

## Article

# The Wind's Prayer, the World's Sabbath: Spirit and Place in Lance Henson and Wendell Berry

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**Abstract:** Although a vast body of poetry celebrates the natural world and addresses issues concerning the environment, it can be overlooked in the discourses of environmental activism. In this paper, we seek to demonstrate the unique contributions that poetry makes to a thoughtful, and in this case, theological, engagement with our present environmental crises. Here, we create a conversation between two poets of two different religious traditions. Cheyenne poet Lance Henson's poem "we are a people" reimagines humanity's self-conception in light of earthly interconnectedness from the perspective of his own Native American spiritual sensibilities. Christian poet Wendell Berry's poem "Sabbaths IV" (1983) relocates our understanding of Sabbath beyond its liturgical designations and practices, asking us to attend to "the true world's Sabbath". We offer close readings of these two poems that mark the distinctions that emerge from and interact with their respective theological visions, but also where they find common ground. Through this work of reading literature theologically, we argue that these poems both refine our attentiveness to the earth as the site of religious import and consequence, and call upon readers to enact other ways of being in the world amidst the climate catastrophe that are inspired by faith and spirituality.



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## 1. Introduction

"Poetry is revolutionary. It must be to survive," declared Lance Henson in an interview with Abenaki writer Joseph Bruchac.<sup>1</sup> While Henson asserted such sentiments during the less widely climate-conscious 1980s, the revolutionary capacity of poetry has arguably deepened, and continues to deepen, as we encounter it from the context of an increasingly burning planet. It is here that we enter the scholarly exchange about what eco-theological literature—specifically poetry—spiritually (and thus practically) offers earthlings who hope to participate in a revolutionary response to climate crisis. The field of religion and ecology is one angle of entry. Championed by religious scholars Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim over the past three decades, this field has sought to position religions as "active participants in finding solutions [to environmental problems] along with scientists, economists, and policymakers".<sup>2</sup> Religion and ecology are both "an academic field" and "an engaged force", focusing in its early years on the retrieval and re-examination of ancient religious texts toward ecological efficacy in the present.<sup>3</sup> This force-field's quality of still-becoming constitutes the precise avenue toward new dimensions of conversation: how is religion transmitted and transmuted in the literary imaginations of its interlocutors? How might that literature present new visions of relationship with the living world?

With a belief in the luminary quality of close and comparative reading, we examine two poems with distinct eco-theological visions in order to not only take the poets at their word, but also to uncover how each poet speaks to the other. Our task is not to argue after the comparative significance of Henson's Cheyenne spirituality and Berry's Christian faith. Instead, we hope to begin a conversation that takes eco-theological poetry seriously

as one means, among a myriad of re-envisioning how to posture our spirits in the face of urgent crisis. Joseph Bruchac describes the “positive, nurturing relationship to the earth” with which Lance Henson imbues his poetry, and Henson himself insists that “all poems are prayers when they work”.<sup>4</sup> Together, these sentiments speak to the reverential, relational quality of Henson’s poetic stance toward the living world. He develops this stance in “we are a people”, a poem that is quick to do away with the anthropocentrism typical of mainstream religions.<sup>5</sup> Situating the reader in a gentle and unspecified physical place, Henson’s “we are a people” guides us into a radical multispecies peoplehood—a collectivity of kinship which disallows any sense of separation between human beings and the world of flora and fauna that we try to shut out of our spaces. This vision is available even to the non-Cheyenne, non-Native reader. Henson has declared that “the poems themselves are evocative enough to start an interest” in Cheyenne lifeways, opening up the possibility of more kinship-conscious—and thus more care-full—practices of relating to the living world.<sup>6</sup> The poet Wendell Berry, known for his agrarian and Christian approach to ecology, presents a similarly place-based imagining of what kind of human life might be possible in “Sabbaths IV” (1983). This poem grounds the sacred practice of the Sabbath beyond built sanctuaries and instead in Earth’s rhythms, inclusive of only those human beings who attend to natural forces with reverent participation. With the conviction that spiritual sensibilities of many colors have something to say to ecological crisis today, we delight in the vision(s) born in pairing Henson and Berry’s poetic imaginations.

In this essay, we first unfold our close reading of Henson’s “we are a people”, then of Berry’s “Sabbaths IV” (1983), attending to the respective (and sometimes shared) eco-theological visions of each poem, and incorporating discussion of how Henson’s and Berry’s spiritual backgrounds enter into and influence their poetics. We then conclude with some reflections on how this poetry serves as another form of eco-theological discourse, its unique ability to captivate readers offering a powerful summons to care for a sacred living world.

