

WRITE LIKE A HUMAN

The Poima Manifesto



scott postma

Write Like a Human

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself. - Leo Tolstoy

HEAPS OF tailings can be found strewn outside deep shafts where not a few prospectors have sought to discover the rich vein that made C.S. Lewis one of the most popular writers of the twentieth century and his corpus worth its weight in gold.¹ It is no mean litotes to say that his works have not ceased producing less in our modern world than another classic author from another period in history. More than sixty years after his death, his best-selling *Chronicles of Narnia* novels have sold more than 100 million copies and three of the seven have been made into major motion pictures. *Mere Christianity*, the edited transcripts of his wartime broadcasts on Christian faith, remains a top anchor in the vast chasm of Christian apologetics. The good philosophy set forth in *The Weight of Glory* and *The Abolition of Man* is still answering modernity's bad philosophy about man's conquest of nature. And favorites like *Miracles*, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, and *The Problem of Pain* are grubstake for twenty-first century metaphysical prospectors. Lewis's writings and abilities deserve exploring because—pardon the momentary shift in metaphors—as the author of Hebrews says of Abel, “though he died, he still speaks.” A dead writer who still speaks is the most hopeful prospect a writer looking for a model to imitate can find. This is why hordes of writers, educators, and theologians have flooded to Lewis as a Sutter's Mill of English literature for six consecutive decades. Like the forty-niners of the California gold rush, anyone with the itch to write or tell a story has at some point dug into Lewis hoping to stake a claim and strike it rich in literary ore. Another way of saying this is there is no shortage of writers who would like to get their hands on Lewis's secret sauce. They want to discover the mystery of his mojo so they too can perform the mysterious feat of speaking even after they've died.

The question is whether or not such ore can actually be extracted. I once heard Michael Ward say something to the effect that Lewis was

blessed to be born in the right time and endowed with the right abilities, that it was a sovereign work of God that he was the man of his time. When *Decision Magazine* asked Lewis in an interview shortly before his death how a writer could learn to write “strong enough to influence our generation,” he replied: “There is no formula in these matters. I have no recipe, no tablets. Writers are trained in so many individual ways that it is not for us to prescribe.”²² If even Lewis cannot explain his ability, is it possible writers are just wasting time digging where they can never hit pay dirt? I’m not as easily dissuaded as R.U. Harby. So in this chapter, we’ll mine some of the reasons for C.S. Lewis’s success as a writer and show that it is due to something more than his own abilities—but not something less than them. By analyzing some of the thoughts and ideas from his published works along with some other writers not usually associated with Lewis, but who clearly influenced him, we’ll see how the writing that makes him so influential is something that flows more from who he is as a person than from his skill as a writer--which is not to say, by any means, his skill as a writer is something to be discounted. When it comes to his abilities and influence, C.S. Lewis is not a passive recipient of chance; he is a learned man, a polymath, who intentionally developed himself. Yet the success and platform he achieves is something he leaves entirely in the hands of the sovereign Poet of the universe.

I think it was Peter Kreeft who first christened C.S. Lewis “the Romantic Rationalist.”²³ I am not aware of anyone who had used the term before him. Regardless of where the credit lays for the title, it is an astute and accurate description of the man, and I will draw on that moniker for the duration. To understand the implications it makes about C.S. Lewis the man—and thus C.S. Lewis, the writer—one must understand the meaning of both *romantic* and *rationalist* in more than simple dictionary terms. More precisely, one must understand the relationship of imagination and emotion to intellect and reason. Therefore, we will consider the meaning and way in which Lewis is a romantic, the meaning and way in which he is a rationalist, and the way in which those two terms which are normally divorced in literature, came to be married in Lewis. Finally, we will discuss how those ideas shape him into such an extraordinary writer.

One of the works that best express his philosophical approach to life, his weltanschauung, is *The Abolition of Man*. It is not insignificant that in

this important work Lewis references both Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley, two influential romantic poets. When he discusses Gaius and Titius's wrong-headed approach to education, he references Coleridge's "Falls of Clyde" and Shelley's Aeolian Lyre metaphor from *A Defense of Poetry*. In 1798, Coleridge, along with William Wordsworth, published the famed *Lyrical Ballads*, the "premiere volume of English Romanticism," which, from a literary critic's view, birthed the romantic era.⁴ In 1821, just a year before he drowned, Shelley wrote his *A Defense of Poetry* in response to Thomas Love Peacock's *The Four Ages of Poetry*. However, it was only published posthumously in 1840 by his widow, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, famed author of *Frankenstein*. It would not be a stretch to argue the Romantic period became debilitated in 1870 and finally breathed its last during the lifetime of the transitional poet, Lord Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892)—the last of the English romantics and the first of the Victorians. Yet giving a title like "Romantic Rationalist" to a man born in 1898 is an implicit argument that the romantic period never succumbed, but simply swooned and revived a half-century later, baptized and smoking a pipe.

