

University of Dallas

**UDigital Commons**

---

Literature

Public Lectures

---

9-8-2012

## How to Read Literature and Why it Matters

Louise Cowan

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.udallas.edu/cowanlec\\_literature](https://digitalcommons.udallas.edu/cowanlec_literature)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

6699 WORDS - NEED 4500

How to Read Literature and  
why it matters

When Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is taken to be an unsatisfactory tragedy-- or when Machiavelli's comedy *Mandragola* is interpreted as wicked and immoral, or the film *No Country for Old Men* is thought to be a tragedy because it has a dark outlook and spills lots of blood --then it

is time for someone who cares about literature to intervene--time to push the philosophers and sociologists aside. And time to think seriously about the governing influence of genre--of tone and mood--in a work of the literary art that the Greeks called poiesis (poetry).

In the spoken word the power of tone is known all too well by those in any sort of intimate relationship. Sustained grievances and even final aliena-

tions have resulted from mistaking the tone of voice in which a comment is spoken. So for poetry, the fullest and most sensitive expression of our inner being, tone is, we might say, the controlling agent. Not just tone of voice: rather, a general tone, as when a painter paints a scene blue or decides, instead on playing up throughout an entire canvas the yellow of sunflowers.

Mood, tone, color for poetry

could we perhaps think that these are characteristic of the various kinds of literature, the genres? We could say, for instance (simplifying a bit), that comedy is about optimism and ingenuity; tragedy, pain and entrapment, epic, the persistent movement forward, lyric the fullness of complete presence.

But this is only the beginning. For of course these different

kinds of literature are not so limited as that theory would imply. Rather, as I began increasingly to see, teaching a course in comedy at the University of Dallas in the late seventies (with as one of my students Mary Lou Hoyle, who, having studied drama with Paul Baker, was already tuned in to comedy. I was beginning to see that the literary "kinds" were as different as day and night. They had already been

characterized by Aristotle in his Poetics: tragedy, epic, comedy, and "that accompanying the music of the lyre." Aristotle had done justice only to tragedy, however; and admittedly it is difficult, more than twenty five hundred years later, to improve on his insights into that genre.

One could perhaps add to his comments the concept of tone. that I have mentioned.

For a certain tone pervades

tragedy; it is not just the events taking place that imbue it with pity and fear. One can kill one's father, for instance, in a different sort of world and be hailed and admired for the dirty deed--in a comedy. Think of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, in which the young man who is thought to have killed his "da" is hailed as a hero. So it seems to be the realm one finds oneself in that determines the significance of



any given action.

It is this strange yet quite normally accepted transformation of events and characters according to their context that I pondered when, in a hotel in Rome, I nursed a badly injured ankle and had to stay quiet rather than pursue the ambitious itinerary throughout Italy that Don and I had planned.

My sudden awareness of the implications of genre came then in a Roman hotel room some thirty years ago. I had just stumbled over a marble step in one of the city's magnificent churches, fallen, and had my traveling bag with all its documents and riches stolen by the accomplice of a gypsy who came forward to help me when I fell.

Afterwards, I was back in the hotel room, in pain, rueful and

self pitying, entertaining dark thoughts about fate and tragic irony. Our travel plans were sadly altered; and worse, our money and pass-ports stolen. The world presented to me, it seemed, a pretty gloomy outlook. But in the midst of all that woe, I suddenly came to my senses: a broken ankle is not tragic, no matter how much it hurts. A broken ankle belongs in the world of comedy. It is controlled by chance, not

fate; and its chief effect is a loss of dignity and mobility, not life or one's soul. Suddenly I laughed; and Don looked up, startled, from his efforts to make out the Italian instructions for reporting a stolen passport.

We had a charmingly different trip from then on, consisting of stampellas (crutches), taxis, pasta and litros of good red vino-- rather than ruins and guidebooks and cathedrals,

as we had planned..

