

The Dialogical Imagination in the Poetry of Wendell Berry

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The ideas expressed in the essays, prose and poetry of Wendell Berry have proven applicable to a broad spectrum of thinkers and writers- from the work of post-modern theorist Jacques Derrida, to secular political theorist Jeffrey Stout, to writer and theologian Eugene Peterson. Perhaps Stanley Hauerwas best explains Berry's wide-ranging popularity when he describes Berry as one of the best truth tellers of our time.

Berry skillfully speaks of "first things," of the sicknesses that riddle a disembodied society based on global markets, mass transit and instant technology. The hope Berry offers is counter-intuitive to modernity, in that it is based on our finitude, the acceptance of boundaries, and most notoriously, the imagery of being rooted in place. Berry understands that one's story is located within the landscape of a larger story, and that this larger story plays an inherent role in the forming and shaping of personhood. Understood thus, the boundaries of place are not restrictive, but rather burst open modernity's myth of the self-enclosed, self-signifying individual, instead offering an identity that unfolds through time within the unfolding of the larger story. The connection Berry makes between space and time could be described as a rooted hope.

Applying this theme of rooted hope to the church, in this paper I will follow the argument made by pastor and writer Eugene Peterson and Baptist minister Kyle Childress that Berry's "hermeneutic of farming"¹ can be related to the Church's "hermeneutic of peoplehood" as described by John Howard Yoder.² I want to extend Peterson's and Childress' observations and explore this hermeneutic specifically through Berry's poetry.

¹ This is a phrase the Childress introduces in his article "Good Work: Learning about Ministry from Wendell Berry" in *Christian Century* 122:5 (March 8, 2005) pp 28-33.

² See John Howard Yoder's "The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood" in *The Priestly Kingdom*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984. (p. 15-45).

I will begin this exploration by first giving an account of Berry's understanding of poetry. In his collection of essays *Standing by Words*, Berry provides an invaluable guide to his poetry. As opposed to a poet like W.H. Auden, Berry believes poetry *does* something.³ Poetry is an interaction of words and deeds that are particular and connected to place. It invites the reader into a local conversation in a way that demands a response of action. In this conversation, the voice of the poet herself is only one voice among many. The outcome of the poem cannot be controlled or contained, but rather makes space for a certain futurity or potentiality to reside within it. Only time, and the response lived out in time, can reveal the truth of a poem.

The understanding of Berry's poetry as conversation is deepened by the fact that Berry's poems themselves engage in conversation with one another. Repeated images, recycled lines and re-visited themes create what I will argue could be called clusters of conversational poems that invite the reader to engage the poetry at a more layered and complex level. These conversations happen over a period of time, grounded by the same framework of place within which Berry has written over the past forty years.

The final part of my paper could be considered an experiment in reading Berry's poetry. I will explore Berry's "The Window Poems" to demonstrate the themes identified by Peterson and Childress as relevant to the church, and explore how this particular form of writing, as conversation, can deepen the imagination and thereby invoke active response within the life of the Church.

³ In his essay "Standing by Words," Berry addresses Auden's claim that "Poetry does nothing." See "Standing by Words" in *Standing by Words*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983.

Berry's Work as Hermeneutic

In his book *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Eugene Peterson explores Berry's account of rooted hope through the lens of his own vocation as pastor. He reflects that the work of a pastor demands a particularity of place. As he describes it, "Pastoral work is as much geographical as it is theological...It is the nature of pastoral work to be on site, working things out in the particular soil of a particular parish."⁴ Peterson's work occurs in a place that has a name, a location on a map, and a unique contour and shape. Without this particularity of place, without understanding theology as a sort of geography, there is the great temptation to slip into Gnosticism. Peterson describes Gnosticism as "a perversion of the Gospel that is contemptuous of place and matter. It holds forth that salvation consists in having the right ideas, and the fancier the better."⁵ Gnosticism is impatient with the restrictions of time and place, instead focusing on ideas. It is embarrassed by "the garbage and disorder of everyday living."⁶

In contrast to Gnosticism, Peterson describes the Gospel as "local intelligence." The more local life is, "the more intense, more colorful, more rich it is, because it has limits."⁷ Locally applied, the Gospel plunges "with a great deal of zest" into the flesh of life, into matter, into place. The pastor's task is to take up work in and with whoever happens to be present as the people of God. "One of the pastor's continuous tasks is to make sure that that these conditions are honored: *this* place just as it is, *these* people in

⁴ Eugene Peterson. *Under the Unpredictable Plant*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 1992.

