

ALIENATION AND LOVE: CREATING A REDEMPTIVE HERMENEUTICS
FROM THE WORK OF AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

By

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I will attempt to outline a practicable method of literary interpretation from a Christian perspective, using the discussions of writing, reading, and exegesis put forth by Augustine of Hippo in two of his works—the *Confessions* and *On Christian Doctrine*. By “practicable,” I mean a method that silences both the criticism of secular academics who say that the Christian perspective in literature is limited and obsolete, as well as the protests of devout Christians who renounce literature for its potential to corrupt readers. I intend to place literature in a framework that enables Christians to strengthen their faith without sacrificing the integrity of the literary works themselves. Furthermore, competing worldviews and literary theories that try to undermine a Christian approach will not be discarded as “enemies to the faith,” but rather re-contextualized and embraced as helpful tools.

I have divided my essay into three parts. In the first, I will perform a close reading of the eleventh and twelfth books of the *Confessions*, in which Augustine discusses memory and time in relation to the first verses of Genesis, when God creates heaven and earth. This close reading will begin the formulation of the Christian literary theory by explaining how God creates and then by extending the process to the human act of creation. Once this dynamic of creativity between God and humanity has been established, I will move into the thirteenth book of the

Confessions, in which Augustine allegorizes the six-day account of creation in Genesis 1. The purpose of this close reading is to set up the “environment” in which a Christian interpretation of literature can operate.

The second part of my thesis refers to Augustine’s account of his conversion in the sixth, seventh, and eighth books of the *Confessions*. I will elaborate upon the effect of sin within humans and their creations, as well as the transformation that can occur in both, following the redemptive act of Jesus Christ. This ability to change that exists in humans will guide my subsequent discussion of hermeneutic theory, where I will put D. W. Robertson, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur into conversation with one another. The conclusions drawn from this conversation will assist me in describing Augustine’s conversion account as an interaction with texts, revealing the inescapable similarities between the narrative of human life and the interpretation of texts. The blurring of the line between human and text is essential to a Christian theory of literature.

For the third part, I turn to Augustine’s treatise on the interpretation and instruction of the scriptures, *On Christian Doctrine*, beginning with a criticism of his concept of “plundering the Egyptians.” By critiquing this idea, I intend to present the underlying challenge of the Christian interpreter: since we are called to be in the world and not of it, how does the interpreter do justice to a worldly text while maintaining focus on God’s will? In order to answer this question, I will turn to Alain Badiou’s ethic of truth, which I believe parallels the revolution that is Christian salvation. Jesus Christ’s commands to His followers lay the groundwork for how Christians can approach literature, and Augustine’s understanding of love, what he terms *caritas*, will assist me at this culminating point in my essay, as I formulate a Christian literary ethic.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will attempt to outline a practicable method of literary interpretation from a Christian perspective, using the discussions of writing, reading, and exegesis put forth by Augustine of Hippo in two of his works—the *Confessions* and *On Christian Doctrine*. By “practicable,” I mean a method that silences both the criticism of secular academics who say that the Christian perspective in literature is limited and obsolete, as well as the protests of devout Christians who renounce literature for its potential to corrupt readers. I intend to place literature in a framework that enables Christians to strengthen their faith without sacrificing the integrity of the literary works themselves. Furthermore, competing worldviews and literary theories that try to undermine a Christian approach will not be discarded as “enemies to the faith,” but rather re-contextualized and embraced as helpful tools.

My goal stems from the notion that, because of the call that God has commanded them to obey, Christian interpreters must be able to incorporate their beliefs into their study of literature. Fredric Jameson’s assertion about the centrality of Marxism reflects a similar perspective which this project embraces: “Marxism is here conceived as that ‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (Jameson 10). Although Jameson is arguing for the primacy of political interpretation, his words describe the same overarching quality that I argue Christianity provides for the believing scholar.

Within modern criticism, however, scholars who ascribe to the religion have debated whether Christianity (or any other religious or political worldview) should influence the study and critique of literature. For example, Northrop Frye seeks to systematize criticism outside of the realm of political or religious interests. He writes, “If it is insisted that we cannot criticize

literature until we have acquired a coherent philosophy of life with its center of gravity in something else, the existence of criticism as a separate subject is still being denied” (Frye 7). He claims that the field of criticism can be structured and organized, making inductive observations from one’s encounters with literature, in a manner similar to science-based fields: “[I]f the varied interests of critics could be related to a central expanding pattern of systematic comprehension, this undertow [of Christian, democratic, and Marxian critics] would disappear, and they would be seen as converging on criticism instead of running away from it” (12).