To deem Lewis a romantic is to recognize the value he places on emotion and imagination—hallmarks of the romantic poets. To deem him a rationalist is to recognize the value he places on human reason—a hallmark of the truth-seeking philosophers. Romantic poetry elevates imagination and feeling over imitation and reason. In the preface to *Lyric Ballads*, Wordsworth explains,

Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.⁵

Rationalists, or philosophers, generally speaking, elevate truth and the human faculty of identifying truth, called reason, above poetry or imagination. In *The Republic*, Plato's Socrates says, "But the one who feels no distaste in sampling every study, and who attacks his task of learning gladly and cannot get enough of it, him we shall justly pronounce the lover of

wisdom, the philosopher, shall we not?"⁶ He further says of poetry, "it was then fitting for us to send it away from the city on account of its character... there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry."⁷ Shelley is fully aware of this distinction when, in *A Defense of Poetry*, he defines reason as the "mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another."⁸ By this he means reason is the "principle of analysis, and its action regards the relations of things simply as relations."⁹ Imagination, he says, on the other hand, is the activity of the "mind acting upon those thoughts [the ones produced by reason] so as to color them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity."¹⁰ This second principle is synthesis, and it speaks to the work of the mind on "those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself."¹¹ (Interestingly, in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge also uses the principle of "synthesis" to explain the idea of imagination.¹²) In this context, Shelley is only interested in reason as a means by which imagination can be contrasted and thus elevated against its rational counterpart. As it is thus distinguished from reason, Shelley sees poetry as "the expression of the imagination."¹³ To the romantic, imagination and emotion are everything and reason was the cause of the frightening, but economically glorious, development of machinery and factories which launched the Industrial Revolution. And it was enlightened reason that dashed the hope of man's ability to save himself by the succor of the faculty when the French Revolution face-planted and found a promising hand up from the all-too-willing, but ill-fated tyrant, Napoleon. All these, in various ways, contributed to the romantic's revolt against mankind's exalted reason. It was a Dionysian reaction to an Apollonian era, to frame it in Nietzschean thought.¹⁴

To get at the good stuff, the rich ore, we must dig even deeper into this shaft. The romantics viewed the poet and poetry as something more than words put to rhyme and meter. Shelley says the poet is a genius who, being privy to the melody, creates poetry that

lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thence forward in the minds of those who

once have contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists.¹⁵

He further argues the poet and the philosopher are not different, but the same. He draws them under the same umbrella, so to speak, by bringing philosophers into the company of poets. He says Plato was a poet, but one who rejected the meters of the day that would hinder his ability to "kindle a harmony in thoughts devised of shape and action, and he forbore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style."¹⁶ In the spirit of romanticism, poets, then, are more than lyricists who put words to meter, or prose to work, reasoning out philosophical truth; they are prophets, not prognosticators in a superstitious, foretelling sense, but in the sense that they are truth-tellers, "legislators,"¹⁷ and their poetry "is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth."¹⁸ Shelley calls poets the "hierophants of an apprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves.... the unacknowledged legislators of the world."¹⁹ To the romantic, a poet is a kind of priest, a mediator of otherworldly mysteries; he is a mirror, an instrument that makes the unseen, seeable; the poet himself is a sort of incarnate metaphor, a kind of logos, revealing the previously unrevealed; a poet is a trumpet, a truth-teller blowing the battle clarion for the advancement of change; he is even a god, an unmoved mover who creates new worlds. And lest one think Shelley's claim truly incredible, it was far from novel. Sir Philip Sidney, in his work, *An Apology for Poetry*, wrote similarly more than two hundred years previous. He wrote that "among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or prophet, as by his conjoined words, *vaticinium* and *vaticinari*, is manifest; so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestow upon this heart-ravishing knowledge."²⁰ Further, Aristotle made a similar, if not the foundational, assertion upon which Shelley, Sidney, and, to some extent, Lewis, asserted their fantastic claim about the rank of poets and their poetry. In book nine of *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that poetry is superior and more philosophical than even history. He states,

The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse—you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters²¹