⁵ Ibid, 130.

⁶ Ibid, 131.

⁷ Ibid, 137.

their everyday clothes, ‘a particularizing love for local things, rising out of local knowledge and local allegiance.’”⁸

Peterson compares this pastoral task of congregant cultivation to Berry’s description of the cultivation of topsoil. Berry himself seems to identify the potential richness of this analogy. He observes, “In talking about topsoil, it is hard to avoid the language of religion.”⁹ Topsoil is a treasure trove of nutrient rich organisms constantly interacting with one another in a cycle of death and resurrection. Peterson reflects that the church congregation, like a form of topsoil, is the “material substance in which all the Spirit’s work takes place- these people, assembled in worship, dispersed in blessing.”¹⁰

Peterson sees the congregation as a field, teeming with energy and nutrients, and thus a mixture of death and life. The congregation is even more complex than an individual soul. Each congregation is different, a unique combination of souls, creating a unique life.

If I am dismissive of the uniqueness of this parish, or unwilling to acknowledge it, I will impose my routines on it for a few seasons, harvest a few souls, then move on to another parish to try my luck there, and in my belligerent folly I will miss the beauty and holiness and sheer divine life that was all the time there, unseen and unheard because of my rapacious religious ambitions.¹¹

In the ordinariness of life, the possibility of taking for granted the mysteries present is always looming. There is tremendous temptation to strip-mine the congregation, to build “theological roads, mission constructs and parking lot curricula.”¹²

⁸ Ibid, 130, quoting from Wendell Berry’s *Home Economics*, p.144.

⁹ Wendell Berry. 1987. *Home Economics*. New York.

¹⁰ *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 134.

¹¹ Ibid, 136.

¹² Ibid, 134.

But the field cannot be manufactured; it can only be protected. Peterson acknowledges that, “like the farmer with his topsoil, I must respect and honor and reverence [the congregation], be in awe before the vast mysteries contained in its unassuming ordinariness.”¹³ With the patient devotion of a farmer cultivating a field, the congregation can be healthy and productive for years to come.

In his article “Good Work: Learning about Ministry from Wendell Berry,” Baptist minister Kyle Childress picks up Peterson’s interpretation of Berry’s work for the Church. Childress reflects on his fifteen years as a pastor of a small congregation in East Texas. When asked, “When are you going to a bigger church? Why do you stay?” Childress’ oft-provided response is, “Because I read too much Wendell Berry.”¹⁴ Childress uses Berry as a “guide” into what it means to be a long-time pastor of a small congregation. Referring to what Berry describes as “the culture of the one-night stand,” Childress describes how clergy can counter the one-night stand by grounding ministry where Berry grounds his work, in “place.”

Like a battered field, churches have members whose lives are ravaged by bitterness, anger, hurt and disease. Add to that the wounds of society- racism, war and consumerism, and the congregation is scarred by sin. Childress writes, “For the gospel of Jesus Christ to grow and heal such worn-out, eroded lives takes patient, long-suffering, detailed work. It takes time to cultivate the habits of peacemaking, forgiveness, reconciliation and love where previously violence, mistrust and fear were the norms. It takes time to grow Christians.”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid, 135.

¹⁴ “Good Work: Learning about Ministry from Wendell Berry” p. 28.

¹⁵ Ibid, 29.

Not only does the growing of Christians take time, it takes a proper posturing. Borrowing the word “propriety” from Berry, Childress notes that in a sense of propriety, we understand that we are part of something bigger than our own selfhood. Propriety makes “an issue of the fittingness of our conduct to our place or circumstances even to our hopes.”¹⁶ Childress cites an essay in *Standing by Words* that reveals one of the most important ideas for a pastor. I quote it in its entirety:

When one buys the farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts...It invariably turns out, I think, that one’s first vision of one’s place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one’s sight is clear and one stays on and works well, one’s love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one’s visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it...Two human possibilities of the highest order thus come within reach: what one wants can become the same as what one has, and one’s knowledge can cause respect for what one knows.