Frye is considered to be a Christian scholar because of his career as an Anglican minister, but his literary work subsumes Christianity within this literary cataloging he describes in the introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism*. He justifies this prioritization by explaining that “the axioms and postulates of criticism...have to grow out of the art it deals with” (6). This may evoke a feeling of objectivity, but this stance actually reveals Frye’s bias, similar to the Marxian or Christian critic’s—if the art determines the organization of politics and religion within its own system, then the art itself merely takes the seat of honor, rather than the economy or scripture. Moreover, one might question whether science trumps art for Frye, considering his desire to legitimize the field of criticism by applying his classifications to “species” of literature. Jameson assists in clarifying the uneasiness that Frye’s project evokes:

It should not, in the present intellectual atmosphere, be necessary laboriously to argue the position that every form of practice, including the literary-critical kind, implies and presupposes a form of theory; that empiricism, the mirage of an utterly nontheoretical practice, is a contradiction in terms; that even the most formalizing kinds of literary or textual analysis carry a theoretical charge whose denial unmask it as ideological. (Jameson 58)

In contrast to Northrop Frye’s opinion that literary criticism should not be framed by religion or politics, T. S. Eliot encourages readers of literature to have a firm grip on what Frye calls their “philosophy of life” when coming to a work of art: “In ages like our own, in which

there is no such common agreement [on ethical and theological matters], it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading...with explicit ethical and theological standards” (Eliot 142). Eliot insists such scrutiny is necessary because, even if readers try to compartmentalize their literary opinions from their religious and ethical judgment, “the separation is not, and never can be, complete” (146).

Therefore, let us not practice the denial that our past experiences and the formation of our spiritual commitments do not affect how we approach literature. Rather, I want to address some important issues that arise for the Christian interpreter when he analyzes literary works and harmonize them into a theory that will allow him to serve himself, others, and God through his interpretive efforts. Augustine’s meditations on similar matters in the *Confessions* and *On Christian Doctrine* are invaluable in this pursuit because he thought about how to ethically interpret texts in a world very similar to ours:

The world of the late Roman Empire knew the tremendous advantages of a colossal network of transportation and communication, of advanced technological achievement, of internationalism, and of cultural, intellectual, and theological pluralism. It also experienced the concomitant disadvantages of a dislocation of values, internecine warfare and random violence, political corruption and revolution, ethnic and racial tensions, new disease, and existential despair. (McPherson 172)

The conclusions Augustine made laid the foundation for textual interpretation throughout the Middle Ages, so his reputation as a Christian theorist is certain. Although he influenced several subsequent centuries of literary thought, his judgment of literature, combined with his focus on allegorical meaning, impose a separation between secular literature and the Christian community, beyond the mandate that Christians are to be set apart (sanctified) for their faith. Christian theorists find themselves isolated, protective, and irrelevant from the larger literary community, and this unfortunately in part is a consequence of Augustine’s teaching. In this essay, however, I want to revisit Augustine, paying particular attention to passages in the two

works that describe human relationships, in order to show that, with Augustine's help, the Christian literati need not—and should not—remove themselves from the larger secular field.

I have divided my essay into three parts. In the first, I will perform a close reading of the eleventh and twelfth books of the *Confessions*, in which Augustine discusses memory and time in relation to the first verses of Genesis, when God creates heaven and earth. This close reading will begin the formulation of the Christian literary theory by explaining how God creates and then by extending the process to the human act of creation. Once this dynamic of creativity between God and humanity has been established, I will move into the thirteenth book of the *Confessions*, in which Augustine allegorizes the six-day account of creation in Genesis 1. The purpose of this close reading is to set up the “environment” in which a Christian interpretation of literature can operate.

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For the third part, I turn to Augustine's treatise on the interpretation and instruction of the scriptures, *On Christian Doctrine*, beginning with a criticism of his concept of “plundering the

Egyptians.” By critiquing this idea, I intend to present the underlying challenge of the Christian interpreter: since we are called to be in the world and not of it, how does the interpreter do justice to a worldly text while maintaining focus on God’s will? In order to answer this question, I will turn to Alain Badiou’s ethic of truth, which I believe parallels the revolution that is Christian salvation. Jesus Christ’s commands to His followers lay the groundwork for how Christians can approach literature, and Augustine’s understanding of love, what he terms *caritas*, will assist me at this culminating point in my essay, as I formulate a Christian literary ethic.

