



RECLAIMING THE
CHRISTIAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

LITERATURE

A STUDENT'S

GUIDE

Louis Markos

Series Editor: David S. Dockery

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INTRODUCTION

Why Literature Matters

I mean to shoot straight in this book, and I will therefore begin—rather than end—by addressing the million-dollar question: What does studying literature have to do with real life? That’s a question, almost always asked rhetorically, that many biology, engineering, and business majors like to tease English majors with. And yet, ironically, I have found that the people who are best able to answer the question are not the English majors themselves but doctors, engineers, and businessmen in the fifth or sixth decade of their lives.

No need to find an eager sophomore devouring a Shakespeare play on the quadrangle. Just ask a successful and seasoned surgeon or chemist or investment banker, and he will tell you how vital the life of the mind is. He will tell you that to be a full and balanced human being one needs to struggle with issues, ideas, and images that lie outside the specialized boundaries of one’s chosen profession. True, one can achieve this balance in part by wrestling with art, music, history, philosophy, religion, and political science, but there is something about literature that personalizes and dramatizes the wrestling—that beckons the reader to enter into the arena.

It is a good thing to study the history, the cathedrals, and the scholasticism of the High Middle Ages, but it is a better thing to read the “General Prologue” to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. To do the latter is to meet, to dialogue, to interact with late fourteenth-century England in all its glory, strangeness, and diversity. Once we have done so, we can no longer hold the men and women who lived in that time and place at arm’s length. They are now members of

our community, old friends and sparring partners with whom we have something very much like a relationship.

I have devoted many years to studying the archeology of Mycenaean Greece, the political structures of Golden Age Athens, and the history of the Roman Republic and Empire, but I *know* the people of those bygone eras because I have immersed myself in the epics of Homer, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the poetry of Virgil and Ovid. And the same holds true for the medieval Florentines of Dante, the Elizabethan Englanders of Shakespeare, and the Victorian Londoners of Charles Dickens. Literature holds up a mirror to life, and, in that mirror, it captures—or, better, holds in suspension—the subtle weave of beliefs and actions and passions that make us human.

But there is more! And that more reveals the true mystery behind great literature. The masterpieces that make up the Western literary canon present us, *simultaneously*, with the specific and the general, concrete details and universal themes, particular people living in a particular place and time, and transcendent character types that all readers at all times recognize immediately. They are, to paraphrase a line originally used of Shakespeare, not only of an age but for all time.

The orthodox believer who accepts the authority of Scripture will learn as much as he can about first-century Palestine, for the more he knows about the culture in which the early church was born, the more he will understand and profit from the letters of St. Paul. But he will not therefore reduce the epistles to mere products of Paul's socioeconomic milieu. As one of the inspired authors of the New Testament, Paul was more than a gifted Pharisee: he was one of God's chosen vessels through which revealed, eternal truths found their way into our fallen, time-and-space-bound world. Paul's letters hold in tension truths that partake of a local, provincial color while yet embodying transcendent, permanent Meaning.

In an analogous, rather than identical, way, great authors

from Homer to Virgil to Dante to Shakespeare reach, through the almost mystical power of their art, transcendent truths of permanent value. Though not inspired in the same direct way as Paul, Moses, and the other authors of the biblical canon, the authors of the literary canon—those to whom we ascribe the exalted title of “genius”—seem to have gained access to a fount of inspiration that, though not divine, is nevertheless supernatural. Even today, we speak of the great poets as being inspired by the Muse, or as having drunk from the Pierian Spring of the Muses. We recognize that they are tapping a source that lies somewhere beyond the narrow confines of their historical moment, and though we do not read their poems as prophecies, we treat them as prophetic in some way. And we are, I believe, right to do so.

I have always found it terribly ironic that people in the natural and social sciences will frequently claim that what they teach is more *true* than what literature teaches. I have often wondered how such people define the word *true*. Certainly one of the most essential qualities of truth is that it lasts, that it does not change radically from age to age and generation to generation, that it persists, endures, abides—which is precisely what does *not* happen in the sciences. Every fifty years—today it is more like every twenty—scientists reject the old paradigm in favor of a new one. The social sciences change even more rapidly, with one pedagogy giving way in quick succession to three others, and with psychology and sociology defining and redefining family, gender, and sexuality with dizzying speed. And when the paradigm shifts in these disciplines, those who still cling to the previous one are often dismissed as old-fashioned and backward. Of course, most of these old-fashioned scholars treated the “true believers” in the paradigm before *them* as equally primitive and backward, so perhaps there is justice (if not truth) in the whole cyclical game.

Contrast all this with the *Iliad* or *Oedipus* or *Aeneid* or *Inferno* or *Hamlet*. These works are as true today as they were when they

were written. Indeed, our age stands just as close to, and just as far away from, these works as did the contemporaries of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare. Granted, the theories of the radical literary critics—most of whom are social scientists in humanistic clothing—do not share in the permanence of the classic works that they have spent the last half century deconstructing. Modernist and postmodernist readings of the Great Books have veered back and forth in an almost maddening dance, but the works themselves continue to delight, to instruct, to mean.

HUMANIZING TECHNOLOGY

“Very well,” answers the modern reader, “I will concede that the classic works of literature have endured for quite some time now, but what does that matter to someone living in the twenty-first century? We live in a new age of technology and specialization that has rendered the old age of literature obsolete.” Though not often stated so directly, the criticism is a ubiquitous one that must be addressed.