From the above illustrations, the resemblances are too striking to deny. Plus it is tough to argue with DNA. Lewis was kin to the romantics, perhaps a first cousin twice removed, but kin nonetheless. What made him different than his cousins, however, was the fact that he was a rational romantic. While Lewis shares the romantic view that emotion and imagination are fundamental elements of being human, he sees them as functioning in a complementary role alongside reason. Lewis believes emotion and imagination are vital to healthy thinking. For example, in one of his more obscure essays, “Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare,” Lewis, while discussing the role of metaphor in poetry or “truth-telling,” to use a Shelleyan term, gives us a clear picture of his view on the relationship of imagination and reason:

It will have escaped no one that in such a scale of writers the poets will take the highest place; and among the poets those who have at once the tenderest care for old words and the surest instinct for the creation of new metaphors. But it must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause

of truth, but its condition. It is, I confess, undeniable that such a view indirectly implies a kind of truth or rightness in the imagination itself. I said at the outset that the truth we won by metaphor could not be greater than the truth of the metaphor itself; and we have seen since that all our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor. And thence, I confess, it does follow that if our thinking is ever true, then the metaphors by which we think must have been good metaphors. It does follow that if those original equations, between good and light, or evil and dark, between breath and soul and all the others, were from the beginning arbitrary and fanciful—if there is not, in fact, a kind of psycho-physical parallelism (or more) in the universe—then all our thinking is nonsensical. And so, admittedly, the view I have taken has metaphysical implications. But so has every view.²²

Again, it is not insignificant that, in the passage just offered, Lewis says, “in such a scale of writers the poets will take the highest place.” He goes on to commend the poets as “those who have at once the tenderest care for old words and the surest instinct for the creation of new metaphors.” This is expressly romantic language. However, Lewis does not carry his romantic worldview nearly as far as Coleridge or Shelley because he does not discount reason to the extent they do (Shelley goes much further in discounting reason than Wordsworth or Coleridge does). As was demonstrated in “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” Lewis held strong opinions that the organs of reason and imagination were complementary and did not stand in conflict with one another. For Shelley, reason and imagination were estranged; for Lewis reason and imagination were lovers joined in a holy matrimony.

Returning to *The Abolition of Man*, this can further be seen where Lewis pushes back against the authors of The Green Book, whom he believes are rightly trying to help students recognize and guard against sentimental propaganda, but are strongly misguided and myopic in their attempt, by emphasizing the need for “‘ordinate affections’ or ‘just sentiments’”²³ He writes,

I think Gaius and Titius may have honestly misunderstood

the pressing educational need of the moment. They see a world around them swayed by emotional propaganda—they have learned from tradition that youth is sentimental—and they conclude that the best thing they can do is to fortify the minds of young people against emotion. My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments.²⁴

The romantic part of Lewis sees the need to irrigate deserts with just sentiments as a defense against false sentiments. He does not believe in cutting down jungles altogether. To him, emotion versus reason is not a zero sum contest; they are complementary. It is not an either/or approach; it is a both/and approach.

The question, then, is how Lewis marries these two that have been opposed to each other for so many generations. Lewis's organ of reason, complementing his organ of imagination, is nourished by what the Chinese call the Tao. By Tao, Lewis means "The doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are."²⁵ To Lewis, the quality of a thing "demands a certain response from us whether we make it or not.... And because our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order... emotional states can be in harmony or out of harmony with reason."²⁶ In other words, Lewis affirms natural law. And for him, reason, imagination, and emotion have to work together for there to be harmony. To drive the point home, Lewis reaches back to Plato to demonstrate the importance and function of the various "organs" of the soul. The epithymatic organ of the soul, a man's appetite for bed and table, must be kept in check by the noetic organ, man's reason, by the means of, or through the power of, the thymatic organ, man's "spirited element." In other words, "The head rules the belly through the chest," he says.²⁷ Seeing the ore Lewis digs up in the ancient platonic mine, it is interesting to me that few other prospectors—

at least from what I have been able to find—have done more digging in this drift. Plato himself left us a treasure map to a rich vein he himself was unable to excavate. In Book X of *The Republic*, Socrates says to Glaucon concerning the exile of poetry from the rational city:

“But nevertheless let it be declared that, if the mimetic and dulcet poetry can show any reason for her existence in a well-governed state, we would gladly admit her, since we ourselves are very conscious of her spell. But all the same it would be impious to betray what we believe to be the truth. Is not that so, friend? Do not you yourself feel her magic and especially when Homer is her interpreter?”