Before I begin my examination of Augustine’s works, I must offer two working definitions for problematic terms that will set the boundaries of my scope for this essay and silence—or at least postpone—potential questions about the relevance of my theory. First, the term *Christian* or *believer* will be defined for this essay by the Apostles’ Creed,¹ which affirms the Trinity (and therefore Jesus Christ’s divinity), the gospel account of Christ’s death and resurrection, the unity of the body of believers by that belief known as the Church, the sinfulness of humankind, and the judgment and forgiveness of God. Although not explicitly stated in the creed, I add to my working definition that the Christian believes in the veracity of the Bible and its divine authorship. Readers may find this definition too limiting, but it allows for the bypass of certain controversies that make the term so troubling.

Due to the nature of conflicts occurring in world affairs today, the term *Christian* tends to be associated with a particular political orientation or agenda. The term suffers further misappropriation when it is considered synonymous with Western-ism. Such unfortunate

¹ The Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.”

connotations that ultimately stem from issues of earthly political power obscure the fact that the term *Christian* labels what Slavoj Žižek calls “the remainder of humanity”: “a community of free believers that suspends all ethnic divisions...those who have faith in Christ” (Žižek 130).

A second term, *truth*, may cause difficulty within this discussion. Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” The question echoes throughout literature in abounding points of view and in long trails of signification. No interpreter can claim to own truth, nor can he or she measure its dimensions; the same holds for the Christian interpreter. As Paul writes, “[n]ow we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” (1 Cor. 13:12). *Belief* in truth distinguishes the Christian interpreter: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see....By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command” (Heb. 11:1, 3). The formation of the universe at God’s command aptly describes the definition of truth used in this essay, as well as Augustine’s use of the term:

[E]verything which begins to exist and then ceases to exist does so at the due time for its beginning and cessation decreed in that eternal Reason where nothing begins or comes to an end. This eternal Reason is your Word, who is ‘the Beginning’ in that he also speaks to us....When some changeable creature advises us, we are but led to that stable Truth, where we truly learn as we stand and listen to him. (C 252)

According to Augustine, from truth springs temporal creation, all that has a beginning and end; furthermore, changeable creation learns from unchangeable truth. Finally, his use of the pronoun “he” refers to Christ, which agrees with John’s reference to God as the Word (Jn. 1:1), and Jesus’ proclamation that He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). Augustine writes the *Confessions* as a second-person narrative to God, whom he addresses occasionally as “O Truth.”

The framework of a Christian literary theory depends upon the understanding of an eternal, immutable truth, but also a truth that is the wellspring of creation, a concept that I will discuss further in this essay. But because no reader or interpretive method is infallible, I will avoid using this term as much as possible in describing my theory’s dynamics.

CHAPTER 2 ERECTING THE VAULT

Nearly every discussion of artistic pursuits from a Christian perspective begins with the first chapter of Genesis, where God demonstrates His own creativity in making the universe, including human beings, whom He made in His likeness. As Dorothy Sayers points out in *The Mind of the Maker*, the main characteristic attributed to God in this first chapter is His ability to create: “Looking at man, he [God] sees in him something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the ‘image’ of God was modeled, we find only the single assertion, ‘God created’” (Sayers 22). Augustine also devotes lengthy consideration to the creation account in the final books of the *Confessions* to assist him in thinking about memory and time, and to practice scriptural interpretation. His examination of Genesis 1, though, will provide the first step for establishing a Christian literary theory because it establishes the space in which literature takes place.

Augustine begins by arguing that heaven and earth show themselves to be made because they exhibit “change and variation” (C 11.4.6). The act of creation effects mutability in that which is created, so that difference instantly arises between the creator and the created. In the case of God, He is eternal and thus unchanging; His created works have a distinct beginning and therefore are not eternal. The fact that created works change from non-existent to existent engenders their changeability from the beginning.

In the case of human beings, we constantly change (being creations ourselves); however, the potential for change in the created works of humanity is multifaceted. In one sense, the works change because they are made of changeable material: paper decomposes, pigments fade, stone weathers, etc. In another sense, however, artistic works do not change; the arrangement of

words, the sequence of notes, the geometric proportions, or the color values remain.¹ Yet one could say that human works change in that the *reception* of those works alters over time. As a simplistic example, let us consider Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: the centuries-old Hengurt or Ellesmere manuscripts undergo the decay of passing years, and although the words he wrote down (barring scribal error) have continued unchanged since he first put them on paper, our understanding and appreciation of them now is quite different from how they were perceived at any other time in history. Is this latter characteristic not the imposition of humans' mutability, *as created beings themselves*, upon the text?

