



Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully: The Power of Poetic Effort in the Work of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis

John Piper

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Herbert - Whitefield - Lewis

In the sixth volume of The Swans Are Not Silent series, John Piper celebrates the importance of poetic effort by looking at three influential Christians whose words magnificently display a commitment to truth and a love of beauty.

Examining the lives of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis, Piper helps us appreciate the importance of carefully crafted words by exploring how Christians can use them to testify to God's glory, wonder at his grace, and rejoice in his salvation.

Whether exploring Herbert's moving poetry, Whitefield's dramatic preaching, or Lewis's imaginative writing, this book highlights the importance of Christ-exalting eloquence in our praise of God and proclamation of his gospel.

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Date : Published May 31st 2014 by Crossway Books (first published May 14th 2014)

ISBN : 9781433542947

Author : John Piper

Format : Hardcover 158 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction, Religion, Christianity, Poetry, Language, Writing

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From Reader Review Seeing Beauty and Saying Beautifully: The Power of Poetic Effort in the Work of George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C. S. Lewis for online ebook

Jake McAtee says

One of my favorite Piper books. Herbert, Whitefield, and Lewis will leave you feeling wildly inadequate.

Douglas Wilson says

Very fine work. Really good, and really good on many levels.

Claxton says

Loved the idea behind the book. Loved the section on Herbert, as I found it personally inspiring. I love John Piper, but this book seemed hastily written and/or poorly edited (e.g., this line appeared a half dozen times throughout the book: "If [Herbert's friend] can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies." This sort of redundancy takes away from the book, especially since 1) Piper himself is a great writer, and 2) it's a bit ironic, given the book's argument.

Hank Pharis says

George Herbert was a Pastor in England who would not be remembered today except for one thing. A week before he died he gave a book of poems that he had written to a friend. This book has been in print ever since and he is widely recognized as one of the best English poets. For example: "Teach me, my God and King; In all things Thee to see; And what I do in anything; To do it as for Thee."

George Whitefield may be one of the top three or four preachers of church history. He was the person God most used to spread the Great Awakening.

Uniquely he as a Calvinistic Methodist who was good friends with both John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.

C.S. Lewis was a literature professor at Oxford and Cambridge who was originally an atheist. However he felt that God pursued him until he became a Christian. He then wrote numerous classic works such as Mere Christianity, Surprised by Joy, The Problem of Pain, A Grief Observed, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and many more. John Piper says that Lewis and Jonathan Edwards are the two men who have most influenced him. Great quotes by Lewis: "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world." (Mere Christianity); "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go

on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." (The Weight of Glory)

Yan Ying says

Ahh! So much love!!! ♥ I really wish all of you can read it. :)

Jeremy says

My review appeared in *Modern Reformation* .

"[R]eaching for a voice that matches the truth . . . wakens the speaker as well as the hearer" (146).

Free ebook here.

Darla says

Beautifully written tribute to the works of Herbert, Whitefield CS Lewis. John Piper highlights their area of expertise while showing how each used their gifts to magnify the beauties of their Savior for othersn This is the 6th book in the Swans are not Silent series by Crossways. Definitely plan to read more of the series.

Christopher Rush says

I have now read four John Piper books in my lifetime. If some country doesn't make me their king soon I will have lost all faith in civilization. Perhaps you are wondering initially why the generous rating of 2 entire stars instead of the usual 1, or perhaps you are wondering why I even bothered to read yet another John Piper book when so many alternative life choices are available. Well, I'm an incredibly generous person, let's get that straight, plus it was a gift more for the subject matter than the author, I'm sure. So I read it. I read it quickly and relatively effortlessly, but that's to be expected from most of Mr. Piper's oeuvre, I have come to believe. The second star: because he quotes so many outstanding poems by George Herbert, the book gets a second star.

It's not a very good book, at least the parts generated by Mr. Piper. The quotations from Herbert, Whitefield, and Lewis are certainly top-notch, and the worthwhile portions of the book, but that's about it. Once again Mr. Piper confuses "sheer repetition" with "proving and supporting one's point." Though this is a comparatively short book, most of it is redundant. Piper quotes an author toward the beginning of the chapter, then a few pages later he quotes the same passage, acting as if it is new material we have never seen before. At times in the following chapters, the same earlier citations will briefly reappear often without warrant. Later, in the wholly unnecessary conclusion, the same passages are referenced yet again and the

same observations about them rehashed. The conclusion of the book is of the same caliber as junior high book reports whose conclusions are copied-and-pasted from their introductions, yet lacking the trenchant insights often found in such material.