So, as I understood in that hotel room, cut off from walking tours and even books, genre is a matter of is it mood? Color? Attitude? From then on I have been occupied with serious thought about genre. Aristotle in his Poetics clarified some of the necessary elements, though not all of them. Paraphrasing him, we might say that he considers

tragedy to be the imitation of an action, serious, complete and of a certain magnitude, in which, through a kind of blindness, a person of some importance goes to his destruction, carrying along with him innocent people, the spectacle arousing emotions of pity and fear and accomplishing a catharsis. But while these remarks are keenly perceptive and wise, they don't quite cover it all. As one goes on

contemplating the tragedies one knows and can call to mind Oedipus, the Oresteia, Hamlet, King Lear--one senses their tragic atmosphere, pervasive and dark, covering everything in its purview with a heavy pall. If you step into that world, look out.

Various characters may try to enliven the atmosphere by cracking jokes, but to no avail. It's not just what the characters do that makes a work

tragic; it's the atmosphere of the region they are in a realm of irony and potential darkness, of blood and death.

A friendly greeting is not the same in tragedy as in comedy, though the two gestures may be identical. The genres are separate worlds, with different laws, different codes of behavior, and different penalties for their violation. In comedy, for instance, you yourself don't have to do all



the work of getting out of scrapes safely; you simply have to catch the bus or, if it's a region of infernal comedy, gun up the motorcycle and get out of there.

The first volume of our group, then, was on comedy: the most intellectual of all the kinds and yet the genre that the general public understands best. This is a puzzling phenomenon: an audience always laughs at the right lines. It's

surprising that even the ordinary non-literary person can be so perceptive about what's funny. This shared communal quality tends to make comedy the most popular of the genres and yet strangely enough, it is the most complicated of them. But all one has to do to get out of trouble in the comic territory is to "catch the bus," to go with the flow rather than to stand, as Malvolio does in *Twelfth Night*,

shaking one's fist at everybody. The conveyance itself will take you out of harm's way.

Dark comedy, ironic and cruel, seems distinctly not funny. Yet neither is it tragedy: Pulp Fiction, Volpone, Mandragola, Congreve's The Way of the World even Seinfeld, in which no character ever acts from any motive other than self interest. These infernal comedies take place in a particular realm, one in which

one ought not spend too much time going to the bathroom, as does John Travolta in Pulp Fiction.

The fourth and final volume of our series, edited by Bainard Cowan is this one that has just come out--on lyric the genre that proves, actually, to be the most difficult to categorize. For lyric is the fundamental poetic impulse, transforming language, manifesting itself on all levels of society, generating

the other genres and never deserting them. (The finest dramas and novels, for instance, have a lyric quality.) It is the beauty of human utterance of language itself that lyric expresses; and we could maintain that this genre remembers and longs for a time all the way back to the moment of creation in the Garden.

Milton depicts this moment in *Paradise Lost* with Adam rising from the dust of the earth to

his full height and naming everything in sight: "Thou sun," he exclaims with the same joy an infant feels when he matches word with thing.

But why does poetry matter? Why is it so necessary for a society to incorporate poetry into its body of knowledge? For genuine poetry is necessary to the community and the reading of poetry is necessary for individual persons who wish to

know themselves and to be in contact with their authentic feelings. Why?' because we need to be able to interpret the language of our own hearts.

poetry, then, is of crucial importance to all of us. Poetry is not just for specialists; certainly it is not meant just for intellectuals. They tend pretty much to ruin it. Rather, poetry is the language of the deepest part of all of us the language not just of the heart

but of the soul and the viscera, Poetry (as insight, not as finished lines of verse) is the basis of all genuine knowledge; original minds in whatever discipline see and recognize something beyond the already known; and then must put that insight (which is a lyric kind of seeing) into their own art or their craft or their skill. An education in poetry is an education in the full dimensions of the human, the creative



imagination. Poetry as a habit of thought, then, is a means to creative insight and, I would say, the graced life.