But let us return to the details of God's creative acts. Once he establishes that God made heaven and earth, Augustine wonders what tools and what media God could have used to create them:

You cannot have gone to work like a human craftsman, who forms a material object from some material in accordance with his imaginative decision. Whatever design his mind's eye conjures up within, the mind has power to impose upon the material, but where would he get this power, if you had not made his mind? He merely stamps a form on matter already in existence and in no possession of its being, such as clay or stone or wood or gold or any other stuff of the kind. And whence would these derive their existence, unless you had established them in being? (C 11.5.7)

This observation could explain the perpetual elements of human creation, that is, the artist's manipulation of materials—Augustine refers to this as *design*. Unchanging, eternal God creates human beings in His image to be creators, and along this chain of creation filters down a quality of persistence, which emerges when a human acts as a creator and imposes a design upon pre-existent material. The deliberate artistic act awakens this character of immutability in the material, an echo from when God first created the material for humans to manipulate.

¹ The one obvious exception to this concept would be revision, but is one version of a work, say, William Wordsworth's 1790 edition of the *Prelude*, the same as another, like Wordsworth's 1850 edition? Should these revisions not be considered separate works?

God did not have this material from which to make heaven and earth, though. If everything that exists does so as a result of God's creative acts, then He must have created *ex nihilo*, which Augustine argues He did. The formation of heaven and earth had to come from within God somehow, like Athena springing from Zeus' head, an analogous situation in classical mythology, or like Narnia growing from Aslan's song, C. S. Lewis's modern allegorization of the idea. At this point, Augustine introduces the W(w)ord into his discussion: "Clearly, then, you spoke and things were made. By your word you made them" (C 11.5.7). He immediately explains that this creative word differs from the times when God speaks to humans in Scripture, like when Jesus is baptized; such speech acts are temporal, and they require the material needed for the act of hearing to exist.

The word Augustine describes is eternal, since it is of God, and all that the word conveys is uttered simultaneously, so that the word does not change. Just as the words that a human speaks intend to transmit thoughts or emotions, so God's word, as Brian Stock writes, "represents the eternal expression of the divine mind" (Stock 195). Even though God's word is eternal and simultaneous, "things which you [God] create by speaking do not all come to be simultaneously, nor are they eternal" (C 11.7.9). So too can human words produce effects and meanings in the listener's mind, regardless of the time of the utterance. Consider also the sequence of responses a reader will have as he or she reads a book; because the words to be read are stored in one place, the book acts with a simultaneity similar to God's word. Yet no earthly analogy will satisfactorily explain God's act of creation, because human words are finite.²

So the word of God is eternal, and all that is made, from the heaven and earth in Genesis 1:1 to the infant born as I write this, originates simultaneously from God's utterance. This idea

² Even the term "creative *act*" erroneously implies an end to God's creative work.

means that God's creative mandate continuously rules over all existent matter. As creatures of His likeness, human beings benefit from this mandate, in that their creative acts are extensions of God's originating word.

By speaking this word, God creates heaven and earth; the former Augustine distinguishes as "heaven's heaven" (12.8.8, cf. Ps. 115:16), the dwelling God creates for Himself.³ The description of the newly created earth is "formless and empty," according to the NIV translation of the scripture, and "invisible and unorganized," according to Boulding's translation of Augustine. He struggles to understand and explain the nature of formless matter, but we can catch a glimpse of the phrase's meaning if we think of raw materials used for an artistic work, before humans apply a design to them. Before a writer pens the words of her story onto a page, the page has no significance outside of its being a piece of paper. The paper could sit in a desk drawer for years, or someone could toss it into the fire without a second thought. Once the writer inscribes meaningful words onto the paper, it takes on a new significance, apart from its nature as paper.

We can compare the "formless and empty" matter of the earth, before God fashions it into land, plants, animals and people, with the paper before the author writes upon it. Indeed, this analogy parallels Augustine's resolution: "[Y]ou, Lord, made the world from formless matter, and that formless matter that was almost nothing at all you made from nothing at all, intending to create from it all the great things which fill us humans with wonder" (C 12.8.8). Once again, Augustine uses the word *intending* in speaking of creation. When a creator imposes a design

³ At the risk of digressing too much, I must comment upon this, for it gave me a foreboding pause. *Heaven's heaven* leads one to question where God lived before He created this place. We could apply a human example, saying that heaven's heaven is like a house an architect builds for herself. Before the house is built, she still exists and dwells somewhere else on earth; we must therefore have faith that God existed and dwelled in some realm while He built His "house". This scheme harmonizes with scripture: in Revelation, both heaven and earth are abandoned for a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:1).

upon matter, his or her intentionality infused within the manipulated material inspires wonder in the beholder, whether it be God's works or human works. But even human works, because of their substance, *are God's works*: "[T]he aforementioned invisible earth is the matter underlying all forms" (C 12.8.8).