Early in the book Mr. Piper wants us to believe his main purpose is about "seeing and saying and savoring," but he never explains what those mean in the book in any meaningful way, which is his wont. He says that slogan again and again, never supporting it, never cogently defining it, always effectively assuming we know what he means. Of course, we do, making the entire book unnecessary. Mr. Piper spends an inordinate amount of time talking about what he is not talking about, as if there is a single Christian alive today who could possibly be under the impression "Saint Paul is not a fan of eloquent words, and the Bible hates poetry." Where he gets the notion those need refuting is beyond me, but then again so is the reputation of Mr. Piper as a quality communicator of needed ideas. I don't mean that as negatively as it likely sounds, but it's been a strange day and I am rather perplexed by the people who think this is a good book. It isn't.

Most of the chapters dedicated to the three not-silent Swans are biographical sketches. Mr. Piper spends comparatively little time drawing conclusions from the lives and works of these people. He does it a bit, to be fair, but most of the book is information that doesn't really help whatever point he is purportedly making coupled with irritatingly-recycled snippets and quotations without apparent purpose. Not terribly surprisingly, Mr. Piper defeats some of his own purpose by claiming the main thesis is "poetic effort," but then he has to modify it with "well, George Whitefield wasn't a poet, so his 'poetic effort' was more like 'skilled sermonizing'" (or something to that effect). He can't even generate a unifying device that binds the three subjects together without apologizing for it and transmogrifying it multiple times. I don't get it. Read the poems of George Herbert. They truly are some of the best the world has ever been given. Read the sermons of George Whitefield, even if they are theatrical and emotionally-driven. Read the works of C.S. Lewis (your suspicions of Mr. Piper in choosing Lewis so he could rehash stuff he's already said multiple times over the last forty-some years instead of drawing our attention to someone "new" we should know about are likely well-founded) - we all know we should do that. This book, however, will not tell you anything you need to know or can't get from some other more coherent, enjoyable source.

Seth Lippert says

This book's unique genre—mini bios mixed with a thematic essay connecting saying with seeing beauty—both informed and inspired. Piper is convincing in showing the common denominator between Herbert, Whitefield, and Lewis. Though they are from different eras (and, in Lewis' case, of a different theology) each made a poetic effort, an attempt, as Piper says, to "describe reality in creative and wondrous language [that] often takes us deeper into reality".

The selection and analysis of Herbert's poems was enjoyable, accurate, and, even in such a small book, felt like a fairly thorough sampling of his work. Whitefield's selections, likewise, were well chosen, and the response to his modern critics (who claim he was a mere actor) was persuasive, supported with Whitefield's own words. The final case of Lewis really brought the point home: whether it be myth, allegory, or romance, the masks themselves reveal.

"If the key to the deepest meaning of this world lies outside this world, then the world will probably be illuminated most deeply not simply by describing the world as what it is but by likening the world to what it is not... God [himself] created what is not God. He made not-God the means of revealing and knowing God."

Margo Berendsen says

It was difficult not to skip straight to the section on C.S. Lewis, my favorite, but it was also fascinating to learn about Herbert and Whitefield.

The book starts with two beautiful analogies:

God made individuals with stunning distinctiveness and as absolutely unique refractions of his glory. Nevertheless, the greatest glory is when these refractions compose a unified display of God's greatness, as a stained glass window with thousands of fragments reveals one bright picture, not in spite of the difference among the fragments, but because of them.

I love how this analogy celebrates the uniqueness and distinctiveness God created each of us to have, and how it in turns magnifies his glory.

My thesis is that this effort to say beautifully is, perhaps surprisingly, a way of seeing and savoring beauty. For example, when I hear my daughter singing worship songs in her bedroom, my heart is glad. But when I make the effort to put into suitable words what I love about her song - in a conversation, in a birthday card, in a poem - I hear more, see more, love more. This is how it is with all truth and beauty - the wonders of nature, the stunning turns of redemptive history, and the glories of Christ.

As a writer myself, this set my heart singing, because it not only affirms my love of writing, but it shows me that I can glorify God with my writing, because as I write I am seeing again and expressing beautiful things I've seen in his creation, difficult but necessary things I've learned, and wonder that he's given me the same delight in creating things that he has himself when he creates.

The introduction also includes examples of "saying beautifully" in the Bible, like Paul's 13th chapter of Corinthians. He could have made the point about love without metaphors, but oh how his metaphors made it one of the most beautiful and memorable poems every written.

George Herbert lived from 1593-1633, and did not share his poems till he knew he was about to die of tuberculosis. He sent his collection of 167 poems with this note to a friend: "if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies."

