hands "to what they no longer are," that is, the living flesh.

The third poem, with its tone of praising acceptance, corresponds to the "apotheosis" of the classical elegy:

> He goes free of the earth.
> The sun of his last day sets
> clear in the sweetness of his liberty.

> The earth recovers from his dying,
> the hallow of his life remaining
> in all his death leaves.
>
> Radiances know him. Grown lighter
> than breath, he is set free
> in our remembering. Grown brighter
>
> than vision, he goes dark
> into the life of the hill
> that holds his peace.
>
> He's hidden among all that is,
> and cannot be lost. (51)

This is Berry in one of his more mystical moments, and yet his claims for "apotheosis" are still cautious, tempered with the realism of farm life. Though the dead man has "grown brighter / than vision," he still must go paradoxically "dark / into the life of the hill / that holds his peace." This paradox may not satisfy the orthodox yearnings of a critic like Richard Pevear for a resurrection in Christ, but it does offer Berry consolation; because the dead man is "hidden among all that is," he "cannot be lost." The corn of wheat that falls into the ground and dies may bring forth much fruit.

The elegies in *Openings*, though they make extensive use of realistic farm imagery, do not yet effect a completely natural combination of theme and material. The Arcadian echoes are still somewhat artificial and obtrusive. More important, the philosophy implicit in Berry's metaphor of seasonal death and resurrection has not yet been fully worked out and integrated into his expression. Though sometimes concerned with subjects addressed more effectively in his prose, the more speculative theoretical poems of the 1970s, such as "A Current" and "At a Country Funeral," have enabled Berry to practice and perfect the technique of the philosophical elegy.

In his most recent book, Berry has written the best elegiac poetry of his career. *The Wheel* (1982) refers by its title to the "Wheel of Life" of eastern religion, Berry's favorite theme of the recurring life cycle and the cyclical notion of time. In an epigraph to the book, Berry quotes Sir Albert Howard, author of *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture*:

> It needs a more refined perception to recognize throughout this stupendous wealth of varying shapes and forms the principle of stability. Yet the principle dominates. It dominates by means of an ever-recurring cycle . . . repeating itself silently and ceaselessly .... This cycle is constituted of the successive and repeated processes of birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay.
>
> An eastern religion calls this cycle the Wheel of Life and no better name could be given to it. The revolutions of this Wheel never falter and are perfect. Death supersedes life and life rises again from what is dead and decayed. (231)

Berry divides *The Wheel* into six parts, as it were, six different spokes. The first part consists of three elegies for his friend Owen Flood. The second part includes a series of his poems reckoning Berry's desolation, the contemplation of one "well acquainted now / among the dead" (246). The third part is made up of four love poems to Berry's wife, Tanya, written in Berry's characteristically elegiac tone. The fourth part, addressing what Berry calls "The Gift of Gravity," consists of two longer poems on the transience of human life, with the river as the overriding metaphor. In the fifth part, a group of six poems, the metaphor shifts to the Wheel of Life as a "dance" including both the dead and the new and future generations. The sixth part contains a single poem, "In Rain," in which Berry considers the "path I follow" and the serene, accepting "marriage to place."

Easily the most powerful poems in *The Wheel* are those written in memory of Owen Flood, "Requiem," "Elegy," and "Rising." The most formal of these, corresponding to the rhetorical first section of the "Three Elegiac Poems" for Harry Erdman Perry, is "Requiem." But this formality of tone acts in a kind of counterpoint to the firm, informal image of the farmer at his work:

> We will see no more
> the mown grass fallen behind him
> on the still ridges before night,
> or hear him laughing in the crop rows,
> of know the order of this delight.

Whatever incongruity exists here is typical of the risk-taking in Berry's more mature work. Even the most "literary" poems grow naturally now from Berry's experience of the world and aim at fidelity to that world and the community of men. These are a farmer's elegies, and they celebrate a way of life Berry has loved as much as they lament the passing from that life of his loved ones:

> Though the green fields are my delight,
> elegy is my fate. I have come to be
> survivor of many and of much
> that I love . . .
> * * *
> I have left the safe shore
> where magnificence of art
> could suffice my heart.