The psalmist writes in Psalm 24, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, / the world, and all who live in it" (Ps. 24:1-2). He distinguishes between the earth and the world—he associates every *thing* with the former and *all who live* with the latter—but the inhabitants of both realms testify to the glory of the Lord as their creator. Consider Psalm 148:

Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, / lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, / you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, / wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, / kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, / young men and maidens, old men and children (Ps. 148:7-12).

The scope of this passage reflects the psalmist's assertion that the hand of God is in the creation of every existent thing; he calls these things to praise God as their ruler and creator. Earlier in the *Confessions*, Augustine also observes this fact: "[Y]ou have made all good things, and...there are absolutely no substances that you have not made....They all exist because they are severally good but collectively very good, for our God has made all things *exceedingly good*" (C 7.12.18; his italics). If nature points to God as its designer, and if human artists, who are part of God's design also, manipulate the natural world for their own design, then the artistic works of humans also testify to God the creator.⁴

The so-called cultural mandate, which God declares after creating human beings in Genesis 1, reinforces this chain of creation: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen. 1:28). Not only does this command call

⁴ Thanks to Ken Myers, whose lecture "The Church and Cultural Discernment: Distinguishing Engagement from Captivity" led me to this conclusion.

humans to care for the earth as good stewards, it also suggests creativity: humans are to occupy this material world, manage it, handle it, *shape* it. The word “subdue” connotes malleability and changeability. “Its very mutability, so evident to us, makes possible our awareness and demarcation of passing times, because this is what the rolling seasons are—the changes that occur in creatures as various forms proliferate and develop” (C 12.8.8).

Time is key for Augustine in understanding change and creation: “These are three realities in the mind, but nowhere else as far as I can see, for the present of past things is memory, the present of present things is attention, and the present of future things is expectation” (C 11.20.26). The past exists only in the mind as reminiscences, and the future is only a prediction based on what visibly exists at present. But the present can be divided into progressively smaller durations so that it becomes a “vanishing point” (C 11.15.20). Time raises a conundrum similar to how God creates *ex nihilo*.⁵

Again, the answer lies in intentionality. Once a person translates what her mind remembers from the past or predicts for the future into (for Augustine) words, then these non-existent places in time materialize. Of course, this materialization has form to the extent that its creator gives it form, just as God gives being to His creations: “It was you who made them, Lord...you who are, because they are. Yet not in the same way as you, their creator, are they beautiful and good, nor do they exist as you exist; compared with you they have neither beauty nor goodness nor being” (C 11.4.6). The spirit of Augustine’s declaration borrows from Platonism⁶, the idea that created things are at gradually farther removes from ideal forms. Still, when an artist creates a work, that work does not have the artist’s ability to remember the past

⁵ Paul Ricoeur examines this conundrum, what he calls an “aporia,” in the first chapter of *Time and Narrative*.

⁶ The influence of Plotinus on Augustine’s thinking is well-documented. Consider his encounter with the “books by the Platonists” in the *Confessions*, starting at 7.9.13.

and foresee the future; its representation of past or future depends on the interpretation of the beholder. Even its representation of the present changes (recall the Chaucer example).

At this point, a brief review of Augustine’s meditations on matter, form, and creativity will help us to the next stage. Scripture states that God created human beings in His own image, the image of a creator. God’s creative work described in Genesis 1 parallels how humans create. First, God created matter out of nothing; similarly, that which humans visualize in their minds to create does not physically exist. God accomplishes His creation by uttering a word that expresses His creative intention. This word is eternal in that it is unchanging and of God, who is also eternal.⁷ The word’s eternity means that the act of creation lasts longer than the six days in Genesis; its duration continues through to this day, and beyond. In addition to its eternity, the word conveys all of God’s creative intention simultaneously—even though the word rings loud and clear to this day, whatever is presently created was part of God’s intention, along with all other created things, from the beginning. We can imperfectly compare this concept to a book: an author’s creative act is stored in the book, but its effects unfold as a reader peruses it over time.

What first comes into existence with God’s utterance is heaven and earth, the latter of which is “formless and empty.” In human terms, we can imagine the raw materials before a work has been made, materials which lack significance and design. The creator must impose his intention upon the material to give it form.⁸ Mutability characterizes God’s works, evident in a wide variety of ways, from the change of seasons to a human’s change of mind. Likewise, human works of art have the ability to change in two ways: the physical material of which the

⁷ I have purposely avoided addressing Jesus Christ as the Word of God for now. This will be covered later in my essay.

