



Publication
Dear Onomatopoe
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Dear Onomatopoe,

The Poetry Festival in Medellin is the largest in the World. The opening evening takes place in an enormous open-air arena which has been hewn from the rocks of the Cerre de Nutibara mountains and which can seat around five thousand people.

This appears not to be enough.

The poetry lovers in Medellin who arrive late climb into the trees surrounding the amphitheatre, into the lantern poles and onto the walls of the arena - anything to get a glimpse of the seventy international poets who have come to their city.

All the poets sit on an enormous stage. They wait. They wait until they have the chance to read their poems for the biggest and most enthusiastic audience they have ever addressed.

The one who reads last has to wait seven hours. Seven hours, during which it rains heavily, gets dark; during which the temperature drops from 30 to 10 degrees, and at one point the lights fail due to a fire in the mixer.

Nobody walks off. The intensity of the listening doesn't diminish for a single second. It is the absolute dream of every literary festival in Europe.

A Turkish poet walks to the edge of the stage, stretches out his arms pontifically and bellows out an ode to Che Guevara. The audience cheers, stands up, press their hands to their bosoms and sing a

battle song. Five thousand voices. Next, a poet from Zimbabwe who, a year ago, exchanged the rifle for the pen and who writes about her life as a child soldier. A following poet has been imprisoned for ten years and tortured because of the political charge of his work. The cheering, that already begins during the reading out of the participants' biographies, almost makes the poetry which follows, superfluous.

Here, as nowhere else, poetry is being celebrated – the freedom of the word.

Here the power that the word can have is given its strongest embrace – applauded.

'Poetry is the voice of the people', cries a hippy poet from San Francisco, whose following poem draws, from the cheering that follows, the power to proclaim Mao as the best thing that ever happened to the world.

The unsurpassed success of the festival in Medellin is their irrepressible belief that poetry is able to heal the world. That poetry will ultimately lead to world peace.

On Facebook I blog about the festival. The poet Nick J. Swarth reacts by asking what's gone wrong with the Dutch art of poetry in the last 600 years, and if it would help if we also started to write overblown, one-dimensional and politically tinged poetry.

It gives me goose-bumps when five thousand voices sing El Quinto Regimiento. I cheer for the child soldier who has chosen poetry. For the poet who has been tortured for his words; out of sympathy, for support, to somehow soften the suffering of the poet. I cheer too for poetry that matters. I love all poets, because

they always, and in spite of everything, live with all their senses, all their senses wide open. I love poetry because poetry can become all things.

But I do not love all poetry.

Does Poetry (with a capital p) lead to World peace? I'm afraid not. Poetry with a capital p means all poetry which has ever been written and ever will be written; all the bad poetry, incendiary poetry, collaborationist poetry, beginners' poetry, charlatans' poetry, dictators' poetry, brainless bellowing poetry and also magisterial poetry. 'Poetry' is far too intangible, and thus totally useless as a means to be used to tackle something as huge as world peace.

Still, sometimes there is a single poem capable of changing a life. Just as once a poem by Fernando Pessoa changed my life. *Du sollst dein leben andern*, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in 1909, not as a summons, but as a simple observation – confronted by real beauty there is namely but one thing that can be done – one must change one's life.

It's the only thing that a good poem really offers – and with that the highest possible attainment for a poet. During their whole life, he or she strives to write a poem that can change another life.

The importance of that is not to be underestimated.