Poetics and Reflective Ministry Practice: A Vital Exercise of Imagination

Sean Gilbert[1]

Suppose we did our work
like the snow, quietly, quietly,
leaving nothing out.[1]

INTRODUCTION

It's not uncommon when introducing ministry students to the expansive world of poetics to spy the rolling of eyes or to hear from braver souls, "I don't do poetry." Akin to the lingering experiences of a music teacher who told us we couldn't sing or the English lecturer who forced us to unravel a poem's complex form, my strategic use of poetry in ministry-related topics is often met with initial bemusement and even notes of resistance.[2] Given poetry's cultural discordancy as a non-informational, indirect form of speech, of what strategic and lasting use can it be, particularly in near-desperate church modes of "relevance" and missional endeavour? Happily, experience has taught me to hold my nerve and persevere! Resonant connections of call and renewed meaning are made in surprising places for both teacher and student. This article argues for the practicality of poetry in terms of encouraging a clearer pastoral identity and vocational purpose, which in turn deepens ministry confidence and imaginative capacity. I increasingly sense an exercised imagination is essential in both faith and social contexts wherein external structures that have long provided stability are collapsing at an accelerated pace. Considering this uncomfortable reality, poetry is a ready means of soulful enlargement and even courage within fissures of social change and ecclesial diminishment. Or, as the poet Li-Young Lee succinctly states, "[P]oetry provides a very important service. It uncovers our deepest identity . . . who we are fully."[3]

WENDELL BERRY AS 'RESIDENT POET'

With this affirmation in mind, and for simplicity's sake, I will employ in the classroom the voice of a well-known and respected poet—the agrarian seer and lover of creation Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer and celebrated author.[4] Primarily, I will access "The Sabbath Poems" that he began compiling in 1979 and to my knowledge is still composing. More specifically, I will draw on his repeated observation that a

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symbiotic relationship exists between what he experiences to be his own needed Sabbath rest and a corresponding imperative to live an affected and fruitful life:

It is hard to return from Sabbath rest
To lifework of the fields, yet we rejoice,
Returning, less condemned in being blessed
By vision of what human work can make:
A harmony between forest and field,
The world as it was given for love's sake.[5]

For my teaching purposes, Berry embodies a prophetic and invitational herald of *return*. Return here means repeated reacquaintances with the gifting of grace that holds and stills the restless spirit, clearing ways for restored imaginings arising from the wonder of sacred encounter.[6] Such a curative-of-soul principle, however, is not yet another stratagem for faith or church renewal.[7] Nor can it be utilised by insatiable Western objectives of growth and productivity from which, Berry contends, no existential return is even possible.[8] For Berry, like many celebrated faith-orientated poets and writers before him, such as Denise Levertov, T. S. Eliot, George Herbert, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *everything* turns on the affecting nature of grace.[9] Yet when that vitalising beginning, centre, and end is veiled due to the failure of imagination, the figurative pristine nature of "the woods" is further desecrated. Later in his life, Berry writes with a good deal of passion and urgency about keeping grace actively alive within vocational callings and unfolding experience:

Having known the grace
That for so long has kept this world,
haggard as it is, as we have made it,
we cannot rest, we must be stirring
to keep that gift dwelling among us,
eternally alive in time. This
is the great work, no other, more harder,
none nearer rest or more beautiful.[10]

Like all artists of social gravitas, Berry often writes in ways contrary to conventional wisdom. This is particularly evident in his expressed ambivalence towards institutional religion, which he suggests plays a role in flattening the collective imagination. Indeed, it is a major reason why I use a poet like him in my teaching. For, by means of accessible yet provocative metaphors, Berry leads his readers towards the very centre of things, holding intersecting realities of spirit and matter together with a beauty that defies a crass secularism while exposing religious dualisms for the menace that they are. Eugene Peterson, who notably entitled one of his last books *Practice Resurrection* after the last line of Berry's "Manifesto of a Mad Farmer," concurs in his own unique way:

The imagination is among the chief glories of the human. When it is healthy and energetic, it ushers in adoration and wonder into the mysteries of God. When it is neurotic and sluggish, it turns people—millions of them—into parasites, copycats, and couch potatoes. . . . Right now, one of the essential Christian ministries in and to our ruined world is the recovery and exercise of the imagination. Ages of faith have always been ages rich in imagination. It is easy to see why: the materiality of the gospel (the seen, heard, and touched Jesus) is no less impressive than its spirituality (faith, hope, and love). Imagination is the mental tool we have for connecting material and spiritual, visible and invisible, earth and heaven.[11]