The architect, the builder, the businessman, the scientist, as well as the musician, the painter, the film maker all must -- like the poet -- trust their insight. All advances in knowledge come to us by means of penetrating the unknown and making new paradigms. The

genuinely new presents itself not as a ready made structure, but as a kind of nebulous vision -until it's translated into a disciplinary language such as music, or architecture, or physics.. The source of that vision has traditionally been called wisdom which dwells in the dark, hidden place of unknowing where poetry is born. (In using the word poetry, I'm not speaking of the literary words set to rhyme and meter,

or of free verse, or of the art of poetry at all; I'm speaking of the insight)

The art of poetry in language a specific poem gives us a glimpse of that realm of insight made conscious, allowing us to participate in vision and changing our consciousness. But it is not the ideas of a poem that accomplish this transformation in us: it is the language itself, its images, its sounds, its rhythm. Robert

Frost's little eight line poem  
"The Dust of Snow," with each  
line having only two feet,  
nonetheless expresses and  
accomplishes this  
transformation:

The way a crow  
Shook down on me  
The dust of snow  
From a hemlock tree,

Has given my heart  
a change of mood  
and saved some part

of a day I had rued.

Even so brief a poem brings together all its alchemical parts: the vivid image: the black crow, the implied image of shaking, the dust of snow, the fact that it is a hemlock tree, with all its bitter associations; the action then the interpretation, the part of the poem that is the human thought: the reflection.

Or, even briefer, the two lines

of Ezra Pound, "On a Station in the Metro":

The apparition of these  
faces in the crowd  
Petals on a wet black bough.

These are unimportant, but genuine little poems, using language, with its imagery of both sound and sense, as a means of insight.

A first century Greek writer named Longinus wrote a treatise on the sublime,

differentiating it from the beautiful, which gives us a key to what we mean by this language of which I speak: he declared that some writers were able to evoke the "language we were born with," which transports us, enabling us to escape the ordinary boundaries that restrain our vision. He didn't mean just the specific tongue Greek, Latin, Arabic etc. that people learned from their families, but the

language that we were all born with, that interior language that simply had to be activated by a specific tongue. it is the constant attempt of lyric poetry to reach that interior language and express it, even simply; and this accounts for its peculiar hold on us: Listen to some of it: these single lines

With rue my heart is laden/  
When in disgrace with  
fortune and men's eyes/  
As life what is so sweet;



what creature would not choose  
thee;/

Thou still unravished bride  
of quietness

Annihilating all that's made/  
to a green thought in a green  
shade;

The force that through the  
green fuse drives the flower/  
Drives my green age . . .

I caught this morning  
morning's minion kingdom of

daylight's dauphin. .

It is not the logic of these lines; indeed some of them seem to have a quite obscure logical meaning; it is what they evoke: they are efficacious; they do something. They speak to the heart; they give voice to the soul.

A reading from the book of Proverbs, illuminates the concept of wisdom..Listen to it:

Proverbs Ch 8:v 1-4; Ch 22

8:1 Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

8:22 The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.

8:23 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

8:24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs

abounding with water.

8:25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth--

8:26 when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.

8:27 When he established the heavens, I was there,

8:28 when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,

8:29 when he assigned to the

sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, 8:30 then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, 8:31 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

All of this is saying that there is an invisible pattern to the

universe and to everything in it; and that that pattern was made by the Creator working in harmony with his poetic spirit, which for the creative act, had to be made separate from himself. It is speaking about the design of things, the creation of the universe, the creation of the very concept of there being anything. And it's saying that before there could be anything there had to be the poetic

intuition of it. The Creator himself, with his overflowing bounty of love, had to empty himself, as we are told in one part of scripture; and He who was everything had to make something that was not himself. And the poetic imagination danced before him at every point along the way. What this is telling us is that there is a mode of creation that is vision, and that that spirit is free and joyous and inerrant.