⁸ Augustine’s scheme is an invocation of Aristotle’s four causes.

work is made changes (which is actually the mutability of God's original work), and the way beholders perceive or understand the work. Although the artist's intention (be it memory, prediction, or observation) manifests itself in the creative act, the completed work becomes susceptible to the interpretation (intention) of anyone who encounters it. All matter that exists, including the artist's material, was created in the utterance of God's word, so that human creations—works of art—still bear the imprint of God's craftsmanship.

What is striking about this framework for creativity is that Augustine unpacks almost all of this interpretation from the first verse in Genesis, aided by the very basics of Christian doctrine, which are laid out in the Apostles' Creed. The changeability inherent to all levels of the creative chain emerge out of the earliest (biblical) account of creation, *not* out of the fall. In spite of the ramifications of sin, variation and multiple interpretations would always characterize creativity.

The other striking aspect of Augustine's conception of creativity is that it serves as a jumping-off point for an allegorical interpretation of the remainder of the creation account. His treatment of Genesis 1 benefits the Christian interpreter who can point to God's creativity without the controversy surrounding a literal reading of the account. Yet Augustine does not alienate believers with his metaphor because he maintains that the account is true: "[O]bserve that scripture offers us a single truth, couched in simple words....But is it not interpreted in manifold ways? Leaving aside fallacious and mistaken theories, are there not divergent schools of true opinion?" (C 13.24.36). By using the creation account to sketch the roles of scripture, reading, and interpretation, Augustine gives Christian students of literature a space of hope and vitality in which to work. I now want to focus on three parts of Augustine's allegory that, combined with our previous discussion, set the stage for literary interpretation: the second day of

creation, during which God erects the sky; the fourth day, when the lights of the sky are lit; and the sixth day, when God commands humans to be fruitful and to multiply.

In Book XII, Augustine describes the order of creation as God's spiritual house. He continues this idea of a building-like structure in Book XIII, when he associates the sky—an expanse separating the waters above from the waters below (Gen. 1:7)—with the “vault” of the holy scriptures (C 13.15.16). This scriptural ceiling is within the spiritual house, one could say, separating two stories. He draws upon two biblical passages for this analogy: Psalm 104, which says that God “stretches out the heavens like a tent” (Ps. 104:2), and the prophecy of Isaiah, which says that the sky will be rolled up like a scroll at the time of God's judgment (Isa. 34:4).⁹

The waters above the vault represent the immortal, angelic peoples who “behold [God's] face unceasingly and there read without the aid of time-bound syllables the decree of [His] eternal will” (C 13.15.18). Clearly the waters below represent mortal human beings. At this point, the allegory reveals itself to be anachronistic, in that it is predicated upon the human condition after the fall, separated from God, which does not occur until Genesis 3. Indeed, Augustine writes later in his allegory, when he speaks of the creatures of the sea on the fifth day, “If Adam had not fallen away from you...there would have been no need for the...words spoken by your stewards amid the pounding waves, words and deeds material and sensible, yet fraught with sacramental power” (C 13.20.28).

Rather than set up a system that would be destroyed by sin, Augustine installs the solution to the problem *within* the system, thereby side-stepping complicated (and frankly irrelevant) speculations about pre-lapsarian life. In the use of the phrase “time-bound syllables,” he additionally introduces the idea that the world beneath the vault relies upon the limited

⁹ Augustine uses the word “book” as opposed to “scroll” for his allegory. From the beginning of the Christian era, the New Testament scriptures were always transcribed by believers in codices, not scrolls.

capabilities of language to gain wisdom, that is, to know God better. We are to “contemplate the heavens, the work of [God’s] fingers,” for it “imparts wisdom,” “evokes perfect praise,” “lays pride low,” performs “reconciling work,” and induces confession, humility, and worship.

Understanding the scriptures is God’s gift to earth-dwellers (C 13.15.17). The vault of scripture is an instantiation of the word. While the sky will roll up like a scroll at the end of time, God’s word will persist, but only then will we see and know the word, and thus God, fully (18).

Earlier we established that the creative works of humans, because they are made of God-made material, are subject to the order of God’s spiritual house. The location of human works, including literature, is in the *first* story of that house, with the earth-dwellers, under the vault of scripture. Literature seems to have a special significance, since humans gain wisdom and grow closer to God by contemplating the scriptures, which are made out of the “time-bound syllables” of language.

Literature’s significance becomes clearer on the fourth day, when God spangles the expanse of sky with sources of light. Augustine interprets the stars to represent believers who, living “in” the firmament of the scriptures, cast the light of wisdom onto the benighted, sensual world. Each star possesses a different spiritual gift, be it healing, prophesying, discernment of spirits, etc. These “stars” already have somewhat interpretive tasks, in that they must reflect the light of scripture’s wisdom for the world, but the blatantly literary skills go to different members of the luminary cast. The person who speaks with wisdom is like the light of the dawn, whereas the person who can “put the knowledge he has into words” is like the “lesser light,” perhaps just before dawn (C 13.18.23).