## 2. Lance Henson’s Wind’s Prayer

we are a people<sup>7</sup>  
 days pass easy over these ancient hills  
 i walk near a moccasin path overgrown with  
 rusted cans and weeds  
 i stand in the forest at sunset waiting for  
 a prayer from the rising wind  
 it is this way forever in this place  
 there is no distance between the name of my  
 race and the owl calling  
 nor the badger’s gentle  
 plodding  
 we are a people born under symbols  
 that rise from the dust to touch us  
 that pass through the cedars where  
 our old ones sleep  
 to tell us of their dreams

Opening with an autonomous line for its first stanza, Lance Henson’s “we are a people” immediately situates our attention on the intimacy between place and time: “days pass easy over these ancient hills” (L. 1). We are folded into a transcendent spacetime—the first among the poem’s multitude visions of time—where there are yet no specificities, nor any human (or nonhuman) subjects. This first line holds permanence and impermanence together: while the hills are “ancient”, the “days pass easy over” them. The poem’s sense of place, then, is both out of time and embedded deeply within it, as these “ancient hills”

ground us in something tangible whilst time moves elegantly through and “over” the topography. Never does the poem specify an exact location for the hills: they could be the Black Hills, long sacred to the Cheyenne among other indigenous peoples; they might simply be somewhere in central Oklahoma, where Henson was raised by his grandparents. Regardless, together with time passing “easy”, the poet’s depiction of hills—already a rolling landform—connotes a certain gentleness in and of this place.

While the poem’s second stanza (LL. 2–5) introduces the voice of a narrator, the human being here holds a fragmented and complicated presence. With the diminished force flowing from a lowercase “i”, the human subject yields its usual lyrical privilege to place, further situating the reader in the “ancient hills”: “i walk near a moccasin path...i stand in the forest” (LL. 1–2, 4). That the narrator walks “near a moccasin path” is not only an explicit marker of Henson’s indigenous heritage, but also an implicit one of soft relationship between earth and feet, deepening established gentleness (L. 2). Yet, this path is “overgrown with/rusted cans and weeds” (LL. 2–3). Might the overgrowth signal tarnish, as even gentle things can be ruined by humans’ lack of care? Or rather, does the path’s overgrown nature indicate further impermanence, as if human footprints (even light ones) do not have the last word on the earth, which will ultimately subsume humanity’s intrusion? Either way, apart from the presence of the narrator walking and standing, it is telling that the human signs are fragmental. The “rusted cans” hint at once to the possible chafing of the senses and to the pathetic quality of remnant human waste. While “weeds” constitutes a verbal signifier that human beings are poor at sharing space and nominally denigrate other species, their presence here is nevertheless muted and marginally colonizing (L. 3). That these hints at human presence share a separate line reinforces a sense of separation from the natural surroundings. Still, these two hints at ‘humanity’ share a line all their own, potentially showing that though painfully distinct, they are nevertheless poetic aberrations.

The second stanza’s latter two lines seem to redeem what might be damning in the first two. Here, the human subject is no longer moving through this place, but has come to rest—“i stand in the forest at sunset” (L. 4) as if yielding to Earth’s unfolding elements. The setting of “the forest at sunset” leaves the speaker simply waiting “for/a prayer from the rising wind” (LL. 4–5). Significantly, prayer itself is reoriented, and in a sense reclaimed. While typically signifying the holy disposition of human beings, here, prayer comes “from the rising wind”—the wind’s breath, not the human’s, is the source, inviting silence and, once more, displacing human self-assertion. In this mention of prayer, “we are a people” announces the unambiguous presence of the sacred, quietly entreating us, too, to listen.

With the third stanza, an even deeper intimacy between space and time arises: “it is this way forever in this place” (L. 6). Following the occasion of the wind’s prayer—or perhaps, only the waiting for it—Henson’s insistence upon the permanence of “this way” “in this place” suggests that the holy is always there, always cleaved to the wind. Place is given a sense of immediacy through the adjectives Henson chooses (“these...hills”, “this place”), but there, nevertheless, remains something universal and abiding about how humans are to inhabit the natural world. In the “forever” of “this place”, human beings are to wait; human beings are to listen, always.

While temporal beingness is expanded into an eternity (“this way forever,” L. 6), spatial beingness, at least of the self, collapses in the succeeding and final lines, as the speaker declares:

there is no distance between the name of my  
race and the owl calling  
nor the badger’s gentle  
plodding (LL. 7–10)

In the world of the text, the self—as represented by an identity, “the name of my/race” (LL. 7–8)—literally diminishes on the page, with the third stanza’s lines growing shorter until containing just one word, “plodding” (L. 10). Here, the poem both signals and resists

the human act of naming. On the one hand, by virtue of its placement near the end of the line, this one 'name' signifying the speaker's racial identity, accentuated by "my", becomes elevated, while, in the following line, "race" is then juxtaposed with the quiet, personally unhindered sounds of "the owl calling [and] the badger's gentle/plodding" (LL. 8–10). There exists a oneness of sounds and utterances in this multispecies world, which does not privilege any. Refusing to specify "race" (it could be Cheyenne, or Native American, or even the human race), the poem draws our attention toward a hidden ground of being that lies underneath all coexisting things at all times. Detecting this interconnectedness by the poem's terms, however, seems possible only after, and through, the waiting and the listening.