With an almost Yeatsean austerity, the poem reaches out to the world to rhyme the particular and the cosmic, one man's fate and the fate of all into the acceptance of life and place in the world which alone promises serenity:

> In the day of his work
> when the grace of the world
> was upon him, he made his way,
> not turning back or looking aside,
> light in his stride.
>
> Now may the grace of death
> be upon him, his spirit blessed
> in the deep song of the world
> and the stars turning, the seasons
> returning, and long rest. (233)

Berry's "Requiem" ends with a wide, spindrift, cosmic gaze that fixes the subject's life and death in the perspective of eternity.

The "Elegy" that follows, however, is a deeply personal, interior poem that does not yield up its human point of view. Ironically enough, the poem, cast in the form of a Dantean narrative, makes large claims in terms of literary antecedents. It begins with the typical Berry paradox that

> To be at home on its native ground
> the mind must go down below its horizon,
> descend below the lightfall
> on ridge and steep and valley floor
> to receive the lives of the dead. It must wake
> in their sleep, who wake in its dreams.

This stanza sets off an extended dream vision that forms the basis of the narrative. Berry is walking "on the rock road between / creek and woods in the fall of the year." He hears first "the cries / of little birds" and only "then the beat of old footsteps." At the moment of mystical vision, as Berry puts it,

> my sight was changed.
>
> I passed through the lens of darkness
> as through a furrow, and the dead
> gathered to meet me.

It is interesting to see again the old metaphor of the grave as a furrow in farming. In the dream vision of "Elegy," however, the speaker is able to cross into the world of the dead and talk with them in the manner of a Homeric hero or Dante. Of course, this literary device has many antecedents (apart from the classical epics, one might instance Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Willowwood" sonnets and T. S. Eliot's encounter with the "dead master" in "Little Gidding"). But Berry's poem exercises this tradition with wonderful naturalness and daring simplicity. The dead whom the speaker meets are not symbols or allegorical figures, but members of his family and close friends who "wonder at the lines in my face, / the white hairs sprinkled on my head." There are first of all his grandparents, "a tall old man leaning / upon a cane . . . knowledge of long labor in his eyes," and "an old woman, a saver / of little things, whose lonely grief / was the first I knew" (234). They are followed by others of Berry's "teachers . . . who once bore / the substance of our common ground." Berry describes their dread as having been somehow transfigured: "Their eyes, having grieved all grief, were clear."

At this point, the beginning of the poem's second part, Berry recognizes his old friend Owen Flood, who died in the early spring of 1974, "standing aside, alone, / weariness in his shoulders, his eyes / bewildered yet with the newness / of his death." Handing him a "clod of earth" from "a certain well-known field," Berry begins a restrained colloquial dialogue with the dead man that laces the remainder of the narrative. The clod of earth is a sort of talisman enabling the conversation, like the blood in Homer's *Odyssey*. But Berry's is an appropriately homely talisman, and similarly the language is simple and natural, touching with a kind of philosophical humor on the subject of death:

> "Wendell, this is not a place
> for you and me." And then he grinned;
> we recognized his stubbornness—

it was his principle to doubt
all ease of satisfaction.

"The crops are in the barn," I said
"the morning frost has come to the fields,
and I have turned back to accept,
if I can, what none of us could prevent."

Couched in this homely conversation of two farmers is the essence of Berry's philosophy of death: acceptance of it as part of the natural scheme of things. Interestingly, the language of the poem, unlike the more forthright statements of Berry's prose, confesses some doubt ("if I can . . .") about the possibility of acceptance, the human frailty of the poet confronting what is ultimately unknowable. Berry's doubt is "answered" not with abstract assertion, but the felt experience of the narrative. Owen Flood, Berry's old mentor, appears now to have

cast off
his own confusion, and assumed
for one last time, in one last kindness,
the duty of the older man. (235)

This "duty" is to demonstrate for Berry, as he once demonstrated the techniques and joys of nurture, the equally natural acceptance of one's fate in death. To this end, Flood and Berry do what Dante, through the mouth of Francesca, suggested was so painful: recall their happy times in time of sadness. Yet, as Owen Flood will demonstrate, the time of death need not be one of unmitigated sadness. Indeed, the mood of the poem remains serene rather than miserable.