This is what the great poets and artists the creative minds of all kinds have discovered; a glimpse of the hidden depths of things because of course they are not free in the way that the divine spirit of Wisdom is free; but theirs is a glimpse of the wisdom that underlies the existence of things. And poetry as vision, or insight, is, as Jacques Maritain has said in his study *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, the act of seeing.



Before the work of art is made, there must be the vision of it; and this is the way in which the human race participates in the divine. Coleridge said of the primary imagination that it is the "echo in the finite mind of the infinite I AM."

The secondary imagination is the making part, working with the particular medium, combining elements, balancing, contrasting. But for art that is true, there must be a

penetration into the primal design the primary imagination. Human beings are meant to see deeply into the heart of things, to find that wisdom that was present at creation. Only seeing the Creator as supreme poet can make this duality/unity understandable. For this is the way the poet works.

So poetry recovers for us our lost wisdom, the language

the human race was "born with," that we forfeited through the fall, and lost again through the tower of Babel episode and that for at least a brief moment was restored to us at Pentecost in tongues of flame.

Genuine lyric poets, then, attempt to get at that buried language, not just to express themselves, their own private emotions but to give voice to the primal pattern for their people.

If tragedy and epic find their realization among the Greeks, comedy with Dante and medieval thought (and these created a new consciousness), then lyric has its paradigmatic beginnings with the Hebrews. The Psalms, as all the authorities remind us, are the poems uttered by the ancient Hebrews confronting their God in the vast stretches of desert and the plains of their own hearts. The psalms are not only

prayers, but also the sourcebook for any genuine poet, for their lines reach a depth and a height seldom attained by other lyrics.

137

By the rivers of Babylon,  
there we sat down, yea, we  
wept,

when we remembered Zion.

2 We hanged our harps upon  
the willows in the midst  
thereof.

3 For there they that carried

us away captive required of us a song;

and they that wasted us  
required of us mirth, saying,  
Sing us one of the songs of  
Zion.

4 How shall we sing the  
LORD's song in a strange land?

These are lyric poems that do  
not simply describe; they enact  
that sense of a power that is to  
be accessed, one that was with  
God from the beginning

Wisdom, which I am calling the spirit of the lyric.

Lyric has three stages: the expression of the fullness of joy or the hope for it, or the bereavement at its loss.

The patterns of Tragedy and comedy are bequeathed to us from the Greeks; Epic from the Hebrews as well as the Greeks and Romans; lyric primarily from the Hebrews.

But these patterns, these forms, have recurred throughout history, consistently enough to reinforce the idea of their perennial character.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/  
Drives my green age . . .

What should be our next task?  
The problems with which our culture is faced in our day stem mostly from the abuses of



language that we hear all about us and I'm not speaking of obscenities, crudities, cursing, but of the prim horror called forth by statements that are deemed to be not politically correct. People are in danger of losing their jobs and reputations over having allowed such language to pass their lips. This is a real danger signal, one that literary authorities should be working to eliminate. What should be the duty of the

literary person in such a time as our own?

At the beginning of this new era, when a different cultural myth is being established, our task should be the guardianship the reclamation of the full vitality of our language.

Language should be allowed to grow on its own, like a plant, rather than to be handed down from above in any sort of mandate.

Not as philologists, not as linguistic scholars; should we be approaching our study, not even as rhetoricians in the ordinary sense of the word, but as lovers of poetry. It would then not be as logicians or rhetoricians that we should do our work. It would be as literary critics, as intelligent and informed readers who take seriously mimetic poetry (and by that we mean what society today calls "fiction,"

openly giving greater value to non-fiction. Fiction is our modern word for poetry: it implies an imagined world, a world in which a King Lear, a Hester Prynne, a Raskolnikov, a white whale can function, instructing us in ways not possible by means of fact.

INSERT HERE

We need to study what has happened to language during

this time that we have called modern the period just now ending==the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries.