The mention of specific animals, as with prayer, likewise evokes the religious orientation of the poem. In Native American legend and spirituality, animals are said to be "totemic": "...they are more than individuals of their species. They *are* the species, the 'grandfathers' from whom all individuals of their species derive."<sup>8</sup> While "we are a people" emphasizes animal sounds over specific animal persons, Henson's mention of the owl and the badger in this third stanza still gestures, in this way, toward a greater multigenerational and multispecies sense of the world, which situates the human race among other creatures. Of note also is that the badger figures prominently in Henson's own life, as his grandfather Bob Cook gave him "the Cheyenne name Mahago Domiuts, meaning Walking Badger, for a warrior ancestor who lived two hundred years earlier."<sup>9</sup> The "badger's gentle/plodding" (LL. 9–10), then, takes on the significance of not only the speaker's immediate context of listening in, and to, his place, and not only the animal's long species history itself, but also Henson's familial and tribal histories as embodied in his Cheyenne name. Within the poem's context, the aural rehearsal of tribal (or species) name and animal sounds enacts a fresh poetic understanding of what a person or species might be with respect to how all creatures inhabit a world that is at once diverse and in harmony.

With first-person plural pronouns making entrance into the poem only after the owl and the badger have also been named, it is almost as if the fourth and final stanza is introducing a new sense of peoplehood. Perhaps, this poem suggests, there never has been a human subject understood as distinct from the other creatures of the natural world, the human being backgrounded in favor of land and place and time. The affirmation of "we are a people" then, beginning with the poem's title, subverts prominent anthropocentrism such as "we the people". At once deconstructing the lyric's human subject and reconstructing an all-embracing peoplehood, Henson reveals to the reader this alternative understanding of 'people', one

...born under symbols  
that rise from the dust to touch us  
that pass through the cedars where  
our old ones sleep  
to tell us of their dreams (LL. 11–15)

It is as if something pre-human resides in the dust—something hidden in life and its contours—that cannot be touched, cannot "touch *us*", unless and until an expansive sense of peoplehood has been recognized. As with the hills, this dust seems primordial, restored in the poem to its earthiness rather than being confined to the connotation of stuffy houses. Senses become central, whether of the dust touching the people in a near anointing, or of the movement "through the cedars", the scent of evergreen wafting about (L. 13). Our attention draws toward the cedar forest "where/our old ones sleep/to tell us of their dreams" (LL. 13–15). Again, the narrator speaks in the first-person plural of a trans-species peoplehood, implying that "our old ones", our ancestors, are not simply our human blood relatives but all those beings who have lived in and traveled through the forest with us (L. 14).

Significantly, the poem's final line delivers the only spatial pause, giving weight to the ancestors' sleeping "to tell us of their dreams". Considering the first-person pronouns

woven throughout the poem, it strikes the reader even more that the dreams are *theirs*, not ours—is this because only those beings who have passed can dream, or because these dreams hold old truths that cannot be asserted, only listened for? While Henson’s might be a “Cheyenne vision of the world”,<sup>10</sup> his poetic invocation of the wisdom of his ancestors speaks to universal human dilemmas. Henson’s “‘people’ are all people everywhere,” says scholar Robert Berner.<sup>11</sup> The poem begins and ends drawing upon the ancient and the old, perhaps emphasizing that we are not the first thing, and that we must take the longview in order to listen for these truths. As poet, Henson enacts an inspired vision of the living world, a vision which defies a ‘special’ spiritual understanding of the human species.

### 3. Wendell Berry’s True World’s Sabbath

Sabbaths IV (1983)<sup>12</sup> © 1987

Who makes a clearing makes a work of art,  
The true world’s Sabbath trees in festival  
Around it. And the stepping stream, a part  
Of Sabbath also, flows past, but its fall  
Made musical, making the hillslope by  
Its fall, and still at rest in falling, song  
Rising. The field is made by hand and eye,  
By daily work, by hope outreaching wrong,  
And yet the Sabbath, parted, still must stay  
In the dark mazes of the soil no hand  
May light, the great Life, broken, make its way  
Along the stemmy footholds of the ant.  
Bewildered in our timely dwelling place,  
Where we arrive by work, stay by grace. (Berry 1987)

As with Lance Henson’s “we are a people”, Wendell Berry’s sonnet “Sabbaths IV” (1983) conjures a place and a moment of attention to place. We find ourselves in a clearing, not a natural one but one made by human hands, and by artistic hands: it begins “Who makes a clearing makes a work of art” (L. 1). That work of art is evoked from the outset provides another setting, both suggesting a disposition towards the land that has been cleared and drawing attention to the text before us, to the poem’s own act of creating a ‘clearing’ as it proceeds to meditate upon this place and theme. As with Henson’s poem Berry’s sonnet also promises a new angle of vision, of looking in order to see, perhaps to see differently.

