



# Poetry At the Heart of Things: Towards a Christian Perspective

*James Howard Trott*

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Poetry is everybody's business. All language is poetic. The meaning of the word "poet" is literally "maker". We are all "linguafacturers". Poetry is distinctive of man made in God's image. It connects to and leads into eternal things. One observable element of Christian disunity is our Babel-like inability to communicate. As we move toward unity, we must move toward one mind and one "language." We need to remember that language at its best is more poetical than "theological" or "scientific". As those who are made in the image of God grow into the likeness of his Son, our one mind becomes a more poetical mind. Poetry resists the partitioning of truth and by its nature, maintains and increases the connections. While analytic prose tends to form walls, enclose spaces, and create separate containers, poetry expresses lively truth that is not neatly packaged or circumscribed. The great contentions in the church have often flattened our gospel, turning it into plain prose. These formulations, intended to function as bulwarks, also maintain chasms between us. They leave less room for mystery. To recover the proper degree of mystery we require a proper respect for poetry. We propose a perspective on the Word of God and the ancient councils which maintains a profound respect. Yet we disagree with those who believe the Bible is chiefly a collection of wise sayings, historical anecdotes, moral lessons or theological propositions. We are indeed opponents of the idea the Scriptures are meant to be mined or analyzed for the purpose of extracting formulas! Truth of the ultimate spiritual things does not reside in formulas analogous to scientific postulates and equations, but in those profounder and simpler statements, metaphors and parables in which God speaks to us. Language can do much more than the formula of the moderns on the one hand and the propaganda of the postmoderns on the other. It is more than reports and persuasion. Language, used poetically, is capable of a precision, not of isolation, but rather of completeness or "inter-connectivity". Words and metaphors are like facets of a gem, not isolated pieces of optical glass, but the cut faces of a diamond. One face may show us a great deal, but the gem is best seen with all the facets sparkling and darkling together. Then it is not merely the separate facets, but the interplay of their surfaces, their depths, and ultimately their relationships to light that make them what they are, that make the diamond what it is. Poetry must do more than accumulate. It must also choose out and set things aside. Poetry must have a negative function, a filtering, selecting side. And again this is part of what metaphor is made to do. This process is like Tarzan swinging through the jungle. He assesses which vines are sound, then grasps each firmly, letting go of the previous and goes forward, having gained support, made progress, but not getting stuck on one strand. Grasping and releasing are necessary. No single metaphor can possibly bear the weight of all truth. All the facets of the gem, all the vines in the jungle are necessary to continue us on our way together. The offense which Jew and Muslim take to the doctrine of the Trinity is very like the offense the modernist takes to poetry: "Let's be sensible! How can one God be three persons? How can one statement mean several things at once?" Most of the major heresies which the early church had to confront had to do with the efforts of the heresiarchs to define the nature of truth in a way that "made more sense". We need to reintegrate our intellects and sensibilities around a commitment to poetry. A poetical understanding is essential to our communications, including our communications with God, with one another, and the world. These and related matters are addressed by the author, who as a poet and a poetry editor, is deeply interested in his subject.

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