We need to examine its undue emphasis on fact and the substitution of metaphor for analogy during this epoch just now passing away, Above all we need to examine the policing of language that has cut so many of our colorful terms out of our vocabulary in this epoch that

we have been calling modern so that we have no name for the era we are now entering except post-modern.

What comes after modernity?. This is the large question confronting our politicians, our institutions, our very families and communities.

The answer given by the authors contributing to this series is poetry. Homer can be

said to have founded Western civilization with the Iliad and the Odyssey; Virgil's Aeneid governed the thoughts and imagination of the Middle Ages; Dante's Divine Comedy announced the beginning of the Renaissance, and Milton's Paradise Lost thrust us into the modern world. Poetry is a powerful force in society, not only predicting the future but helping to bring it about. It is important to have a group such

as this one that holds image and symbol in their high position as learning. Our way of reading literature, putting together works of the same kind epics with epics, tragedies with tragedies generates a depth of understanding not available from reading for theme and idea (which is, I'm sorry to say, the way in which students in most schools are encouraged to view literature. When we read Homer, Shakespeare and Dante



primarily for their philosophic ideas, we are likely not to see the analogical role those ideas play in the total structure that is the poem. Philosophic readers are likely to read seeking the literal portrayal of virtue: Hector is thus considered superior to Achilles, whose divine wrath regarded as a "tantrum." Henry V and Hamlet tend to be similarly disapproved of. What poets have been telling us over and

over again, however, is that heroes who are given an insuperable task cannot always follow our ethical standards. As Caroline Gordon pointed out, the hero tends to be destructive to the city; but, as she affirmed, the city cannot exist long without the hero. Melville intended us to see Ahab as a hero; Ishmael is constantly telling us to admire him, wrongheaded as he is, violent, constantly challenging

the gods, but, like Achilles, necessary to our noble concept of the human. Similarly, Nick Carraway and Jack Burden attempt the same task on a lesser scale by making us look at Jay Gatsby and Willie Stark in a heroic light. These narrators are drawn to a man of excess, larger than life, possessing a mission, wrong headed, but heroic. But many readers insist on imposing ethical standards on a work of

literature instead of letting it teach them the reaches of the human spirit. And because such readers already have a standard of the good, they are not likely to be changed by their reading of literature but to find their own principles mirrored back to them. They disapprove of Achilles and of Hamlet, of Henry V and

A poem read in this light merely reinforces what we already

know; whereas it should take us to the roots of human action and make us see something beyond our own standards. It does not necessarily, however, like the discipline of philosophy, endow us with the intellectual skill to speak about what we saw. But it changes us. It gives us, as Jacques Maritain has said, connatural knowledge, knowledge of something as though we had experienced it ourselves. It issues into the

way we live. As Robert Penn Warren has written:

"...poetry... is knowledge...  
...what kind of knowledge am I  
talking about? I should say:  
knowledge by form. No,  
knowledge of form... the  
organic relation among all the  
elements of the work, including,  
most emphatically, those  
elements drawn from the actual  
world and charged with all the  
urgencies of actuality... The  
form is a vision of experience,

but of experience fulfilled and redeemed in knowledge, the ugly with the beautiful, the slayer with the slain, . . . a new knowledge. . . springing from the deep engagement of spirit with the world. This engagement may involve not only love for the world, but also fear and disgust; but the conquest, in form, of fear and disgust means such a sublimation that the world which once provoked the fear

and disgust may now be totally loved in the fullness of contemplation.

Great cultures are based on this inclusive, poetic way of seeing and knowing. The origins of our tradition are poetic: the Israelites found their God in speech, not in structures.