Unlike “we are a people”, “Sabbaths IV” names no “i”; the act of seeing what lies before us progresses in the third person until the final couplet when “we” are included (as with Henson’s last stanza) in the poem’s final appeal. The speaker is present only through his acts of witness to what he sees and hears. The focal force of the poem derives not from the speaker’s experience, though this may be assumed, but from the trees, the “stepping stream”, the “hillslope” and the soil, whose “dark mazes” elude human touch. Hence, the effect is similar to Henson’s poem in that human presence in this place as well as in the poem is granted no privilege. The “daily work” (L. 8) performed by clearing the field for planting *participates* in what surrounds it, and cannot reach what lies beneath it. How the poem achieves this orientation towards the natural world and our place within it involves a revisioning of its central motif of Sabbath.

When we think of Sabbath, our first thought usually recalls God’s creation and rest, and the formal rehearsal of this in the ordering rituals aligned with notions of sacred time. Although patterns of Sabbath-keeping vary widely, in Judeo-Christian understanding, the Sabbath is typically understood as a day set apart for a people set apart, and is accompanied by set religious practices that express attentiveness to the command to ‘keep this day holy’. The traditional English sonnet form of Berry’s poem, with significant variations in rhythm and lineation, mirrors this sense of ordering, in contrast to the free-form style of Henson’s meditation. With this liturgical context and more formal style, Berry’s appropriation of the

word for his subject conveys a sense of dignity and significance to his meditation. However, from the first appearance of the word in the poem, we are greeted with an unusual claim: we are not in a designated religious space but in the space of “The true world’s Sabbath” (L. 2). From this point on, Berry departs from the traditional and the familiar. “[T]rue” here considers its opposites—false, unreal, artificial; and the syntax in these first two and a half lines “The true world’s Sabbath trees in festival/ Around it” (LL. 2–3) defies clear predication. Does “true” modify “world”, in contrast to an unreal or artificial world, or does “true world’s” modify “Sabbath”, suggesting that the world’s true Sabbath is found in the place where the speaker is standing (in contrast to, for example, a church or religious site<sup>13</sup>)? Furthermore, “Sabbath trees” can be read with “Sabbath” modifying “trees” as an adjective, or “trees” can be a verbed noun, with “Sabbath” as its subject: hence, the ‘treeing’ action of the “true world’s Sabbath” in festive celebration around the perimeter of the clearing. From the outset, the poem disrupts our orientation, the complex syntax reiterating the disruption in our perception of what counts as ‘Sabbath’, while still insisting that we recognize the Sabbath’s ‘true’ nature.

We notice too that rather than a moment and space of rest, or of this only, this “true world’s Sabbath” is energetic, in motion. Whether in ‘treeing’ festively, or in the musical flow of the “stepping stream” (“A part/ Of Sabbath also,” LL. 3–4), which is “making the hillslope by/ Its fall” (Ll. 5–6), Sabbath here is alive, vital, unreserved. Its “rest” is not *at rest* in the sense of motionless or still, but active, as with the stream “at rest in falling, song/ Rising” (LL. 6–7).

From these Sabbath dynamics at play around the clearing, the poem returns to human making:

... The field is made by hand and eye,  
By daily work, by hope outreaching wrong, (LL. 7–8)

The emphasis once more falls on perception, and on attentiveness, finding in the “daily work” from which one would rest another mode of Sabbath-keeping: hope. It is no vague sentiment, but a comprehension of work, of farming in this case, which looks beyond its immediate effect towards some kind of healing, “outreaching wrong”. Is this the activity of the farmer who does not exhaust the land but works it with what Berry calls “kindly use”,<sup>14</sup> who is ever about the business of caring for the land he inhabits? Undoubtedly so, though, the poet extends the scope of this outlook to all of the created world and connects this with religious faithfulness. As he asserts in his essay “The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity”:

Once we have understood that we cannot exempt from our care anything at all that we have the power to damage—which now means everything in the world—then we face yet another startling realization: we have reclaimed and revalidated the ground of our moral and religious tradition.<sup>15</sup>

In the vision of the poem, work is not set apart from Sabbath but is subsumed by, or within, its continual operation; it is indeed exceeded by a Sabbath that, ironically, never ceases.