...The good worker will not suppose the good work can be made properly answerable to haste, urgency, or even emergency...Seen in this way, questions about farming become inseparable from questions about propriety of scale. A farm can be too big for a farmer to husband properly or pay proper attention to. Distraction is inimical to correct discipline, and enough time is beyond reach of anyone who has too much to do. But we must go farther and see that propriety of scale is invariably associated with propriety of another kind: an understanding and acceptance of the human place in the order of Creation- a proper humility...It is the properly humbled mind in its proper place that sees truly, because- to give only one reason- it sees details.¹⁷

For Childress, this passage provides a particular hermeneutic, one he calls a “hermeneutic of farming.” Through this hermeneutic, the proper order, the proper scale necessary for proper care can be seen. Childress compares Berry’s “hermeneutics of farming” to John Howard Yoder’s “hermeneutics of peoplehood.”¹⁸ Within Yoder’s

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 30, quoting Wendell Berry in “Standing by Words.”

¹⁸ “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood,” 15.

hermeneutics, one “patiently and humbly listens to the sense of the congregation and the Bible and the Spirit in a particular context.”¹⁹ For Yoder, the Bible has no isolated meaning apart from the people reading it and the questions that they need to answer. Childress explains that he began to do a hermeneutics of peoplehood “sitting on front porches and working gardens with the people and drinking iced tea afterwards while listening to their stories... As a result my preaching and teaching changed. My sermons began to grow out of the conversation between the people and the Bible and the place where they lived. I learned to listen throughout the week in order to speak for 20 minutes on Sunday morning.”²⁰

Childress compares Yoder’s hermeneutic with Berry’s when he reflects on Berry’s description of a bulldozer. According to Berry, a bulldozer is “a powerful generalizer” that works against the impulse “to take care of things, to pay attention to the details.” Berry believes that “good work is always modestly scaled, for it cannot ignore either the nature of individual places or the differences between places, and it always involves a sort of religious humility, for not everything is known. Good work can only be defined in particularity, for it must be defined a little differently for every one of the places on earth.”²¹ Childress notes, therefore, that the kingdom of God is not brought in with bulldozers.

It cannot be imposed and still be the kingdom of God. The means God uses to bring about his reign must fit with the purpose of God’s reign of justice, peace, harmony and reconciled relationship with God, with humanity and with all of creation. It cannot be coerced with bulldozers...God calls us to do the work of ministry that fits with the Prince of Peace, the Suffering Servant, Jesus.”²²

¹⁹ “Good Work,” 30.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

For Childress, the cultivation of church happens daily, in the details of his community members' lives that extend through time. He has learned that most of the "good, deep-down work" of discipleship happens less in his study, and more where the people live.

In Berry's stories, members of the community look out for one another. The community lives together and works together, is present both in difficult times and for a weekly game of cards. But how did the community of Berry's writings form? From whom did they learn to share a common life? Berry says that they the received that learning from a "community-across-time tradition."²³ "Human continuity is virtually synonymous with good farming and good farming must outlast the life of any good farmer. For it to do this...we must have community."²⁴

The type of community that Berry envisions and writes in defense of is rare, but it is one that ought to speak most profoundly to the church. As Childress reflects, "We need churches that are ... the very ground of community, that define and build and embody a kind of life that can move beyond the walls of the church and demonstrate common living in the wider society."²⁵ As the Church, we ought to know that we are the body of Christ. In Christ, "we are re-membered every Sunday in worship as the body" and our work as the body extends into the week.²⁶ This week-day living of life together is what keeps our Sunday work from becoming, as Peterson warned, Gnostic.

Fine-tuning the Hermeneutic: Berry's Poetry as Guide

Berry's poetry, like his other works, reflects his belief that boundaries are not restrictive, but rather burst open modernity's myth of the self-enclosed, self-signifying

²³ Ibid, 31.

²⁴ "Standing by Words" 25.

²⁵ "Good Work," 31.