He is loved for his technical rigor and his spiritual depth. T.S. Eliot said, "The exquisite variations of form in the poems of The Temple show a resourcefulness of invention which seems inexhaustible, and for which I know no parallel in English poetry."

From the poem "Giddinesse":

Lord, mend or rather make us: one creation
Will not suffice our turn:
Except thou make us dayly, we shall spurn
our own salvation.

From the poem "Nature": (beautiful!)

Full of rebellion, I would die,
Or fight, or travail, or denie
That thou hast ought to do with me.
O tame my heart;
It is thy highest art
To captivate strong holds to thee.

From the poem "The Holdfast":

But to have naught is ours, not to confesse
That we have nought. I stood amaz'd at this,
Much troubled, till I heard a friend expresse
That all things were more ours by being his.

From the poem "Joseph's Coat":

I live to shew his power, who once did bring
My joyes to weep, and now my griefs to sing

And the entire poem, The Pulley, is just stunning:

When God at first made man,
Having a glasse of blessings standing by;
Let us (said he) poure on him all we can:
Let he worlds riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way;
Then beautie flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure;
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
Rest in the bottome lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts in stead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,

But keep them with repining restlesnesse:
Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
If goodness leade him not, yet wearinesse
May tosse him to my breast.

Of the 167 poems in the Temple, 116 are written with meters that are not repeated. This is simple incredible when you think about it. He created new kinds of structures for seventy percent of his poems.

I also loved what Herbert said about music: "Music points the way to heaven as it frees us, for the moment, from the limitations of our bodily being and gives us strength back to believe in final harmony."

For George Herbert, poetry was a form of meditation on the glories of Christ mediated through the Scriptures. Conceiving and writing poems was a way of holding a glimpse of divine glory in his mind and turning it around and around until it yielded an opening into some aspect of its essence or its wonder that he had never seen before - or felt. This is meditation: Getting glimpses of glory in the Bible or in the world and turning those glimpses around and around in your mind, looking and looking.

A little about what I learned of George Whitefield. I knew he was a preacher of the Great Awakening. I didn't know he was the colonies' first hero, and by 1750, a unifying force. He often preached 60 hours a week! I also did not know that he was a slaveholder, but he was also an ardent evangelist to slaves. A seventeen year old black Boston servant girl named Phillis Wheatley wrote one of his most famous elegies. Wheatley would become one of the best known poets in pre-nineteenth century America.

God has chosen him unconditionally, and God would therefore keep him invincibly. This was his rock-solid confidence and a fire in his bones and the power of his obedience. He wrote in 1739 from Philadelphia:

Oh the excellency of the doctrine of election, and of the saints' final perseverance, to those who are truly sealed by the Spirit of promise! I am persuaded, till a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself; but when convinced of these, and assured of the application of them to his own heart, he then walks by faith indeed, not in himself but in the Son of God, who died and gave himself for him. Love, not fear, constrains him to obedience.

The section on Whitefield ends with:

No eloquence can save a soul. But the worth of salvation and the worth of souls impels preachers to speak and write with all their might in ways that say: there is more, there is so much more beauty - so much more glory - for you to see than I can say.

And now to my old favorite, C.S. Lewis. I dearly hoped John Piper would do him justice, and oh, he did, and even more than I hoped! I learned so much more about my favorite author!

Piper starts with defining some of Lewis's theology, his "Mere Christianity" - what it is, and what it is not and how radically different it was from liberalism.

He believed that when one looks at Christianity across the centuries it has an astounding unity which has great apologetic power.

. Even before he became a believer, he noticed that great Christian writers from Augustine to Bunyan represent

very different churches, climates and ages... and that brings me to yet another reason for reading them. The divisions of Christendom undeniable... but if any one is tempted to think - as one might be tempted who read only contemporaries - that Christianity is a word of so many meaning that it means nothing at all, he can learn beyond all doubt, by stepping out of his own century, that this is not so. Measured against the ages, mere Christianity turns out to be no insipid interdenominational transparency, but something positive, self consistent, and inexhaustible... so unmistakably the same; recognizable...

Piper says no one else has Lewis's gift for expressing joy and wonder and defending objective, absolute truth.

My thesis...is that Lewis's romanticism and his rationalism were the paths on which he lived his life and did his work. They shaped him into a teacher and writer with extraordinary gifts for logic and likening - and evangelism. What I mean by "likening" as we will see, is almost identical with what I have called "poetic effort" or "dramatic effort" in the previous chapters [with Herbert and Whitefield]. Lewis discovered that joy and reason, longing and logic (romanticism and rationalism) called forth a kind of language - a poetic effort, an imaginative use of likening - that illuminated the reality of what is by describing it in a way that it is not. Thus he spent his life pointing people, even in his rigorous prose, beyond the world to the meaning of the world, Jesus Christ.