As the sonnet reaches its *volta* or pivot point at the beginning of the sestet in line 9, we read:

And yet the Sabbath, parted, still must stay  
In the dark mazing of the soil no hand  
May light, the great Life, broken, makes its way  
Along the stemmy footholds of the ant. (LL. 9–12)

“Sabbath, parted” may mean separated or divided (echoing “a part” in L. 3 and in semantic resonance with “broken” in L. 11), or de-parted, that it has, in some sense, left. However, the latter seems less likely given what follows, separated or set apart being more in keeping with a Sabbatarian motif. In either case, it remains buried, though once more vibrant, full of “the great Life”. Interestingly, the speaker here assumes the same posture as the



speaker in “we are a people”, who is found “waiting for/a prayer from the rising wind”. In “Sabbaths IV”, the attendant witness likewise stands aware of something beyond, whose source is found in nature. As with Henson’s symbols “that rise from the dust to touch us” towards the end of his poem, that something comes from below rather than from above. Furthermore, as with Henson’s speaker, Berry’s farmer remains “parted” from that source, and can only imagine the workings of the “great Life” beneath, there touched only by “the stemmy footholds of the ant” (L. 12).

The two parallel clauses, “Sabbath, parted” and “Life, broken”, each standing in the middle of the line, tie together the sestet and warrant further consideration, in preparation for the sonnet’s final couplet. Once more, we note that the agency of both Sabbath and Life are not human. Their subterranean activity which lies beneath the farmer-artist exceeds human control or designation. Each clause also conveys a kind of doubleness, the Sabbath that remains “In the dark mazes of the soil” also marks a separation; the “great Life”—here, nearly synonymous with the workings of Sabbath—conveys wholeness while also “broken”. The immediate reference of the latter regards the breaking up of soil into fragments that bear this hidden life, a life found in the pieces of dirt across which follow “the stemmy footholds of the ant”. Life found in such brokenness is present down to the smallest particulars of the natural world. However, “Life, broken” signals more than this material manifestation. It conjoins life with brokenness in a way that at once acknowledges the dual presence of both—life on this earth always bears the marks of brokenness—while affirming that this “great Life” always triumphs over such depredation. (One cannot help but hear certain Eucharistic resonances here as well.) The farmer who is literally digging up the earth in order to create a clearing for planting commits an act of wounding of sorts, and yet that very act can “outreach wrong” (L. 8), enabled as much by the Sabbath-Life ever-present in the land as by the caring, potentially healing attention the tiller of the land gives it.

The turn at Line 9, “And yet”, announces this prospect. The moment recalls Berry’s poem “Damage”, which begins his collection of essays in *What Are People For?* Part III of that poem ends by declaring “An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars”.<sup>16</sup> We will return to the unique role that poetry plays in the creation spirituality of both Berry and Henson, but at present, we notice how both poems view a world that has suffered ‘scars’ by human hands, while holding forth hope. Henson’s “we are a people” describes the condition explicitly, as we have seen, relating the speaker’s walk on a moccasin path “overgrown with/rusted cans and weeds” (LL. 2–3). “Sabbaths IV” is more suggestive, though it labels the implied damage explicitly as a “wrong”. For both, however, such brokenness does not have the final word.

Where, then, are ‘we’ left in Berry’s sonnet? “Sabbaths IV” concludes:

Bewildered in our timely dwelling place,  
Where we arrive by work, stay by grace.

The couplet is indented, announcing a final reflection that is both part of but also distinct from the body of the poem which has preceded it. “Bewildered” conveys more than confusion, though this is one facet of the condition proffered. To be confused or disoriented, finite “in our timely dwelling place”, confirms once more that humans are not the masters of the world that they may imagine themselves to be. Furthermore, for Berry ‘be-wildered’ also situates us within that larger ‘wilderness’ or ‘wildness’ of our natural surroundings—not as those who stand apart from this but, again, reminiscent of Henson’s vision, properly within it as co-inhabitants, both temporally (“timely”) and at home in our own “dwelling place”. However, we need to be cautious about over-domesticating the stance conveyed here, or more precisely, affirming some idealistic vision of domestic living that unfolds within this ‘clearing’ made by human hands, particularly when viewed in the context of the modern American household which Berry criticizes so vehemently. As he writes in his essay “Living in the Future: The Modern Agricultural Ideal”, the household of contemporary American life, “[w]ith its array of gadgets and machines”, tends towards