“Greatly.”

“Then may she not justly return from this exile after she has pleaded her defense, whether in lyric or other measure?”

“By all means.”

“And we would allow her advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her cause in prose without metre, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man. And we shall listen benevolently, for it will be clear gain for us if it can be shown that she bestows not only pleasure but benefit.”²⁸

In other words, Plato is saying that if there ever comes a time when there is a poetry that is both pleasant and beneficial to “a well-ordered city and all the life of man,” we should let it back into the city. He goes on to explain that a poetry that is charming and beneficial should be able to make an apology for itself and demonstrate that it is “best and truest.”²⁹ Perhaps the reason Lewis could marry imagination and reason was because he had discovered the poetry that was both pleasant and beneficial to a well-ordered city and all the life of man. In a talk given to the Oxford Socratic Club, published in *The Weight of Glory* and titled “Is Theology Poetry?” Lewis famously said, “Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see by it, but because by it I see

everything else.”³⁰ It’s worth noting some find Lewis aberrant in some of his secondary and tertiary theology, but those views aside, it seems it was the basic tenets of the faith, the gospel, that worked out in Lewis the ability to recognize the organ of imagination at work in harmony with, and not against, the organ of reason. Only in the gospel mythos can the dead live again. Only in the gospel mythos can sinful man be reconciled to a holy God. Only in the gospel mythos can poetry and philosophy be reconciled to live in harmony in the city of man. Lewis the man was shaped, and thus Lewis the writer was informed by the reconciling work of the gospel.

Having explored and discussed the basic aspects of the ideology that shaped Lewis, namely that he was a rational romantic—and the most important part of his worldview being his belief in Christianity—two things remain before we wrap up. First, regarding Lewis’s abilities as a writer, what he said was true: “There is no formula in these matters.”³¹ As is true of all literature, it was Lewis’s ideologies that informed his writing in a significant way. It was how he saw the world through the gospel’s reconciliation of his reason with his imagination and ordinate affections that afforded him, in the words of Shelley, the poet’s legislative power. Interestingly, Gyorgy Lukacs, is very helpful on this point. In an essay titled, “The Ideology of Modernism,” he notes that Joyce’s “stream-of-consciousness technique is no stylistic device.”³² It is the “part and parcel of the aesthetic ambition”³³ that informs his work. What he means is the writing techniques used are not a master’s trick of the literary trade, so to speak. It is actually much deeper than that; it is the undergirding, the scaffolding, the roots giving life to the solitary ideology that drives the modernist’s literary aesthetic. Lukacs says,

Let me say here that, in any work of art, perspective is of over-riding importance. It determines the course and content; it draws together the threads of the narration; it enables the artist to choose between the important and the superficial, the crucial and the episodic. The direction in which the characters develop is determined by perspective...³⁴

Of course this is true of Christian literature as well. The ideology will inform the perspective of the artist’s work. What made Lewis’s writing both

weighty and winsome was the fact that, as a Christian, he was both rational and imaginative. Certainly, he was a good wordsmith and grammarian, but more than this, he was a poet in the romantic sense. In this sense, poets are different from other men. While all men observe, imagine—imitate natural objects in the mind (create phantasms)—and express their imitations, some have a greater sense of “approximation to the beautiful” from which the highest delight will result, and “those in whom it exists in excess are poets.”³⁵ Recall how Lewis references Shelley in *The Abolition of Man*. Shelley likens the poet to an Aeolian lyre in that his own person is “an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alterations of an ever-changing wind...which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody.”³⁶ In other words, in the Romantic view, poets are the instruments on which the impulses of “some unseen Power,” both internal and external, blow against, producing the melodies of imagination.³⁷ And remember, his poetry “lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar... [and makes] memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists.”³⁸ If it is true that the pen is mightier than the sword, then in the hands of Lewis, it is Excalibur!

This brings us along to the final thought, the idea that the success and platform Lewis achieved was something that was entirely in the hands of the Sovereign Poet of the Universe. Romantics like Coleridge and Shelley had varying religious views. For example, Shelley, having cast off the Trinitarian God of the church, had taken up nature as his god. For him, poets are nature’s elect and are inspired to write poetry as truth-tellers. His parakletos is what he calls the “Spirit of Beauty” in his “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” It could be argued that the Spirit of Beauty and Shelley’s experience with the spirit are nothing more than metaphorical. And such an argument certainly would be rational if it were not for the fact that he made a distinct and purposed divorcement of reason from imagination in his *Defense* and then followed up with the assertion that the poet creates poetry unconsciously by the moving of a mysterious spirit of inspiration and not by his own efforts. Given the spirit of Shelley’s age, his definitive and purposed definition of poetry, and the qualifying expressions in his poetic works, it seems one would be amiss to discount Shelley’s explanation as simply metaphorical. In a word, Shelley believes poets are the unacknowledged

legislators of the world because he believes they are the divine prophets of the Spirit of Beauty.