²⁶ Ibid.

individual. In this section of my paper I will argue that the very *form* of Berry's poetry reveals and extends his hermeneutic of farming. After giving an account of Berry's understanding of poetry, I will revisit Yoder's "hermeneutic of peoplehood," to further argue that Berry's poetry is particularly applicable to the Church, in that it is through his poetry that we most explicitly encounter glimpses of the mystery of God. Vladimir Lossky writes, "Only poetry can evoke [the mystery of God] precisely because it celebrates and does not pretend to explain."²⁷ If this is indeed the case, then the rooted nature of Berry's poetry celebrates the mystery of God that is present in (the rightly ordered and boundaried) Creation itself.

Berry understands poetry as an art of the imagination. To imagine is to perform a theological act. He writes: "The imagination is our way into the divine Imagination, permitting us to see wholly-- as *whole* and *holy*-- what we perceive as scattered, as order what we perceive as random."²⁸ Poetry as form is a careful construction of the imagination. Adhering to the scale of propriety that Childress found so valuable, the quality of a poem is measured by things outside the poem: the propriety of diction, tone, and rhythm; a measuring of the poem against its subject. The poem in this sense is located within the larger context of place. It does not exist for itself, nor is it enclosed within itself. Rather, poetry is concerned with the order that makes possible a "conviviality" between nature, humanity, and God. To imagine our life in scale with life

²⁷ Vladimir Lossky. *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 46.

²⁸ Wendell Berry. "Notes: Unspecializing Poetry" in *Standing by Words*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983. p.87. Italics mine.

around us, “we may begin to see it in its sacredness, as unimaginable gift, as mystery- as it was, is, and ever shall be, world without end.”²⁹

This concept of imagination is a far cry from fantasy. The type of imagination Berry describes is a disciplined imagination. Rather than flying into the abstract, a disciplined imagination may imagine a farm, a factory, a community, a marriage, a family, or a household. But this is only the first step. Having imagined such reality, the imagination will then strive to imagine the relation of that one to all the rest. The imagination Berry upholds is attentive to relation, propriety, dependence, and scale.³⁰ Cultivating such a hermeneutic using this type of imaginative lens could be considered a type of conversation wherein the imagination is searching, seeking, responding and locating the self within the proper order of things. To preserve our places and be at home in them, Berry believes we must first fill them with imagination. First, we must look clearly with our eyes, and then see our place with the imagination in their sanctity, as belonging to the Creation. There is a very precise order for Berry in the act of imagination. “To imagine that place as it is, and was, and-- *only then*-- as it will or may be.”³¹

The task of the poet then is to take up again the old interest in action. The poet ought to renew the meaning of actions known from the past and consider the possibility of right action now and in the future. “There are actions worthy of the patience and work of whole lives-- actions, even, that no whole life can complete-- that involves the lives of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 89-90.

³¹ Ibid, 91. Italics original.

people in the lives of places and communities. Without such actions, both in life and in art, the consciousness of our people will be fragmentary.”³²

Berry’s definition of imagination should prove helpful to the Church. The training of our minds into a properly rooted hopefulness, within the proper scale of propriety may provide us with a hermeneutic that gives glimpses of the mystery of God at work in the world. With a properly trained imagination, we are able to glimpse the relationships between things that may not otherwise be obvious to modernity’s gaze. In other words, with a properly formed imagination, we may begin to see God’s activity in the world.

Re-opening the Poem: Locating the Dialogic Imagination

In *Standing by Words*, Berry begins his collection of essays by first lamenting what he describes as “the specialization of poetry.”³³ Specialization in poetry, like specialization in any other craft, has a practical purpose. The specialist withdraws from responsibility for everything not within the realm of her specialty. Specialization abandons the old ideals of harmony, symmetry, balance and order for the sake of the singular ideal of control. That this type of achievement has been successful over certain part of Creation has, Berry argues, given rise to the supposition that such control is possible on a much larger and grander scale, bringing Creation and history into line with humanity’s own self-seeking intentions. This shift in order breaks down the natural union of beauty with goodness and truth. In reaction to the utilitarianism of other “specialized” disciplines, the arts become understood as non-utilitarian, superfluous diversion. In this superfluous state, the poet is isolated and specialized. A new premise

³² Wendell Berry. “Standing by Words” in *Standing by Words*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983. 21

³³ Wendell Berry. “The Specialization of Poetry” in *Standing By Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983) 3.

now exists: poets are different from other people. As a result, there now exists a class of people that Berry describes as “poet watchers.”³⁴