“destructiveness of the world” and “divorces us from the sources of our bodily life”; it institutionalizes “the divisions and fragmentations of modern life” and “is not a response to place”.<sup>17</sup> In Berry’s estimation, this betrays a moral and spiritual condition, which prompts him to evoke that keyword ‘bewildered’ found in our couplet. With modern notions of place made into mere abstractions, that “generalized sense of worldly whereabouts is a reflection of another kind of *bewilderment*: this modern person does not know where he is morally either.”<sup>18</sup>

Here, we find another facet of what it means to be “bewildered”: together with the sense of being within the wildernesses that surround us (‘be-wildered’), when knowing oneself within a *particular* place goes unacknowledged, we become spiritually lost, *dislocated*. Not only may it be the case that we do ‘wrong’ to our environment, we also harm ourselves. This too Berry ties to our spiritual commitments, specifically faith. In his essay “The Body and the Earth”, under the sub-heading, “The Necessity of Wildness”, he argues for a “double faith” or “two fidelities”: one towards the human order, the other towards the natural order. In regard to farming in particular, apropos of the setting of “Sabbaths IV”, he contends that:

An enduring agriculture must never cease to consider and respect and preserve wildness. The farm can exist only within the wilderness of mystery and natural force. And if the farm is to last and remain in health, the wilderness must survive within the Farm.<sup>19</sup>

This same bond, he adds, is obtained for society at large, such that any hope for a “resilient” human culture must “somehow involve within itself a ceremonious generosity toward wilderness of natural force and instinct”.<sup>20</sup> It is this ‘double faith’, characterized by Berry ultimately in terms of theological commitment, which, he charges, adherents of organized religion have failed to uphold, having “cut themselves off from mystery and therefore from the sacred”.<sup>21</sup>

Freighted with such connotations from the poet’s own vision, “Bewildered” both responds to notions of “The true world’s Sabbath” elaborated in the body of the poem, and introduces a way forward for the ‘we’ addressed in the final line. For the workings of Sabbath which “stay/In the dark mazes of the soil” (L. 10), and animated by “the great Life” found there, there is a mystery that will always evade us, always ‘bewilder’. This does not, however, forbid our activity on the land, despite the risk of wounding its ‘great life’. In keeping with the central motif of Sabbath, the poem ends on a note of affirmation: “our timely dwelling place” also manifests a clearing of sorts, “where we arrive by work, stay by grace”. The terms reiterate those of the Sabbath, ‘work’ as the companion of rest, grace as a state of favor as well as rest, including favor towards the land. The imagery here also hints at Eden, though ‘arrival by work’ reverses that departure away from the garden into a life of toil, with work now the very condition of a return. The combination of work and grace as the terms of both arrival and dwelling recalls also Berry’s own reflections on one of God’s commands to the people of Israel in Exodus regarding their use of the Promised Land. In one of the Sabbath laws, every seven years, the people of Israel were to leave the land fallow and “let it rest” (Exodus 23:10). Berry writes in “The Gift of Good Land”, speaking in the language of grace and responsibility: “having failed to deserve it [i.e., the gift of the Land] beforehand, they must prove worthy of it afterwards; they must use it well, or they will not continue long in it.”<sup>22</sup> To “stay by grace”, then, recognizes both the giftedness of the land itself and the care or ‘kindly use’ of it entrusted to those who live on it, a stewardship which, he adds, extends to all Creation.

With grace sounding the final note of “Sabbaths IV”, we return once more to the first line, “Who makes a clearing makes a work of art”. As the poem contemplates the nature of Sabbath and the Sabbatarian nature of the world itself, we are also asked to think about the nature of art. In our concluding reflections, we will consider how Berry and Henson regard their poetry in light of their own ecological vision, and how poetry itself offers important voices to the discourses of eco-theology.



#### 4. Poetry as ‘Complex Reminding’

As noted in our introduction, Lance Henson has argued that “all poems are prayers when they work”. Accordingly, “we are a people” asks us to imagine prayer itself arising from our inspired natural surroundings and not only from the mouths of humans. This connection between poetry and the sacred, and the vision of a poetry which insists upon the sacredness of the natural world, resonates with Wendell Berry’s artistic sensibilities and vision. Berry also draws parallels between his work as a poet and as a farmer, and finds in both a connection with a faith that is deeply invested in a commitment to Creation. As he writes of poetry in his essay “The Responsibility of the Poet”, “a good poem . . . exists at the center of a complex reminding, to which it relates as both cause and effect”.<sup>23</sup> This reminding, he elaborates, includes what we have read and heard, and especially what is remembered or ought to be remembered; and by a poem’s own “formal integrity”, it refracts a vision of the world which it urges upon us.<sup>24</sup> He writes, amplifying our sense of his poem’s opening declaration that “Who makes a clearing makes a work of art”:

By its form [a poem] alludes to other forms, evokes them, resonates with them, and so becomes a part of the system of analogies or harmonies by which we live. Thus the poet affirms or collaborates in the formality of Creation. This, I think, is a matter of supreme, and mostly unacknowledged, importance.<sup>25</sup>

