

## Response to "The Powers of Poetry" by Gregory Orr

Reading "The Powers of Poetry" by Gregory Orr was exciting and a big eye opener for me. My life has been full of avoiding the nuances of language, skipping over the laws of proper construction, believing mastery was beyond my apprehension. I wrote last week how hard it was for me to find any mystery and symbolism in words and then I read Orr's essay and he shows ways to entrain it. It seems I have just been looking at things the wrong way.

My enjoyment of poetry has always been veiled by what I thought was a lack of understanding. I have been secretly carried away with the rhythmic tides of poetry, but drowned in the ignorance of why or even what the poem was about. For me, poetry sat on a higher intellectual shelf that required years of study in Language, Math and Music. Dreamily I would look up and view it, stand under the odd waterfall when it washed my life. Poetry is an art, but it's a writer's art. I am a Painter. These were two different things for me until Orr's words showed me the connection I needed to bring them together. Poetry (and Prose to a lesser extent) are like paintings. They have flow, form, color, meaning, tension, abstraction, symbolism, mystery and magic. Everything that I find in a painting able to stimulate my senses.

The vulnerability that words instill in me derives in part from definition and usage, but also the rigidness of them. They appear to pin down thoughts too tightly. There is often a narrative to the images I paint, but the painting can hold many meanings to others. When I put a title to an image, I find my own thoughts and meaning are captured. I wrestled with this concept for a while, and still not sure if I like it or not. In the end I came to realize a painting is about communication and the "Story", "My Story" is important. Orr's insight on the power of

story reiterates my own feelings that "story is the most primordial way of establishing the meaning of what it is to be a self in a world of time, space and other selves" (Orr, 2002, p. 95) . So many of Orr's comments about poetry and prose could be used to reference painting. For my paintings I select and arrange details for their symbolic significance. I might like Prose fill the canvas with images, brushwork, texture, establishing the richness and variety of experience. Or similar to Poetry, have only one or two images that create a dramatic effect and tension (Orr, 2002, p. 95). I may chose to frame an abstract painting to bring some order to the chaos created in the viewers mind. William Blake framed his poem "The Tyger", "with nearly identical first and last stanzas" (Orr, 2002, p. 110) for the same reason.

Orr's discussion of Theodore Roethke's personal lyric "My Papa's Waltz" was enlightening. The poems buoyant dancing rhythm had me first waltzing over the less so happy details. It showed me the powerful way words can be used to layer one image with another. It is another painting technique, a jaunty image crafted in blue paint. Orr then goes onto show how "story in a lyric poem has a centripetal impulse" (Orr, 2002, p. 98), which discloses the meaning through a central focus. He also showed the way abstract language can carry us into a sensual world. These are both painting methods that I can relate to, but Orr took me closer to the high writers shelf with a philosophy step. He noted how Philosophy uses abstract language to help order our vast chaotic experience of the world by condensing many experiences into one word. "The use of physical language to communicate meaning in story is in major contrast to how philosophy makes meaning out of language" (Orr, 2002, p. 99). Many flowers are imagined with the word flower, many other things are imagined with the word beauty. Beauty is an idea, it has no connection to the physical world. Suddenly all the rigidness I had attributed

to words broke down with this knowledge. Abstract language is very hard to pin down to a particular thought.

Orr then takes us into the powerful transformative effect of telling our story. "A way of taking personal experience back from silence, shame, fear, or oblivion" (Orr, 2002, p. 100). It is a way for the self to "circle back and revive the self spiritually and emotionally" (Orr, 2002, p. 101). I feel painting holds the same potential, offering an abstract way of ordering chaotic overwhelming emotions and providing insight.

During the next section of his essay, Orr brought the writers shelf to me. He showed me the symbolism of language, symbolism is my painters language. Metaphor, yes, that paints a picture in my mind, takes me on a journey. But words themselves as symbols - I had never considered it. Words have full-page dictionary definitions, their origins, meanings and uses strictly documented. But try looking up the word "Black Milk", or "Good Shoes". These conjure up images far greater than their mere definitions. "A symbol allows an object to mean more than itself, to take on additional meanings" (Orr, 2002, p. 101). I feel like I have found the philosophers gold in language land, an alchemic tool to help me create mystery rather than keep confusion in words.

I love the way Orr touches on the idea that the use of symbols, especially ancient ones, can continue to "suggest meanings beyond those consciously intended by the poet" (Orr, 2002, p. 104). How they refuse "to give up all their mystery to our need for understanding and explanation" (Orr, 2002, p. 104). How "we cannot unlock all the mysteries, even those we think we ourselves have created" (Orr, 2002, p. 105). With this section about symbols, Orr lets me

see that the magic of poetry yielding more than crafted words is not necessarily planned. Just as the images I create often tell a different story than intended. The use of the left brain I have always associated with language no longer appears dominant in poetry, where a more intuitive creative power comes into play. By the end of the essay Orr had put the writers shelf within easy reach for me. And then just in case I still question my ability to rearrange the treasures I find there, he offers up the magic spell of "Incantation" to sooth my worries. I loved it all.

I am a painter  
a symbol maker  
with pagan heart  
for magic art

art of fluid nature seek  
make my hand use words to speak  
weave your spell into my line  
mix what is yours and what is mine

I am a writer  
a symbol maker  
with pagan heart  
for magic art