It was wonderful revisiting many quotes from C.S. Lewis on joy and desiring, but it was also fascinating learning more about his rational side, his strong belief in logic as rules which govern thought and the world, which I had caught hints of but hadn't really become familiar with, having not yet read the Abolition of Man (it's next on my list!) I'm actually considering taking a course on logic as a result of reading this book and having heard Dallas Willard (another great Christian philosopher/practicer of logic) talk about its importance

(I have wrongly supposed for many years that logic was somewhat of an enemy of faith).

Here is the crucial link between truth and Joy. "Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring." So we see what is at stake. The entire modern world - and even more so the postmodern world - was moving away from this conviction. Liberal theology, and postmodern cynics who score propositions, have gone with the flow of unbelief - subjectivism and relativism. Lewis stood against it with all his strength. Subjectivism and relativism means "the abolition of man."... but long before that, it means the destruction of Joy, because, as Lewis had learned when he became a Christian, an attack on the objective reality of God is an attack on Joy... without God, the event in my mind called joy is utterly trivial.

Here's another great summary:

He reasoned like this: if the key to the deepest meaning of this world lies outside this world, then the world will probably be illuminated most deeply not simply by describing the world as what it is but by likening the world to what it is not....At one level, it seems paradoxical to liken something to what it is not in order to show more deeply what it is. But that's what life had taught Lewis. And he devoted his whole life to exemplifying and defending this truth.

I could probably quote this entire chapter, it's just that good. I haven't even got to the section "Only Supernaturalists Can See Nature":

Unless we see that this world is not ultimate reality but is only like it, we will not see and savor this world for the wonder that it is.

This is followed by a quote from Lewis's *Miracles* (the other major book of his I haven't read yet!)

The Englishness of English is audible only to those who know some other language as well. In the same way and for the same reason, only Supernaturalists really see Nature. You must go a little way from her, and then turn around, and look back. Then at last the true landscape will become visible.

He ends with the two most important of all Lewis quotes:

The salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world.

The glory of God, and, as our only means to glorifying Him, the salvation of human souls, is the real business of life.

Steve says

The three are looked at from the point of view of beauty and rhetoric. Nicely done.

Emily Cook says

To see and to savor and to speak the glories of Christ—
this is the delight, the calling of all Christians!

This effort to say beautifully is, perhaps surprisingly, a way of seeing and savoring the beauty. Piper here demonstrates three masters of the poetic effort in their own arenas. I enjoyed reading this book very much! (It made me want to return to college and take a few more English classes!)

"This is meditation: Getting glimpses of glory in the Bible or in the world and turning those glimpses around and around in your mind, looking and looking."

A quote from each of these greats:

Full of rebellion, I would die,
Or fight, or travail, or denie
That thou hast ought to do with me.
O tame my heart;
It is thy highest art
To captivate strong holds to thee.
(“Nature” by Herbert)

“I will never speak of what is real as though it were imaginary.” Whitfield

“A great romance is like a flower whose smell reminds you of something you can’t quite place. . . . I’ve never met Ents or Elves—but the feel of it, the sense of a huge past, of lowering danger, of heroic tasks achieved by the most apparently unheroic people, of distance, vastness, strangeness, homeliness (all blended together) is so exactly what living feels like to me. (Lewis)

See, savor, speak!

May God help us to will and to do this faithful thing, in accordance with our unique gifts!

Brad says

This series of books are great little insights into the lives of saints who have shaped the church. I've loved reading them through the years

David Steele says

A powerful look at George Herbert, George Whitefield, and C.S. Lewis through the Reformed and refined lens of John Piper. Astounding!

Jonathan Berry says

A wonderful book examining the way in which the use of intentional and beautiful language to describe God and his mercies - poetry, prose, or spoken; published or personal - serves to help us to see him more clearly and more wonderfully. Piper examines the lives of 3 men who epitomized this in different ways: George Herbert, a country pastor and poet; George Whitefield, a prolific speaker; and C.S. Lewis, a novelist, essayist, and speaker. The stories of these men's lives and Piper's observations on how they can teach us were quite helpful to me. My one complaint is that at times the same idea seems to be repeated over several pages. However, that is a minor quip when those ideas are so helpful and beneficial. Overall, highly recommend!