This stress on harmonies, affirmation and collaboration as the ethos of the space created, or ‘cleared out’, by a poem, leads Berry to emphasize a further connection, that of work and love, and with this, a love of work. This too, he contends, is a facet of the poet’s art:

The standards of love are inseparable from the process or system of reminding that I am talking about. This reminding . . . must be our subject if we want to understand the responsibility of the poet; it is to a considerable extent what poets respond to, and is to a considerable extent what they respond with.<sup>26</sup>

This kind of reciprocity likewise mirrors in poetry the relationship to the world that, for Berry, marks one of his greatest urgencies. As he announces in the previously quoted sequence “Damage” (n. 10), “If I have damaged my subject [i.e., Creation], then I have damaged my art.”<sup>27</sup>

A loving response to the world in the form of a ‘complex reminding’ captures well some of the work that both of these poems achieve. Henson’s imaginative reoccupation of a world imbued with the sacred anticipated in “a prayer from the rising wind”, its symbols rising from the dust to “pass through the cedars where our old ones sleep”, and Berry’s revisioning of the Sabbath as the lively dynamic of a world endowed with “great Life” down to the very “dark mazes of the soil”, generate an intimacy that relishes nature. That both poems insist upon a deprivileging of human mastery while advancing a belief in the inseparable union of humans and nature/Creation, as one among her multitudinous creatures, depicts the conditions by which such a relationship becomes possible. As Berry pronounces the needed point of view, “We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy.”<sup>28</sup> At issue, then, is not only the potential for continuing to destroy the natural world, but recovering—as with Henson’s vision—or establishing—as with Berry’s vision and critique of Christian neglect—a commitment to care and ‘kindly use’ out of love. Or to name another of the theological virtues invoked in “Sabbaths IV”, a “hope outreaching wrong”.

However, the poetry of Henson and Berry also has a more aggressive ambition, which confronts the stakes involved in the face of catastrophic ecological outcomes should the vision of their poetry be ignored. So, Henson contends that “Poetry is revolutionary” and must be in order to survive (see n. 1). More than the survival of the medium, Henson also knows that poetry bears the potential to transform by simultaneously engendering new perspectives and subverting others, as we find evident in “we are a people”. In short, poetry can argue, though its means of doing so follow the ways that the imagination works, and works *on*, its readers.<sup>29</sup> In our two poems, the tacit appeal for a new vision of Creation

and our place in it is *subtly* subversive. The figures of both the Native American who communes with nature and finds his own identity and heritage there, and the farmer who finds “the true world’s Sabbath” around and beneath the field he clears, embody a way of being in the world that is made proximate for us. By what they see, we see, through their eyes, and feel the passion they feel which thrums in the surroundings where we are invited to stand with them as their readers. The challenge to contrary and destructive perspectives and the promise of a new vision, then, gathers energy as we find ourselves identifying with these personalities. Not only might we see what they see, but we may also come to see *how* they see, and in this, experience an urgency to act. As William Wordsworth so aptly describes this transformational power of poets and other “Prophets of Nature” at the end of *The Prelude*, “what we have loved,/Others will love, and we will teach them how” (Book XIV, LL. 446–47).

If, as environmental educators and activists Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim contend, eco-theology extends beyond the academic to become an “engaged force”, then we yearn to find ways to engage others which generate this effect. We of course need thoughtful rational discourse as one element in this effort. We also need the kinds of resources that poetry and other works of the imagination offer, which, when read closely as we have attempted in this essay, enhance our attentiveness through what the biblical scholar Robert Alter has called poetry’s “peculiar advantages”.<sup>30</sup> There is a growing body of work that reinforces such distinct contributions that poetry makes to ecocriticism, and to eco-theological discourse in particular. One example is Emma Mason’s recent work on the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti, subtitled *Poetry, Ecology, Faith*.<sup>31</sup> In this study, Mason demonstrates both the poet’s commitment to an “ecological spirituality” founded upon the “ecological love command” that Rossetti confirmed from her Trinitarian faith,<sup>32</sup> and the legacy of poetic investment in an “ecothological reading of creation”,<sup>33</sup> which extends to contemporary poets such as Henson and Berry. Of particular salience from the standpoint of our work, Mason asserts that Rossetti “considered poetry the ideal expression of this gentling, compassionate way of being”.<sup>34</sup> Or as she neatly summarizes, resonant with the effects achieved in our poems, “Rossetti’s language brings the reader to the experience of dwelling in creation through a relational and loving thinking of it as a radical divine solidarity with an unfolding cosmos.”<sup>35</sup> As the poet declares in her sonnet sequence “Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets”, sounding a note that could have come from the mouths of either Lance Henson or Wendell Berry, “Tread softly! all the earth is holy ground.”<sup>36</sup>