Like bird watchers, poet watchers examine the poet, studying as unobtrusively as possible whatever secrets may be disclosed through the slip of conversation. The poet watcher hopes that poets will reveal themselves “for the strange creatures they really are.” The life of the poet is considered “different” and exciting. Because of this, a conversation with a poet cannot be considered dialogue between two beings of the same general kind. Such a dialogue could lead to hard questions, or perhaps even argument. Instead, poet watchers, like bird watchers, miss essential truths, because their interest is too direct, too laden with the excitement of a special event. They are, as Berry bemoans, “too much agog.”³⁵

Berry describes what he considers one of the oldest doctrines of the “specialist-poet,” that of the primacy of language and the primacy of poetry. According to Berry, the “specialist-poets” have made a religion of their art, a religion based not on what poets have in common with other people, but what they *do* that sets them apart.³⁶

For poets who believe this way, a poem is not a point of clarification or connection between themselves and the world on the one hand and between themselves and their readers on the other, nor is it an adventure into any reality or mystery outside themselves. It is a seeking of self in words, the making of a word-world in which the word-self may be at home. The poets go to their poems as other people have gone to the world or to God- for a sense of their own reality.³⁷

This “word-world” creates not only a necessarily enclosed literary ghetto, but also an isolation of the poet within herself. The only common ground that then exists between

³⁴ Ibid, 6.

³⁵ Ibid, 6.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

the poet and her (ideal) reader is the poetry itself. The world is usable for poetry only after it has been totally subsumed within the self. Berry quotes poet Phillip Levine, who after a visit to Spain wrote: “By the end of the year the landscape seemed me, seemed like a projection of my own inner being. I felt that when I looked at the Spanish landscape I was looking at a part of myself.”³⁸ As Berry reflects, the world that once was mirrored by the poet has become the poet’s mirror.

Berry contends that the weakening of poetry demonstrates what is wrong with us, both as poets and as people. The weakening of poetry is indicative of a lack of interest, first, in action, and second, in responsible action.³⁹ Our malaise, as expressed both in our art and in our lives, is this loss of sight for the possibility of right action. Instead, as opposed to a tale of hope, we communicate a tale of futility and victimization. We have elected this as our new story. “The prevailing tendency, in poetry and out, is to see people not as actors, but as sufferers.”⁴⁰

Poetry and Place

Berry, in opposition to the “specialization of poetry,” believes that poetry should be considered a dialogue located within the boundaries of place. The subject of poetry is not words, but the world, which poets inhabit with other people. For Berry, even in the form of poetry, his writing is firmly embedded in place and in time. He writes, “This place has become the form of my work, its discipline, in the same way the sonnet has been the form and discipline of the work of other poets: if it doesn’t fit it’s not true.”⁴¹ While Berry will later nuance this statement by saying place can be form “only under

³⁸ Ibid, 8.

³⁹ Ibid, 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁴¹ Wendell Berry. “Poetry and Place” in *Standing by Words*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983. 92.

certain conditions, and only in a certain sense,”⁴² Berry is describing poem-making much as Peterson describes theology. It is, in a sense, geographical.

Local conversation is the heart of the power of poetry. Community speech, unconsciously taught and learned, in which words live in the presence of their objects, is the very root and foundation of language. “It is the source, the unconscious inheritance that is carried, both with and without schooling, into consciousness-- but never all the way, and so it remains rich, mysterious, and enlivening.”⁴³ The landscape that Berry works from stands in contrast to the modern assumptions.

The modern world is not necessarily, and not often, the real world. It is a false world, based upon economies and values and desires that are fantastical... The job now is to get back to that perennial and substantial world in which we really do live, in which the foundations of our life will be visible to us, and in which we can accept our responsibilities again within the conditions of necessity and mystery. In that world all wakeful and responsible people, dead, living, and unborn, are contemporaries. And that is the only contemporaneity worth having.⁴⁴

When grounded in the details of place and community, poetry opens the vision to the mysterious relation between things, thereby fixing the gaze upon the real world. Poetry itself can participate in the “real-world” creation. Vladimir Lossky writes that through poetry “we can penetrate the mystery of the created being. To create is not to reflect oneself in a mirror ... it is not vainly to divide oneself in order to take everything unto oneself. It is a calling forth of newness. One might almost say: a risk of newness.”⁴⁵

For Berry, place is also something which exists through time. Berry sees that place is laden both with the past and the hope of the future, and thus with narrative

⁴² Ibid, 93.