We stood on a height,
woods above us, and below
on the half-moved slope we saw ourselves
as we once were: a young man mowing,
a boy grubbing with an axe.
* * *
We made it [the old field] new in the heat haze
of that midsummer: he, proud
of the ground intelligence clarified,
and I, proud in his praise.

> "I wish," I said, "that we could be
> back in that good time again."
>
> "We are back there again, today
> and always. Where else would we be?"
>
> He smiled, looked at me, and I knew
> it was my mind he led me through. (236)

The larger memory of mankind consists in the interlinking memories of the generations, in the connections that we make and maintain with past and future. This theme, so prominent in Berry's writings, is once more poignantly suggested here. And how typical of Berry that it should involve the memory of daily work, the kind of thing some people would consider "drudgery." But it is with such "drudgery" that "we enact and understand our oneness with the Creation" (*The Unsettling of America* 138). The narrative continues now with a number of episodes like this, as Owen Flood moves Berry

> through all the fields of our lives,
> preparations, plantings, harvests,
> crews joking at the row ends,
> the water jug passing like a kiss.
>
> He spoke of our history passing through us,
> the way our families' generations
> overlap, the great teaching
> coming down by deed of companionship . . .

The encounter with and contemplation of death is actually the contemplation of life itself, of which death is an inevitable part. Berry tells us that Owen Flood's "passion" was "to be true / to the condition of the Fall/ to live by the sweat of his face, to eat / his bread, assured that the cost was paid" (237). This is Berry's highest compliment.

The fifth section of the poem deals with "the time of [Owen Flood's] pain," when in spite of "the sweet world" about him, "his strength failed / before the light." In one of the most moving passages, Berry for the first time senses mortal weakness in a man whose strength he had always taken for granted:

> Again, in the sun
> of his last harvest, I heard him say:
> "Do you want to take this row,
> and let me get out of your way?"
> I saw the world ahead of him then
> for the first time, and I saw it
> as he already had seen it,
> himself gone from it. It was a sight
> I could not see and not weep.

This sudden, often untimely fading of strength that lies at the center of our wondering about death is perhaps, to the human imagination, its most tragic quality. Berry the philosopher knows what to say next about it, but Berry, the poet in the grip of his vision, cannot help pausing to weep for the tragedy of the human condition. Owen Flood himself does not weep. In the sixth section offers yet another touching vignette of the two men together, looking over the fields and seeing

> the years of care that place wore,
> for his story lay upon it, a bloom,
> a blessing. (238)

It is the summer's end, and their conversation turns to "death and obligation, / the brevity of things and men" (238-39) . At this moment of heavily moving words and heavy thoughts, Owen Flood is not bitter, but filled with the wonder of nature and of life:

> We hushed.
> And then that man who bore his death
> in him, and knew it, quietly said:
> "Well. It's a fascinating world,
> after all."

We are a long way here from the literary posturings of "A Man Walking and Singing." Owen Flood delivers his farmerly words with a perfect naturalness and simplicity. Indeed, the whole poem moves us with the sort of difficult simplicity that we find only in the mature works of certain masters; it is Berry's version of a *Heiligerdankgesang*.

> In the very hour he died, I told him,
> before he knew his death, the thought

> of years to come had moved me
> like a call. I thought of healing,
> health, friendship going on,
> the generations gathering, our good times
> reaching one best time of all. (239)

In the final sections of the poem, they return among the dead, and Berry has a vision of the essential unity in life and death of all the generations, even those to come.

> Again the host of the dead
> encircled us, as in a dance.
> And I was aware now of the unborn
> moving among them.

Berry's "teacher" speaks one more time, reminding him that "joy contains, survives its cost." And as he speaks, it is Berry's "gift" to hear the "song in the Creation":

> In its changes and returns
> his life was passing into life.
> That moment, earth and song and mind,
> the living and the dead, were one. (240)

At the end, Owen Flood, "completed in his rest," drops the earth Berry had given him, and waves the living man, "inheritor of what I mourned, . . . back toward the light of day."