This is enlightening in view of Lewis's influence as a legislating poet, so to speak. In *The Problem of Pain*, he writes, "We believe that the Holy Spirit can be really present and operative in the human spirit, but we do not, like the Pantheists, take this to mean that we are 'parts' or 'modifications' or 'appearances' of God."³⁹ The similarity between Shelley and Lewis as legislating poets under the influence of a spirit is striking. But the difference is even more striking. When speaking of the Spirit as being at work, Lewis is vigilant about disassociating from pantheists, thus distancing himself from the likes of Shelley. Yet, Lewis rightly maintains that the Holy Spirit is at work in the human spirit. As a believer and follower of Christ, Lewis belongs to God; he is a poet under the influence and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. And as a poet under such influence, he is to the modern world what Ransom is to *Perelandra* or Raphael is to Adam in Milton's Eden—an admonishing angel, a truth-telling poet with his finger on the pulse of the culture. In an article titled "Is Progress Possible?" Lewis writes, "I care far more how humanity lives than how long. Progress, for me, means increasing goodness and happiness of individual lives."⁴⁰ Here Lewis acknowledges his place as a Christian humanist seeking the "goodness and happiness" of people over the longevity of our existence. These lines from Raphael in Milton's, *Paradise Lost*, could have just as easily come from Lewis's lips to his generation:

Be strong, live happy, and love, but first of all
Him whom to love is to obey, and keep
His great command; take heed lest Passion sway
Thy Judgement to do aught, which else free Will
Would not admit; thine and of all thy Sons
The weal or woe in thee is plac't; beware.
I in thy persevering shall rejoice,
And all the Blest: stand fast....⁴¹

Today words clutter the blogosphere and the bookshelf the way pyrite clutters mountain streams and coal beds. With the emergence of the Internet and self-publishing venues, the mining for and exchange of valuable

ideas has become easier than ever—Johannes Gutenberg and Jeff Bezos be thanked. But since every good action has a potentially equal and opposite reaction, we should not be surprised when we look around the literary landscape and find it looking more like an old west mining camp replete with gunslingers, whores, and card sharks than a medieval university library abundant with regal tomes of venerable wisdom. The minecart that carries the bad ideas for which we crinkle our noses and furrow our brows rides on the same tracks that allows for the proliferation of good ideas for which we give thanks and rejoice. It is rough and noisy in the literary world. Evangelists and educators trying to make a difference on this frontier can expect to be crowded and harassed by gamblers and gunslingers hustling a piece of the action before the boomtown turns ghost town. And contrary to the Internet infomercials promising prospective writers who follow their plan a chillaxed life on some white sandy beach with a tropical sunset on the horizon and a bottomless umbrella drink in hand, sick skills and a story worth telling won't guarantee that somebody is listening—or buying. Plenty of writers, hoping to strike the mother lode, have exhausted themselves and their resources and died broke and unknown. What does all this mean? It means this is the chance prospectors take. Writers who fall tail over teakettle for a shot at wielding the same influence as C.S. Lewis cannot be satisfied with just learning to write well. Certainly they must have nothing less than the skills and abilities Lewis procured by years of practice, but also nothing less than a poetry that can marry imagination and reason, and the ability to recognize fool's gold—and dodge bullets.

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"Write Like A Human" is an excerpt from my forthcoming book, *The Poiema Manifesto: Discover Your Significance, Create Meaningful Art, and Make a Difference That Actually Matters*.

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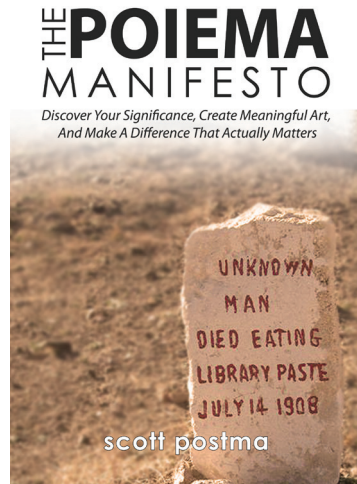
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End Notes

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