The distinction between *speaking* and *putting into words* implies that the latter is writing. Writing might be the lesser light for Augustine because speaking has a more immediate impact.

Certainly, several authors, such as Brian Stock, have pointed out the centrality of reading (and therefore writing) in Augustine's view of Christian learning; his prioritization of speaking and writing is not important at the moment, because he privileges them both, as verbal acts, above the other spiritual gifts in his allegory. Writing and speaking transform the obscurity of the night into the all-encompassing presence of God's wisdom, the light of day.

Like the second day, the fourth is important for its introduction of language into the world. Even the scriptural account mentions signs: "[L]et [the lights in the sky] serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years" (Gen. 1:14). Recall that seasons exemplify the mutability of God's creation; the lights in the sky now serve to signify that variation, the marking of time. Also recall that humans use their creative works in the same way, to put into tangible form their mental perceptions of past, present, and future. Thus, on the fourth day, the creative goals of humans merge with God's, and believers who use language as their medium stand at the point of convergence.

Augustine sees a progression in the creation account, starting with the making of formless matter and culminating in the proliferation of human life on the sixth day. He reflects that progression in his allegory, so that the sixth day marks the pinnacle of human creation and thereby justifies Augustine's creative, interpretive act, the *Confessions*. He interprets God's command to increase and multiply in relation to interpretation: "[W]e do not find anything able to increase and multiply in the way that one truth may be articulated in various modes, or one articulation understood in many different senses; this we find only amid signs displayed by corporeal things and concepts of the mind" (C 13.24.37).

Augustine compares signs to the sea creatures made on the fifth day and concepts to human progeny. Once again, as in the case of the lights in the sky, he gives preference to the act

with more immediacy—in this case, thinking over writing. Why is this? Perhaps humans display their resemblance to God most when their creative acts parallel God’s. God creates heaven and earth by speaking a word; what comes into being as a result of this word is His creative intention, the product of His “mind.” Thus, humans are most like God when they articulate their creative intentions.

How do we reconcile the preference Augustine gives to speaking in the *Confessions* with his critique of spoken word in *On Christian Doctrine*: “[B]ecause vibrations in the air soon pass away and remain no longer than they sound, signs of words have been constructed by means of letters” (*OCD* 2.4.5)? Written language overcomes speech’s transience, but apparently we do not find our commonality with God through the seeming permanence of writing. Augustine provides an answer in the first book:

How did He [Jesus Christ] come except that ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us?’ It is as when we speak. In order that what we are thinking may reach the mind of the listener through the fleshly ears, that which we have in mind is expressed in words and is called speech. But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us. (*OCD* 1.13.12)

Throughout his discussion, Augustine equates God’s creative word with Christ the Word.

Christ’s identity as the Word allows Augustine to say that the Word is coeternal with God.

Furthermore, as the “Word made flesh,” Christ dons the material created out of the Word, the divine instance of art and artist becoming one.

As a spoken Word, Christ came to humanity, like a spoken word coming to the listener’s ear. After He ascends to heaven, those who hear His Word receive the thought (or intention) the Word means to communicate, that is, God’s order of creation, which comes in the form of the Holy Spirit, who is also God. Thus God embodies all three parts of the creative dynamic

Augustine describes: the creator (God the Father), the intention (the Holy Spirit), and the work of art (Jesus).

In turn, believers who receive the Holy Spirit, the intention, verbalize Him/It in earthly language. This is what occurs at Pentecost: “They [the disciples] saw what seemed to be *tongues of fire* that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages *as the Spirit enabled them*” (Acts 2:3-4; my italics). The disciples “declare the wonders of God” in these multiple languages; what are God’s wonders but His order of creation? Speech thus takes the place of privilege over written language because it most closely resembles how God established the order of creation.

This order is reflected in Genesis 2, when God allows Adam to name His other creatures: “Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19). A synergism occurs between God and Adam—God creating the animals and Adam creating names for them. Adam performs his creative act upon the material provided by God, and it is a verbal act. Thus, the naming of the animals represents the harmonious order of creation. But this is an ideal from before the fall, when God and humanity were not in different parts of the spiritual house.