Ancient Greece was founded on the poetry of Homer and Hesiod; and the Greek Golden Age, too, was given its first



lineaments by the poetic dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Virgil's poetic cosmos lasted through the Middle Ages, crowned, finally by Dante, taking a turn thereafter with the dissemination of scholasticism. In England the world Shakespeare established was strong enough to support British culture through a couple of centuries of increasing scientific rationalism. Then

Romanticism gave organic form again to the imagination; and later the British modernists and the Southern poets and critics struggled to cram the old verities into concrete images, confronting the coming nihilism of abstraction.

They were successful in producing fine works of art but not in changing culture. The twentieth century went on to be increasingly ideological, with several major powers

attempting to found their regimes on ideas and having to exterminate in the process vast millions of human beings who didn't fit the pattern. The outcomes of societies based on ideologies rather than poetry are disastrous.

But before we attempt to describe a society based on poetry rather than ideas, we need to say what kind of a thing poetry is. As an art form, it is,

primarily, an imitation, as Aristotle says, a fiction: a made thing, a pattern, a laboratory work. It is not a realistic diagram of life. It is not a portrayal of the world as we experience it, even when it comes to moral and ethical qualities. It is an analogy, about an action, as Aristotle says, a movement in this strange complex that we call life and consciousness, for life exists not in stasis but in

motion. Poetry is an imitation of, an analogy of, a moment in time, perceived from a particular angle, fictionalized; and, as such, is as basic to our understanding of the world as is physics. But poetry captures not measurable things, not quantities, not repeatables, but unique moments that reveal meaning==as Roman Ingarden has put it, "metaphysical qualities," to which it gives form in what Hegel called a

"concrete universal." The qualities literature captures are those of the soul, those that Faulkner called the old verities. Pride, pity, courage, suffering are metaphysical qualities that we cannot examine in actual experience because we are overwhelmed by them when they happen to us. This inability to see and examine life's most intense moments accounts for the curiosity that we feel for violence as onlookers, we can

see the extremes that we would not be able to examine in our own lives; this is why people are fascinated with crimes of passion, with war and crime; for to be human, as Lambert Strether finds out in *The Ambassadors*, is to give one's imagination to life. Indeed, his advice to Chad Newsome, the young man he was sent to Europe to rescue and bring home is "Live, live." And one might agree with I. A. Richards

when in the 1920s he pointed out that the most intense living is in poetry.

We have to acknowledge that the greatest poetry, that which has the power to remake us, is not primarily edifying; rather we could call it revelatory. It is not about morality so much as about life itself, the qualities, the deep passions that move us. The other disciplines order our mental faculties; but literature provides glimpses of those



metaphysical qualities in our lives, without which we would have to say the world is dead.

Yet poetry is not content to contemplate those qualities coolly, analyzing them at a distance. Rather it offers, as Maritain has said, connatural knowledge, knowledge of experience that feels as though we ourselves have suffered it. We can then by analogy extend this wisdom into actual life, so that we have more empathy for

other people, less rigidity in our own character, less literalism in the way we interpret experience, awakened hearts. We feel for a blind self-righteous outcast who has killed his father and married his mother, for a vindictive woman who has murdered her children to spite her husband, for an old senile egotist who has cursed his most loving daughter. For none of these, in life, could we easily feel sympathy. Yet, in a

work of literature, if a sufficiently profound writer took on the subject, I'm sure we could feel some kind of empathy for a child molester football coach. And I'm maintaining that this arousal of the heart is an important, nay, a necessary, task if people are to maintain their essential humanity. Does the mode of this fundamental education of the human heart have to be fictional a work of art in

language about "the human heart in conflict with itself"? Or can it be history? Philosophy? the other liberal arts? We would hope so; but these other disciplines are more sophisticated; they come later in the course of learning because they deal with actualities. They are undertaken by the conscious and more detached analytical mind. . If a society moves from being a folk culture into a technological

society without having been shaped by poetry, it would seem to be a different kind of thing altogether. (America, though a highly technological society as it stands today, was shaped in its early formative years by the Greek and Roman classics and the Bible.)