Through their incarnational tone and content, Berry's poetics, I believe, help keep the vision of the present and promised Kingdom alive without force, contrivance, gloss, or cliché. Indeed, he is a truth-teller about the nonconventional ways and means of divine grace. Very early in his first "The Sabbath Poems" collection, he writes of his own Sunday morning experience, which is sympathetic to the gathering of the local congregation but his soulful intention lies elsewhere:

The bell calls in the town
Where forebears cleared the shaded land
And brought high daylight down
To shine on field and trodden road.
I hear, but understand
Contrarily, and walk into the woods.
I leave labour and load,
Take up a different story.
I keep an inventory
Of wonders and uncommercial goods.[12]

It is Berry's *different* story and imaginative leanings that I hope students of theology and Christian ministry will "take up" also. Similarly, I want them to prioritise keeping an "inventory of wonders and uncommercial goods" before seriously considering paying any attention to skill development or ministry goals. Not that I have any objection to pastoral competence and desired outcomes. Rather, it is a matter of a right ordering; a needed reminder about what is spiritually life giving and therefore vocationally sustaining. Imaginative alignments to the ever-unfolding love and mercy of God are, I believe, fertile ground for any sustainable and self-giving practice of Christian *ministry*, particularly in this current winter season of the Western church's life.

THEOPOETICS AND THE PASTORAL IMAGINATION

As I write this, I am on retreat at a Cistercian Abbey in rural Victoria, Australia. The repeated combinations of the community's prayer and silence, coupled with my own journaling and meanderings around the beauty of the abbey's fields, doesn't

leave me in places of passivity or self-absorbed piety. By way of significant contrast, I know I will soon return to my teaching re-energised and *re*-visioned in terms of what really matters within the Christian life and how I might convey that as congruently and clearly as I can.

Such intentional life and faith experiences have taught me over the years that an imaginative stance held amid the pressing daily demands—and counter-demands—of Christian ministry is well placed to discern the ever-active realms of Spirit. In simpler terms perhaps, if we stay still long enough to enjoy God's beholding of the world and of ourselves within it, such charged moments of meaning, love, and imaginative "*increasing*"[13] become wellsprings from which giftings of Christian ministry then flow.[14] In fact, not only does our disposition change by virtue of the encounter with the *immanence–transcendence* of grace, but our language of faith becomes less conceptual, moralistic, and prosaic. A "theopoetic"[15] emerges naturally, that being a more constitutive or integrative form of conversation infused with sacred curiosity, desire, and wonderment. I contend that such a renovation of language would be a priceless gift in the present moment when religious information is often contested, caricatured, or largely ignored due to its didactic tone and intent.[16]

Consequently, dwelling more intentionally in the language of poetic imagination can spark movements of soul and encourage vocational originality, specifically in anxious times when most things seem too hard to think our way through.[17] It might even help rescue many from disillusioned and exhausted places of rote pastoral activity to places of enjoyable possibility. Emily Dickinson inferred as much many years ago when she mused: *"I dwell in Possibility – / A fairer House than Prose – / More numerous of Windows– / Superior – for Doors –."*[18] I suspect many ministry practitioners long for such a receptive and creative space in which to dwell and flourish.

That said, intrinsic to the above discussion is also a caution that the use of poetry is by no means a sure-fire technique to employ when teaching ministry students. Rather, the poetic is a particular form of language well suited to the ways and experience of the Christian pilgrim: explorative, metaphorical, consoling, challenging, startling, symbolic, curious, respectful, and yes, even prayerful. One can travel lightly and over a fair distance with a poem or two in one's back pocket. For instance:

Coming to the woods' edge
on my Sunday morning walk,
I stand resting a moment beside
a ragged half-dead wild plum
in bloom, its perfume
a moment enclosing me,
and standing side by side
with the old broken blooming tree,
I almost understand,

I almost recognise as a friend
the great impertinence of beauty
that comes even to the dying,
even to the fallen, without reason
sweetening the air.[19]

In the first stanza of the above untitled poem, Wendell Berry's languid saunterings[20] in nature readily become the reader's as well. His ease of writing about what he both sees and smells awakens an attentiveness and a certain familiarity. And then there is the "impertinence" and sweetness of beauty! Who hasn't had such a surprising encounter with grace? It is noncoercive in its revelation and so brazenly given *despite* human resistance and the ever-pressing reality of mortality. Here in seemingly simple verse, then, abides not a doctrinaire portrayal of grace (which many theological students might be expecting from an authoritative voice) but a generous extension of Berry's own graced experience in and through the unhurried beauty of his poetics. In other words, poetry, unlike so many theological posturings, has the potential to take us beyond mere cognition to a place of *re*-cognition.[21] That is, poetry can take us to "aha moments" whereby settled life stations or perspectives are punctured by living, existential truths, enabling us to return to deeper places of seeing and *feeling* again as if it were for the very first time. Hence, we imagine broader futures and seek to live out of a renewed sense of purpose.