⁴³ “Standing by Words” 33.

⁴⁴ “The Specialization of Poetry,” 13.

⁴⁵ *Orthodox Theology*, 54.

accounts of it. In this sense, he understands himself not only in context to a place that is more than him, but also as a participant in a story larger than his own story.

Our past is not merely something to depart from; it is to commune with, to speak with...Remove this sense of continuity, and we are left with the thoughtless present tense of machines. If we fail to see that we live in the same world that Homer lived in, then we not only misunderstand Homer; we misunderstand ourselves. The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it.”⁴⁶

Located rightly within time and place, poetry allows for conversation to occur. Poetry understood as dialogue breaks the poet out of her self-enclosed world of words, expanding her very self into a larger community that shapes her, as she shapes it. The understanding of Berry’s poetry as conversation is deepened by the fact that Berry’s poems themselves engage in conversation with one another, inviting both diachronic and synchronic readings of the texts. Repeated images, recycled lines and re-visited themes create conversations that invite the reader to engage the poetry at a more layered and complex level. These conversations happen over a period of time, grounded by the same framework of place that Berry has written from over the past forty years.

A reading of “The Window Poems”

It is perhaps fitting to deepen this exploration of Berry’s dialogical imagination by engaging with one of his poems. “The Window Poems,” from his collection *Openings* (1968), is a group of poems that revolve around the very forty-paned window Berry sits by as he writes in a cabin on his property. In language fitting for a riverside cabin, Berry reconstructs through poetry the events and relationships that recur in his essays and fiction.

⁴⁶ “The Specialization of Poetry” 14.

In this collection, the window serves as a sort of two-way grid, a square boundary, through which Berry restlessly probes the complexity of the scene outside the window, and seeks for signs of meaning within it. An open introspection is also evident in the poem as Berry reflects on himself in the third person, as if a spectator looking in from outside the window. But the introspection does not slip into a Gnostic groundlessness. Rather it is anchored in the framing of the window, which becomes the boundary for the working of Berry's imagination.

Peering out the window, Berry encounters the mystical.

The window is a fragment
of the world suspended
in the world, known
adrift in mystery.⁴⁷

Because the mystery is in a sense contained by the window, Berry is allowed to probe the surface and search for some form of order between disparate experiences that, though ultimately cannot be fully grasped, can be glimpsed through the poem.

Outside the window, Berry describes a tapestry of seasons, mixing with the activities of the forest and river inhabitants. Thoughts of the trash from the cities intersect with the admiration of cardinals red as beings like fire on the mats in the river. The beloved fictional character Burley Coulter rows along on the real river.

Now that April with sweet rain
has come to Port Royal again,
Burley Coulter rows out on the river to fish.⁴⁸

The overlapping scenes from the window, of ecological scars mixed with extraordinarily descriptive beauty, along with the interaction of fictional and actual worlds, captures the

⁴⁷ *Selected Poems*, 59.

⁴⁸ *Selected Poems*, 58.

nonlinear quality of Berry's imagination. The poet's imagination probes the overlaps between the disparities as a means of enriching the liveliness of the scene.

This probing is an ongoing and re-creating act. The practice of approaching the same subject in different forms, or from different angles or perspectives is a discursiveness that patterns the ongoing, discursive nature of living itself. One of Berry's favorite trees demonstrates this complexity of perspective. On the edge of Berry's property there is a sprawling, ancient sycamore tree. This tree has been the subject of its own poem.⁴⁹ In "The Sycamore," Berry reflects on the meaning of the tree's multiple scars. He writes, "It has gathered all accidents into its purpose."⁵⁰ Its healing is, to Berry, mystical, its shape unique.

This same tree reappears multiple times throughout "The Window Poems." First, Berry reflects on the mystery of its scarred figure.

And its white is not so pure
As a glance would have it,
But emerges partially,
The tree's renewal of itself...
All he has learned of it
Does not add up to it.⁵¹

Berry looks upon the white of its healed-over scars, and reflects on how the tree's healing does not come by imagining.⁵² Later in the poem, the sycamore is described as having a pride that speaks to the propriety of ordered creation:

Let them understand the pride
Of sycamores and thrushes
That receive the light gladly, and do not
Think to illuminate themselves.⁵³

⁴⁹ "The Sycamore" in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ "The Window Poems" in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 48.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 52.