A society constructed on poetic principles is organic, with a strong sense of community, festivals, passions. One

constructed on reason is structured, legalistic, subject to polls, the vote. And though we need this latter kind of safeguard for a good society, we need the strong underpinning of poetic communion. If we skip the founding education in poetry, we are likely to turn out societies that are not quite fitted for human imperfection, like the various utopias that are constructed from time to time-

- the one Hythloday tells us about in More's Utopia, or Swift's land of the Houhynms, or the one Dostoevsky's ridiculous man ruins with his mortal imperfections with the possible result that millions of imperfect people have to be exterminated.

In our time, the supremacy of reason (which we thought could build perfectly rational societies), long taken for

granted in the West, now finds itself under siege, what with the clash of civilizations from the outside and the redefinition of the human on the inside. And admittedly it has its vulnerabilities. Three centuries of analytic reason with an emphasis on fact and logic face an unprecedented challenge. What seems to be replacing reason on the international stage is an irrationalism capable of sending the world back into a



barbarism it deserted  
thousands of years ago.

May we not think it possible  
perhaps to see that the two  
ways-- the way of feeling and  
the way of reasoning-- are not  
just capable of being reconciled  
and supporting each other but  
of coming together in a form,  
an organic structure combining  
meaning and passion and  
expressive of being? This is  
the way of poetry; and this was  
the way of Homer and Virgil,

Aeschylus and Sophocles, Dante and Shakespeare. This was the way of the Russian writers in Dostoesky's time and the Southern agrarians and the Irish poets and playwrights. These were poetic minds, approaching culture with a sensibility shaped and governed by the art of poetry.

What can one mean in using such terms as a poetic mind? Surely we are not referring to highly emotional language or to

heavily embroidered figures of speech. Rather, we mean to be implying that there are discernible characteristics in a mind shaped by poetry that are not merely decorative.

We might even try to list some of the characteristics of poetic thinking:

1. Poetic thinking moves toward a conclusion yet revels in the path toward it, ending with a sense of the whole, a completion, whereas other

kinds of thinking are interested primarily in the conclusion. Its method is accretional rather than residual, producing a totality that transforms the parts. The portrait of Alyosha as teacher at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov* does not obliterate earlier images of him in the novel; for instance we still call to mind as valuable in itself his childhood memory of his mother, frenzied, suffering, holding him up as a three year

old child to the ikon of the Blessed Mother. And the grown man remembers a ray of light streaming in from a window and illuminating the scene. But the image is not, as in life, simply on the reader's part a memory; it is a vitally alive unit of meaning that one places beside the later portrait of Alyosha as teacher. The early image is not merely instrumental, meant to lead to the mature young man; instead, at the same time that it

participates in a sequence it has an existential reality like figures on an urn. Perhaps this is only to say that literature is both a temporal and a spatial art. But the form to which it brings its material is a new form, a redeemed form, that both endures and transcends time.

2. So that in the same instance that it presents a form, it provides an awareness of multiplicity, with each part

maintaining its identity even after the conclusion has been reached; it thus has room for incongruous elements, for the grotesque, the apparently unnecessary, the polyphonic; the exorbitant; the good, the bad, the ugly.

3. Yet it has a sense of harmony, so that the parts interact and modify each other;

4. Poetry has a sensuousness; it makes use of the earthy, the visceral, the bodily,

gathering it up, like Bottom in the arms of the Fairy Queen;

5. It possesses a self-organizing quality so that the material itself is allowed at least to some degree to find its own shape (as opposed to being clearly structured, which is the mark of conscious construction)

6. Over it hovers a sense of meaning as contained in a form. (What do we mean by meaning?) We mean that another level of being is indicated; the whole



adds up to a predicate of some sort about a larger, more inclusive reality; as Coleridge said of the symbol, it partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible

Metaphor: an eye for resemblances between essentially unlike things;

Analogy: the invisible things are known by the things that are seen.