POETICS AS A CREATIVE MEANS OF IMAGINATIVE LONGING, NOT AN END

Christian [Chris] Wiman is a teacher of religion and literature at Yale Divinity School and a greatly respected poet. As a person so steeped in the art of poetics, he refreshingly does not regard poetry or its linguistic forms as ends in themselves. Rather, he argues that good poetry contains glimpses of meaningful possibility that represent movement beyond the familiar into a longed-for unknown. Thus, poetry becomes a literary vehicle for the exercising of faith conversant with deep currents of change.[22] The problem, though — one raised by Jesus himself (John 5:39–40) — is that humans tend to turn flashes of insight into hard and fast bases of knowledge that in turn resist any further insight! Wiman states pointedly: "The hunger must be *other* than what art can satisfy. The poem is means, not end. When art becomes the latter, it eventually acquires an autonomous hunger of its own, and 'it does not wish you well.'"[23] Wiman's assertion and related warning is good news for those nervous about poetry being marketed as the next brightest and best thing! It surely doesn't need to be practiced in measurable ways but can be experienced as an important literary conduit for truly reflective thinking and original practice.

At many theological colleges and seminaries, students often begin—and sometimes conclude—their studies with a resistance to the unfamiliar. Indeed, there can exist a gulf between the discomfort of challenging new information and previously held learnings that, in my experience at least, are rarely bridged by prosaic or logical persuasion. And this is where a deliberate use of a theopoetic, namely, an

appeal to a faith-oriented imagination and vision (the unconscious by another name), has the potential to enter into vitalising play.

RECENT CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE WITH GOD THE TRINITY

By way of illustration, I have taught a class titled God the Trinity in recent years, a semester-long unit of study offered at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Traditionally, this is the domain of systematic theologians, not of a pastoral theologian such as myself.[24] A key objective of the unit is to trace the history of the emergence of the doctrine of God the Trinity from its biblical foundations through to its contemporary expressions, with a clear view to contemporary application. That is no small feat with so many key players and movements to consider over a two-thousand-year period. My approach seeks to emphasise what the great theologians *saw* in God, not simply what they believed *about* God. From such an existential and visual perspective, it helps that primary sources from St. Athanasius to Gregory of Nazianzus and from St. Augustine to Bonaventure and on to Dante, from Julian of Norwich to Catherine LaCugna, all wrote from places of deeply affected hearts and minds, resulting in renewed imaginings for themselves, the church, and the broader society. Their language was anything but prosaic as it mirrored something of the sighted mystery of holy, gratuitous love.[25]

My experience of newly enrolled ministry students is that they expect that the "complex" doctrine of the Holy Trinity will be taught with a certain biblical and discursive precision. Then, and only then, might it make more logical sense, which, in turn, will help them to explain the doctrine more simply and confidently to others. In the words of one recent student, reflecting on her initial class and teacher experience,
In the first week, we listened to a recording of an orchestra playing Charles Gounod's *Credo.* We were encouraged to 'hear' the creed in the emotions of the music: the joy, the suffering, the hope of redemption. While I enjoyed the music, I was also baffled. When were we going to talk about ice, water and steam? When would we open our Bibles and start looking at the so-called Trinity proof verses? [26]

Patently, I take a certain delight in gently challenging student's prior assumptions and expectations from the evidence of the tradition itself, namely, the role and converting place of doxology. Arguably, doxology is the responsive, creative, and shaping force of all things theological, the Trinity notwithstanding.[27] In other words, its very language (literally, words of glorification) is imbued with the common experience of startling *radiance*, hence renewed meaning-making or *poiesis*. In a desirous spirit, and through a posture of attentive gratitude, doxology reaches beyond itself and its own creative capacities. God may not be able to be fully conceptualised but can be felt deeply (even in one's bones), moving the human spirit into new arenas of expressive and attentive being. Again, Berry is instructive at this point via his wondrous noticing poem "Grace" from the *Openings* (1968) collection:

The woods is shining this morning.
Red, gold and green, the leaves

lie on the ground, or fall,
or hang full of light in the air still.
Perfect in its rise and in its fall, it takes
the place it has been coming to forever.
It has not hastened here, lagged.
See how surely it has sought itself,
its roots passing lordly through the earth.
See how without confusion it is
all that it is, and how flawless
its grace is. Running or walking, the way
is the same. Be still. Be still.
"He moves your bones, and the way is clear."[28]