Later, as Berry reflects on the passing of all things, he writes:

Now the old sycamore
Yields at its crown
A dead branch.
It will sink like evening
Into its standing place.⁵⁴

Each reflection of the sycamore reveals a different element of the tree. Whether it is the grandeur of its mottled scars, its proper pride within the order of Creation, or Berry's understanding that even this most hallowed of tree's time on earth is fleeting, the tree's shape becomes richer, and more laden with significance for both Berry and his reader. This complexity of perspective enables Berry to write and re-write his experience in ways that open the poem for multiple conversations.

Each time Berry returns to a previous line or image, he affirms the interpenetration of the past and present. The past is still accessible to the present where it is re-evaluated, re-explored from a new perspective. In "Life is a Miracle," Berry explains that even if the world stayed the same, "one would be getting older and growing in memory and experience, and would need for that reason alone to work from revision to revision."⁵⁵

By remaining framed within the boundaries of the window, Berry allows the approach of mystery to be one that avoids a Gnostic understanding of the mystery. Indeed as Lossky points out, the revelation of God is only possible in Creation.⁵⁶ The mystery is not found in disembodied ideas or states of being, but rather, the mystery is

⁵⁴ Ibid, 57-58.

⁵⁵ Berry, "Life is a Miracle." 139.

⁵⁶ *Orthodox Theology*, 46.

found in the every day scenes from the window, or walks into the woods around the “long legged house.”

Berry poems can be read both diachronically and synchronically, that is, in attention to both space and time. The tension itself indicates a sort of futurity to Berry’s texts-- an understanding that the poems, like an ongoing conversation, may not be finished; they may be revisited, if we stay in location long enough. The poems stand in their own merit, but if we pay careful enough attention to the exchanges between poems, we find layers of meaning that enrich the poem. These connections become the glimpses of mystery, through “the dark richer than the light and more blessed.”⁵⁷

Berry’s Poetry for the Church

Like Berry, peering through the grid of his window, the Church is positioned to constantly engage, examine and probe. And like Berry’s “Window Poems,” these probings are both internal (i.e. the Church as community) and outside the window (the Church within the world). As Berry explains,

To be bound within the confines of either the internal or external way of accounting is to be diseased. To hold the two in balance is to validate both kinds, and to have health. I am speaking simply from my own observation that when my awareness of how I view myself overpowers my awareness of where I am and who is there with me, I am sick, diseased. This can be appropriately extended to say that if what I think obscures my sense of whereabouts and company, I am diseased. And the converse is also true: I am diseased if I become so aware of my surroundings that my own inward life is obscured, as if I should so fix upon the value of some mineral in the ground as to forget that the world is God’s work and my home.⁵⁸

To understand the church thus located is to be mindful not only of the life and health of the church community, but also expands the boundaries of the church, locating

⁵⁷ Wendell Berry. “The Country of Marriage” in the *Selected Poems*, 85.

⁵⁸ “Standing by Words,” 42.

it within the larger context of the particular community on the map that both defines and is defined by the church. The two-way grid of the window that takes in the particularities of one “fragment” of the world provides the proper boundaries for the church to explore the mysteries of God within the complexity and richness of detail.

Back to the Hermeneutics of Farming and Peoplehood

Poetry, as an art of the imagination, helps the Church to both see and act rightly in the world. As John Howard Yoder describes,

It is a significant anthropological insight to say that language can steer the community with a power disproportionate to other kinds of leadership. The poet is engaged in steering society with the rudder of language.⁵⁹

Yoder realizes that the poet, as one who invokes the imagination, helps determine the thoughts the members of a given community are capable of having and thereby determines what kind of action is possible.

Through poetry, the Church’s imagination is refined, so that the vast mysteries of God may penetrate the enclosed world of modernity, bursting open the possibilities of church life as unique as the “material substance in which all the Spirit’s work takes place—these people, assembled in worship, dispersed in blessing,”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “The Hermeneutics of Peoplehood” 32.

⁶⁰ *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, 134.

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