Over the last several decades, a number of factors have worked together to push the study of great literature to the margins. The ever-growing, all-consuming presence of Internet and digital systems, not to mention the ever-expanding emphasis on visual media, has disrupted the dominance of printed (and *carefully composed*) material as our main vehicle of communication. The amassing of endless databases has privileged the skills of reason and analysis over those of imagination and synthesis. The ever-widening demand for a technically specialized workforce has increased the reputation of vocational learning at the expense of traditional liberal arts universities that offer a core curriculum grounded in the humanities in general and literature in particular. Perhaps most troubling of all, the persistent focus on present gratification and future progress has tended to cut us off from our past, from our traditions, from those deep roots that extend back

through the greatest works of the greatest minds. And these forces are often just as strong *within* the church as they are outside of it. In the face of such overwhelming forces, sincerity loses its human face, truth becomes diluted into efficiency, and design becomes but an impersonal, mechanical facsimile of that grander cosmic order celebrated by Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton.

Given such a state of affairs, the burden falls on the teachers and students of the literary canon to maintain a dialogue with the custodians of these great technological forces and to offer ourselves as midwives in a new and glorious birth through which even technology can become humanized and function as a friend to man's endless search for self-growth and awareness. Indeed, at the very start of the Industrial Revolution, Romantic poet William Wordsworth, in his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800), prophesied: "If the time should ever come when what is now called science . . . shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man." Literature need not, and should not, reject scientific and technological progress out of hand. Such great poets as Donne, Pope, and Tennyson were strongly conversant in the scientific advances of their day and wrestled with those advances in their poetry—and by wrestling, humanized them.

A generation after Wordsworth, a more extreme Romantic poet named Percy Bysshe Shelley went even further in asserting the power of poetry to humanize the natural and social sciences. In his "Defense of Poetry," Shelley argues vigorously for the central role of poetry and creative thought in an age of progress. "We have," he writes, "more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies . . . our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest." What we need now, he contends, is a power, a force

that can synthesize this sea of discrete facts into something tangible, something knowable. The poetic faculty, he argues,

engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange [this sea of facts] according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good. The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature.

I suggested earlier that without literature we cannot fully appreciate or understand the past. Shelley here goes further to suggest that without literature we cannot understand the present or the future. Literature, especially poetry, has the power—and the *anointing*, I would add—to explain ourselves to ourselves. That need is not vitiated by the recent and unprecedented advances in science and technology; to the contrary, it is increased. The twin growth of digital technologies (not only the Internet, but cell phones as well) and of specialization (not only in the natural and social sciences, but in the arts and humanities as well) has left us with an amorphous glut of information. We cannot live in such a vast sea of discrete, unassimilated, often anti-humanistic facts. We must make sense of the facts, must synthesize them somehow with what our race has learned about God, man, and the universe. Aside from the Bible itself—which is, in any case, composed of over a dozen different literary genres, especially poetry—literature is one of our best tools and guides for achieving this grand and humanizing synthesis.

THINKING LIKE A POET

It will be my goal in the chapters that follow to provide a foundation for understanding and appreciating poetry: and let me make it clear at the outset that my focus will be almost exclusively on

poetry. Until quite recently, poetry has been privileged above prose as a higher, and even more spiritual, form of literary writing, and most who have written in defense of literature—from Aristotle to Sidney to Shelley—have written in defense of poetry. Indeed, though I have titled this introduction “Why Literature Matters,” you will note that my real thrust has been to argue that *poetry* matters.

So poetry it is, but if all I can do in this book is convince you that poetry matters, I will not be satisfied. I mean to inspire you to think *like* a poet, to view the world aesthetically rather than scientifically, imaginatively rather than rationally, intuitively rather than logically. That is not to say that I want you to abandon the head in favor of the heart or the intellect in favor of the emotions, but it is to say that I expect from you a willingness to embrace poetry on its own unique terms—terms that call for *both* spontaneity and precision, inspiration and craftsmanship. Accordingly, I will begin with two “brass tacks” chapters on prosody (rhythm and rhyme) and figurative language. Rather than provide an encyclopedic overview of these topics, I shall focus on defining key terms and concepts and describing how and why poets work within fixed metrical schemes and in accordance with a metaphorical view of the world.

Having covered the building blocks of poetry, I will move on to the heart and soul of my book: a lengthy and detailed survey of Europe’s major aesthetic ages and the particular authors, genres, themes, and approaches that dominated those ages: the Classical, the Medieval, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Romantic, and the Victorian and early modern. This chapter will be followed in turn by a final, theory-based chapter in which I will survey the major texts and phases of literary criticism and show how each phase sought, in its own way, to defend poetry from its Platonic and/or Christian detractors. I will conclude by briefly critiquing three postmodern schools of theory that have, I believe, drawn students not toward great literature but away from it.

I also hope, over the course of this book, to convince Christian students and teachers that they, far from being suspicious of poetry or considering it frivolous, should be in the front lines of poetry's defenders. It is those who believe in the Bible as the inspired Word of God and who believe that Jesus himself is the incarnate Word of God who are best poised to champion the truth-giving potential of all poetry, whether sacred or secular.

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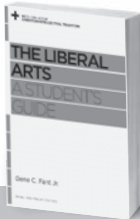
I would like to express my special thanks to Houston Baptist University for awarding me the Robert H. Ray Chair in humanities and the title of scholar-in-residence. The extra time provided me by the chair and the title has made it possible for me to complete this book. I would also like to thank Houston Baptist University for inviting me to teach the freshman classical Christian curriculum (Homer to Dante) for our new Honors College, a position that has allowed me to immerse myself and my students in the glories of the Classical and early Christian Age.



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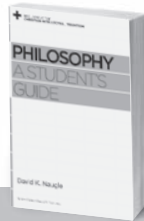
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“Not only students will benefit from this learned and perceptive overview, but also mature scholars of the discipline will find here a helpful and clarifying aid.”

Louise Cowan, Professor of Literature, University of Dallas

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