It is no exaggeration to suggest that a poetic approach to the theology of Christian ministry practice makes a significant difference for students in both the (virtual) class room and in the field. And in keeping with those who are now writing extensively about pastoral imagination and defining it in terms of "the capacity to see into a situation in all its embodied, spiritual, and relational depths and then be able to make a fitting pastoral response,"[29] a *theo*poetic is attuned to fresh *in*-sight which, unlike defensive bastions of belief, is often startling, disorienting, and thus potentially and practically transformative.[30]

Jane Hirshfield, a preeminent poet and writer on poetics, puts it this way:
Each instant of a good poem provides the enactment of an unfathomable transformation. From the silence preceding the title's first word to that first word to the second, everything is changed. . . . A good poem makes self and world knowable in new ways, brings us into an existence opened, augmented, and altered. Part of its work, then, must also be to surprise—to awaken into new circumference is to be startled.[31]

As is plainly evident, the student quoted above was genuinely surprised, if not shocked, by the theopoetic pedagogy I adopted when teaching God the Trinity. By her own admission, and according to her own lived experience, the Christian faith and its related practices of discipleship were based upon hard-won certainties, not vapid encounters with an "ineffable" Mystery! Coupled with this firm doctrinal stance was a sure and predictable ordering of church life as 'bible-based,' hierarchical, and moralistic.

However, despite the religious preconditioning, what continued to encourage me in relation to this particular student (and her peers) was how the "seeing" of the Triune Mystery repeated in various metaphorical ways throughout authoritative course texts connected with her otherwise hidden desires for something different within her own life. Whereas theological prose has the tendency to shut down explorative functions of the mind and heart, theological imagining (or a theopoetic) unashamedly converses with spiritual affections or goodly loves, upon which, in Wendell Berry's estimation, everything of value in life turns: "The light within, I think,

means affection, *affection as motive and guide.* Knowledge without affection leads us astray. Affection leads, by way of good work, to authentic hope."[32]

At the end of the Trinity course of study, the student in question reflected upon her own unearthed longings for a greater sense of Christian freedom. The provocative trinitarian simile and hope of *perichoresis*,[33] introduced midway in the unit via the writings of John of Damascus, shaped her eloquent and deeply reflective words:

To join a dance, in some ways you have to stop trying and simply let yourself go as you follow along. As you do, you can join hands with others doing the same dance to share energy and guide each other. This is all quite poetic, but there are real, practical consequences to this vision of God. If the Christian life is a dance of love with God and with others, then it is liberating and exuberant—'vivifying', to use a fun word. There is no fear of failure, only an eagerness to participate and a joy at full acceptance into the dance. There is no hierarchy, for all are doing the same dance. There is no exclusivity, for all are invited. There is no loneliness, for 'persons in communion' is the very essence of trinitarian thought. The dance is relational, performed with others; and it is always moving, dynamic and full of energy.[34]

CONCLUSION

I began this article by suggesting that an exercised imagination in the context of theological and ministry studies is a current imperative. I also suggested that the resonating use of poetics can be a vital part of the deepening of pastoral insight and practical expressions of wisdom. Indeed, to quote my featured poet Wendell Berry quoting yet another poet, Allen Tate, "It is by imagination that knowledge is carried to the heart."[35]

My teaching experience over a number of years demonstrates that the use of poetry in this integrative and imaginative way is by no means a form of escapism. By way of significant contrast, the evidence suggests that non-prosaic entry points into otherwise complex and contested areas of Christian belief have the potential to address the very heart of the matter, not a preferential or conceptual periphery. In fact, they repeatedly display the potential for genuine movement of the yearning soul and thus further emergences of healing and embodied expressions of love in the midst of a torn and self-destructive world.

Finally, I sought to emphasise the contrary nature of Wendell Berry's core principle of rest and *re*-creation within all vocations that desire to live out the given affection of divine love. Poetics has the proven ability to stir such graces up and to sustain them into meaningful communal action, defiantly at times, disregarding cultural prosaicism and productive norms. As both prayer and benediction, Berry writes at the end of a poem entitled "Massachusetts Avenue at Rock Creek Park":

We pray for vison, though we die, to see
in our small imperfect love, the Love of the ages
of ages, whose green tree yet stands amid the flames. May we
be as a song sung within the tree, though beside us

the river of oil flows, burning, and the sky is filled
with the whine of desire to burn and be burned in the fire.

If through creative exposures to poetics ministry students begin to imagine themselves offering a song of beauty and hope to the world while being at home in the greening tree of God's presence, I will continue to be satisfied, and joyously so.