It is, again, this summons to recognize and honor the sacredness of all the living world that poetry and other works of the literary imagination can so distinctively engender. As the Irish philosopher William Desmond has argued, “Imagination might be said to be at the birth of mindful being, as both incipiently self-aware and as open to the other as other.”<sup>37</sup> In this moment of consequence regarding our planetary future, the artistic power of poets such as Lance Henson, Wendell Berry, and scores of other eco-sensitive poets such as Christina Rossetti can tutor us in such mindfulness towards the many ‘others’ who inhabit the complex ecosystems of Creation with us.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Bruchac 1987, p. 109).

<sup>2</sup> (Grim and Tucker 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Grim and Tucker, “Ecology,” p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Bruchac, “Whirlwind,” pp. 108, 112.

- 5 Later in “Ecology and Religion”, Grim and Tucker discuss the problematic tendencies of anthropocentrism in religion as it relates to ecological issues: “Have issues of personal salvation superseded all others? Have divine-human relations been primary? Have anthropocentric ethics been all-consuming? Has the material world of nature been devalued by religion? Does the search for otherworldly rewards override commitment to this world?” Cf. Grim and Tucker, “Problems and Promise of Religions: Limiting and Liberating,” in (Grim and Tucker n.d.).
- 6 Bruchac, “Whirlwind,” p. 109.
- 7 (Henson 1993). Full text of the poem reprinted by permission of the publisher.
- 8 (Berner 1990, p. 419).
- 9 (Wilson 2001, p. 70).
- 10 Wilson, “Spirit Voices,” p. 65.
- 11 Berner, “Lance Henson,” p. 421.
- 12 “Wendell Berry, “Sabbaths IV” [“Who makes a clearing makes a work of art”] from *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems 1979–2012*. Copyright © 2013 by Wendell Berry. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Counterpoint Press, counterpointpress.com. It should be noted that “Sabbaths” is not the title of this individual poem but refers to the series of poems under that title, differentiated by a Roman numeral and/or by the year when it was written.”
- 13 As Berry insists in his sermon “Christianity and the Survival of Creation”, “The Bible leaves no doubt at all about the sanctity of world-making, or of the world that was made, or of creaturely or bodily life in this world”; he continues, “The idea of the exclusive holiness of church buildings . . . is wildly incompatible with the idea, which the churches also teach, that God is present in all places . . . .” ((Berry 1993), online 3, 4, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/berry.htm>, accessed on 19 August 2021).
- 14 “Kindly use,” writes Berry, “depends upon intimate knowledge, the most sensitive responsiveness and responsibility,” a virtuous approach to agriculture that distinguishes the farm as “a place to live and a way of life” rather than a mere “unit of production” in (Berry 1977, pp. 31–32).
- 15 (Berry 1995, p. 75). He later adds succinctly in this same essay, “Care . . . rests upon genuine religion” (p. 77).
- 16 (Berry 1990, p. 7). It is interesting that earlier in this same poem, the poet describes the work he faced on the family property he inherited and decided to inhabit as a recovery project, albeit one with risk as well as promise:
- In general I have used my farm carefully. It could be said, I think., that I have improved it more than I have damaged it.
- My aim has been to go against its history and to repair the damage of other people. But now a part of its damage is my own.
- Until that wound in the hillside, my place, is healed, there will be something impaired in my mind. My peace is damaged. I will not be able to forget it. (ibid. 6)
- 17 (Berry 1977), op. cit., pp. 51–52.
- 18 Ibid., 53; emphasis added.
- 19 (Berry 1977), op. cit., p. 130.
- 20 Ibid., p. 131.
- 21 Ibid., p. 130.
- 22 (Berry 2009, p. 272).
- 23 (Berry 1990), op. cit., p. 88.
- 24 Ibid., pp. 88–89.
- 25 Ibid., p. 89.
- 26 Ibid., p. 90.
- 27 (Berry 1990), op. cit., p. 7.
- 28 (Berry 1993), op. cit., p. 3.
- 29 In her presidential address to the Modern Language Association in 1980, the great literary critic Helen Vendler makes a similar distinction, declaring that, “Though the state of reading, like that of listening to a piece of music, is one of intense attention, it is not one of scholarly or critical reflection. It is a state in which the text works on us, not we on it.” In (Vendler 1981, p. 344).
- 30 (Alter 1985, p. 205).
- 31 (Mason 2018).
- 32 Ibid., pp. 3, 24.
- 33 Ibid., p. 4.
- 34 Ibid., p. 3.
- 35 Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., quoted on p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> (Desmond 2002, p. 284).

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