

Why Poetry?

He has made his wonders to be remembered.
—Psalm 111:4a

In all of creation, one of the greatest possessions we have is our language. Our words not only tell us what we see but what we think: “And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field . . .” (Genesis 2:19–20 NASB). Just as Adam named the living creatures, the poet names the significant things and the important events of life, because life has meaning, because words have meaning by the grace of God.

Of course, the idea that words are not all that powerful or important is common. It is intriguing to think about why we try to play down the power of words with other words no less.

(1) We have all heard and probably said: Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me (is there a saying like this in all cultures/languages or just English?). In most cases it’s probably a statement of bravado. We all know how much words hurt and continue to hurt long after the sticks and stones. Remembering the unpleasant words someone said about us can cause us pain again but remembering the blows of stick and stones will not cause the same physical pain.

(2) And of course, there is that other very popular canard: A picture is worth a thousand words (sometimes qualified with a “can be”!). Just think of all the pictures that have left you in total ignorance when a thousand words would have given some understanding of the scene. Living in a world of just pictures would be something like living in a foreign country when one doesn’t know the language. Obviously, seeing is a way of learning and understanding, but knowing the language would certainly deepen and expand one’s understanding more quickly.

But why read or write poetry? Well, because poetry lets the writer do something with our language that other forms do not. And that something special is the energy inherent in the words and their arrangement. For example, we see a river flowing by. The various scientists could describe in very precise chemical terms the formula for the water and the pollutants in the water, or list and describe all the living organisms in the water, or the plants growing in the water or on the riverbank, or the types of rocks and soil that the water flows over. The geographer could describe the effect the river has had on the land or where it comes from or is going to. The anthropologist could describe what part the river has in forming the cultures of the people living near it. The historian could narrate the history along the river of peoples, towns, battles, bridges, disastrous floods, and droughts. But a poem about the river would use words that give some sort of delight or pleasure or excitement or insight or wisdom or feeling or wonder. Of course, we might find this in the writings of the chemist, biologist, geographer, or historian, but not as a primary focus. For them, it’s not in how the words tell but what the words tell. In poetry, it’s how the words are combined that’s most important for the power and deep effect of the poem upon the reader. My intent and my hope would be that the poems in this book would make us remember the wonder of God’s creation and also let us maintain focus on truth, beauty, and goodness in all its manifestations:

Finally, brethren,
whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is right,
whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is of good repute,
if there is any excellence
and if anything worthy of praise,
let your mind dwell these things.
(Philippians 4:8)

Gary Hotham
Cheltenham, England
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