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[1] Wendell Berry, "Like Snow," in *Leavings Poems* (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010), 3.

[2] One can only speculate on the presenting resistances. I believe it would be reasonable to suggest that for many fledgling ministry students, interpreting the sacred text remains primarily an exercise of refined conceptuality through which God and the Christian (vocational) life is further given a manageable shape of certitude. The introduction of metaphor and simile via a more generalised poetic within invitational and renewed encounters with the Christian Scriptures, e.g., the Psalms, the Song of Songs, or Jesus' parables of the Kingdom, can be unsettling. Indeed, it takes a certain pedagogical courage to enter settled landscapes encouraging students to look beyond the known and the familiar.

[3] Li-Young Lee, "The Subject is Silence," in *Joy: 100 Poems*, ed. Christian Wiman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 55.

[4] For biographical and topical information about Wendell Berry, see Ragan Sutterfield, *Wendell Berry and the Given Life* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2017).

[5] Wendell Berry, "1979 VII," in *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979–1997* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998), 14.

[6] See Berry, "1979, X," in *A Timbered Choir*, 18.

[7] See Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

[8] See Berry, "The Objective," in *A Timbered Choir*, 208–9.

[9] See Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture & Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012).

[10] Wendell Berry, "2014 XVII," in *Leavings: Poems*, 54–55.

[11] Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 172.

[12] Berry, "1979 IV,"*A Timbered Choir*, 9.

[13] This metaphor is borrowed from Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* (Long Text), ch. 58. Julian theologically defines this notion of increasing as Christ's action of "reforming and restoring" the human being into his own image.

[14] See Christian A. B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell Reid, "Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice," *Auburn Studies* (Winter 2016): 42–46. According to the authors, "Learning pastoral imagination is needed for inhabiting ministry as a spiritual practice, opening up self and community to the presence and power of God" (p. 42).

[15] This descriptive term was first introduced by Amos Wilder in *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976). Wilder writes, "Though theology strictly understood is an intellectual if not discursive activity yet the work of the greatest theologians has always been shot through with the imagination" (p. 3).

[16] See Sean Gilbert, "Out of Silence: An Exploration into the Language of Faith," *Uniting Church Studies* (Melbourne, Victoria) (July 2022).
[17] See James K. A. Smith, "I Am a Philosopher. We Can't Think Our Way Out of This Mess," *The Christian Century*, 2021, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/i-m-philosopher-we-can-t-think-our-way-out-mess.
[18] Emily Dickinson, "I dwell in Possibility," #657.
[19] Berry, "1987 1a," in *A Timbered Choir*, 87.
[20] Henry Thoreau's definition of saunterers as Holy Landers rings true here. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, and Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*
(Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991), 71–72.
[21] See Mark S. Burrows, ed., Introduction to *The Paraclete Poetry Anthology: Selected and New Poems* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2016), xv.
[22] See Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations on Faith by a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013).
[23] Christian Wiman, *He Held Radical Light: The Art of Faith, The Faith of Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019), 39.
[24] That said, my earlier graduate work was in the area of historical theology, more particularly the development of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.
[25] Dante Alighieri is considered by many to be the greatest Western poet of all time. His theological credentials, gleaned largely from St Thomas Aquinas, are also impressive. For example, at the very end of *Paradiso* he writes, "In the profound and clear Subsistence of the deep Light I saw three circles, of three colours and of one circumference, and one seemed reflected from the other like a rainbow, and the third seemed fire breathing equally from both. Oh how short is speech and how hoarse to my thought! And this, next to what I saw, is such to say 'little' is not enough." Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, ed. And trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 667.
[26] Student L., Uniting College, 2022. Used with the kind permission of the author.
[27] See Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 319–75.
[28] Wendell Berry, *Collected Poems 1957–1982* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 69.
[29] Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, *Pastoral Imagination: Bringing the Practice of Ministry to Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 31.
[30] See Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection:* "To imagine is to see most clearly, familiarly, and understandingly with the eyes, but also to see inwardly, with 'the mind's eye.' It is to see, not passively, but with a force of vision and even with visionary force. To take it seriously we must give up at once any notion that imagination is disconnected from reality or truth or knowledge. It has nothing to do either with clever imitation of appearances or with "dreaming up" (p. 14).
[31] Jane Hirshfield, *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry* (Newcastle, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), 45.
[32] Berry, *It All Turns on Affection*, 35.
[33] See LaCugna, *God for Us*, 270–78.
[34] Student L., Uniting College, 2022. Used with the kind permission of the author.
[35] Berry, *It All Turns on Affection*, 25.