Dante's polysemousness is a delineation of the different

analogical senses in a poetic work:

literal (Actual)

Allegorical

(Obvious abstraction)

Tropological (Moral)

Anagogical (Spiritual)

the poetic image evokes a metaphysical sense

7. Clarity: the whole has radiance, beauty, incandescence beyond itself;

Beauty: the sharp sting of truth expressed in a form: a

surplus beyond meaning and the inclusion of discordant materials as well as ornamentation, elegance, opulence.

8. Correspondences (patterns, fractals) within the field of consciousness and in existence itself.

9. what R P Warren called "impurities," irony, discrepancy, discordancy, grotesquerie, contradiction, surplus, ugliness. . .without

distorting the aims of the whole.

10. And finally "invisible presences," realities not accessible by the senses that nonetheless suffuse our awareness of life. Horror, pain, love, sympathy, pity, terror, repulsion, delight . . .

These qualities I have listed should be noted as the characteristics of a poetic understanding of reality, which

may or may not produce actual poems in language but should produce the gracious life.

(empathy, courtesy, codes of behavior, pietas.)

In his introduction to the Agrarian manifesto (a desperate attempt by a group of poets to warn about the social effects of industrialism) John Crowe Ransom wrote, "religion and the arts can hardly hope to flourish" in such a society. . . . " Nor can the

"amenities of life" "such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, romantic love . . . the social exchanges which reveal and develop sensibility in human affairs."

"The social exchanges which reveal and develop sensibility in human affairs" flourish only in a society that embodies in some sense a poetic conception of life.

The contrast between the

analytic, or reductive vision and the fulness of the poetic one is what most modern fiction is about: *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Beast in the Jungle*, *Absalom, Absalom*, *Light in August*, Joyce's classic story "The Dead," *One Hundred Years of Solitude* . . . the fiction of most of the modern Southern and Latin American writers.

Was not the America of the

past a combination of the two ways of being? its churches, families, and schools being societies based on poetic principles and government on reason? And do we not see in our time, with the extreme polarization of ideology on both sides, a tendency to subsume everything under the power of government, leaving only a kind of carnivalia outside?

The founding fathers studied not only Plato and Aristotle, but



Homer and Virgil. Isn't what's wrong with our government today that it has no understanding of the poetic way?--- That it considers the goal of education to be high quantitative scores for all learners, even on the college level?

Could we not say that it is not villainous intent, not lies, not even stupidity, but bad education that accounts for most of our troubles today in

the civilized world education that has taken no note of the qualities that derive only from a poetic outlook..

There is indeed in our time a threat to reasoned government. If the movement to desert rationalism means that we are moving into an age that will be more communal and tactile--- dominated by the shape, the pattern, the insight the multiple voices of poetry, then we could quite likely have

another great age of faith and of the arts. For the poetic mind encourages faith and manners, as well as a cultivation of beauty. But if the desertion of reason in our time is simply a further intensification of the analytical mode of thought, it will stifle faith and if carried to its extreme, will finally eliminate any mark of religious sentiment from public life altogether, considering it to be what the 18th century

disapprovingly called enthusiasm, the 19th and 20th superstition, and our own 21st, fundamentalism which is coming to be thought of as the source of terrorism.

I have meant this talk to be leading around to the necessity of poetry in the education of the young and to reinforce the ever greater importance of a poetic view of the world, which seems to many of us to be

growing increasingly irrelevant to our society at large. This in the end is why it of crucial importance to teach poetry to restore it to its place as knowledge in itself, not merely a container and an illustrator of other kinds of knowledge (theology, philosophy, psychology, history)---so that we may work toward building an earthly regime in which humanity can take on its full stature, I want to end on a

positive note, however, rejoicing at the way in which literature has shaped the Dallas Institute curriculum and is being disseminated in the lives of all of you. The task of continuing it is great.

This is the role given to a group such as this; to honor and to practice as best we can the poetic way while we wait in joyful hope for the coming of the kingdom.