Berry's haunting by Owen Flood is not yet over, however. There is another poem in the sequence entitled "Rising" that is dedicated to Owen Flood's son Kevin. The poem offers a more detailed memory of Owen Flood in his prime as Berry's model of a farmer. Again, this poem does not suppress narrative. It begins with an anecdote of a young Berry working with Owen Flood in the harvest after having rather foolishly "danced until nearly I time to get up." The harvest does not wait for young men with hangovers, however, and Berry must work "half lame / with weariness . . . dizzy, half blind, bitter / with sweat in the hot light." Owen Flood, however, taking"no notice" of Berry's distress, goes on ahead, "assuming / that I would follow," and leading Berry

> through long rows
> of misery, moving like a dancer

> ahead of me, so elated
> he was, and able, filled
> with desire for the ground's growth.

As Berry puts it, "my own head / uttered his judgment, even / his laughter" (241). Owen Flood's only comment is gentle and laconic: "That social life don't get / down the row, does it, boy." The anecdote springs to life, full voiced and full of a kind of joy, the way our pleasant memories of the dead may spring to life again once we have come to terms with the primal tragedy of their death. Berry has done this through the visionary meeting of "Elegy," and now Owen Flood may live again in his memories, which may be a gift, as the dedication of "Rising" suggests, to the future generation.

The anecdote also engages the theme of generations subtly linked by the human activity of living and working together in one place. This activity represents in microcosm the heritage of the land itself, always an important element of Berry's writing. From Owen Flood, Berry learns to work not "by will" but "by desire," making what might seem an "ordeal" into "order / and grace, ideal and real." The conjunction of Berry's "awkward boyhood" with "the time of [Owen Flood's] mastery," troubles the younger man "to become / what I had not thought to be." Thus the disciplines of the system of systems are "made, remembered, taught, learned, and practiced" (*Standing by Words* 47), passing from one generation to the next. Owen Flood teaches Berry the role of the "cyclical" man at home and in place, the nurturer who stands in opposition to the constant "traveler," the exploiter of the land:

> The boy must learn the man
> whose life does not travel
> along any road, toward
> any other place,
> but is a journey back and forth
> in rows, and in the rounds
> of years. His journeys end
> is no place of ease, but the farm
> itself, the place day labor
> starts form, journeys in,
> returns to: the fields
> whose past and potency are one. (242)

In such a way, time past and time future may indeed both be contained in time present; and one may indeed experience the paradoxical joy of fidelity, those

"moments when what we have chosen and what we desire are the same" (*The Unsettling of America* 122). In *The Unsettling of America*, Berry quotes with approval Thomas Hardy's poem about the farmer, the "man harrowing clods" who "will go onward the same / Though Dynasties pass" (14); here he eulogizes Owen Flood in similar terms:

> The man at dawn
> in spring of the year,
> going to the fields,
> visionary of seed and desire,
> is timeless as a star. (242-43)

These lines form the emotional center of Berry's poem, and perhaps his work as a whole. Here Berry's gaze rises from the particular toward the universal, "personal at the beginning and religious at the end" (*Standing by Words* 50-51). And this movement of his vision suggests why what we have seen is "not the story of a life," but "the story of lives, knit together / overlapping in succession, rising / again from grave after grave." But the memories of living men are the keepers of this mystery, this "severe gift" we "keep / as part of ourselves" when "like graves, we heal over." As Berry puts it:

> There is a grave, too, in each
> survivor. By it, the dead one lives.
> He enters us, a broken blade,
> sharp, clear as a lens or mirror.
>
> And he comes into us helpless, tender
> as the newborn enter the world.

In such a way, "the dead become the intelligence of life" (243).

Berry ends his poem "Rising" with as deeply felt an "apotheosis" as we are likely to encounter in contemporary American poetry, and in it he sums up much of his attitude toward death and life. The mature version of Berry's song of death transforms itself into a song of life, "rhyming" flesh with flesh and generation with generation.

> But if a man's life
> continues in another man,
> then the flesh will rhyme
> its part in immortal song.
> By absence, he comes again.

> There is a kinship of the fields
> that gives to the living the breath
> of the dead. The earth
> opened in the spring, opens
> in all springs. Nameless,
> ancient, many lived, we reach
> through ages with the seed. (244)

This is an attitude which has been hard won, offering neither glibness of orthodoxy nor glibness of despair. It is an attitude proprietous and secure in man's place in the system of systems and the ultimate mystery surrounding it. The earth that opened one spring for Owen Flood opens in all springs to embrace the dead and to bring forth new life. Owen Flood's death was, as Berry would have his own, the good death of a farmer, a nurturer "reaching through ages."

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