Now that humans are separated from God, their methods of creativity do not mimic God’s as much as they did in paradise. An uncertainty arises in human creativity, caused by the divisive forces of God’s order and human sin. Works of art seek reconciliation in this position of conflict. Whether an artist operates under an aesthetic of beauty or dissonance, the underlying motivation of *aesthetic* is that there is a “proper” manipulation of material that will enhance people’s understanding of the ordering of the universe. Thus, we have in part Horace’s two

demands for literature, that it delight and instruct. One should not confuse the former with entertainment and the latter with didacticism. Rather, literature should delight the reader in the sense that she has a clearer idea of the creative order, or its post-lapsarian disorder. At the same time, literature instructs the reader to work toward recapturing the order, or to continue to point out examples of the disorder.

Augustine's illustration of God's command to be fruitful and to multiply to the inhabitants of the land and sea indicates the uncertainty and urgency of creativity in the fallen world: "Thus the waters of the sea are filled, for it takes a variety of signs to stir them; and so too do human generations populate the land whose aridity bespeaks its thirst for knowledge, the land where reason holds sway" (C 13.24.37). Augustine uses the word *stir* to describe the activity of writing, which fills the allegorical sea; in his other images of the sea, he uses strong words that connote motion, including "gush," "stormy," "pounding," "fraught," and "unstable flux" (C 13.20.28). Not only do these words point to frenetic activity, but also uncertainty, as if the act of writing by humans is their attempt to gain their bearings.¹⁰

Whereas the sea is enraged with numerous, competing written interpretations, the land, "where reason holds sway," is a stifling desert where generation upon generation of humans "thirst for knowledge." Augustine's image is strong because it encompasses all of humanity, not merely Christians—whether they realize it or not, all humans exhibit their resemblance to God in the use of their minds to process symbols and search for truth (C 13.24.37). This search incites desperation, for while their reason motivates their search, reason cannot give them complete

¹⁰ In his interpretation of the fourth day, Augustine compares "sacred signs," which either constitute miracles and spiritual gifts or the words of scripture, with the waxing and waning moon. If we extend the metaphor, the ever-shifting signs of writing add to the movement of the ocean of written interpretation, like the phases of the moon controlling the tides.

truth. As Blaise Pascal writes in the *Pensées*, “[r]eason’s last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it” (Pascal 188).

The vault of scripture hovers over both the land and sea. Brian Stock describes the scriptures as “verbal signs given by God and revealed to us in the transcriptions of men” (Stock 197). So the scriptural sky is similar to the ocean of interpretations, in that the written word binds them both, but unlike the tumult of conflicting human interpretations in the sea, the sky is serene and luminous, the source of wisdom.

Augustine interestingly compares preachers to clouds (C 13.15.18), which can be a troublesome metaphor. He explains that, like the clouds that blow away, preachers’ lives come to an end, yet the Word that they preach, like the sky, abides. We can extend this metaphor further to understand the interrelationship of written works. Just as the sky absorbs water from the ocean into clouds, which rain down upon the land, the conflicting written interpretations of humans can interact with the scriptures, precipitating knowledge to quench human reason’s thirst for wisdom.

Through his allegory, Augustine has imagined the foundations on which Christian interpretations of literary works can be constructed. I will briefly recapitulate the highlights of his allegory covered above. On the second day of creation, God creates the sky, which Augustine identifies as “the vault of scripture.” From this analogy, he establishes the separation of humanity from God, the condition of the world after the fall. In spite of this separation, humanity exists within God’s order of creation, the spiritual house. The scriptures stretch across this divide as a way for God to communicate with humanity. Thus, humans find wisdom—understanding of the order of creation—by contemplating the scriptures. Christian believers play the role of luminaries installed in the scriptural firmament in Augustine’s interpretation of the

fourth day. They illuminate the wisdom of God's word and shed light upon the world darkened by sin. Believers who can utilize language, whether written or spoken, take center stage in Augustine's allegory; they represent the light of dawn, the prelude to the full disclosure of God's wisdom, the light of day. On the sixth day, after God has created everything, he instructs humans to be fruitful and to multiply, which for Augustine parallels humans' ability to think and to generate interpretations. The act of interpretation occurs also in the sea, which represents written interpretation in Augustine's allegory. Humanity's procreation takes on an incessant, insatiable quality, like the human quest for wisdom, while the tempestuous oceans mimic the conflict of multiple perspectives put into writing. The vault of scripture can unify the land and sea by drawing from the scribal ocean and raining down upon the thirsty land of human reason.

The details in Augustine's allegory thus describe the "environment" in which a Christian literary theory can flourish. This framework benefits the Christian interpreter in that it asserts the authority of God without being divisive: all of humanity and all creative endeavors—including literature—are included in the created order conceived by Augustine. We cannot end the discussion here, however. Serious questions about human nature, and its reflection in literature, remain.

CHAPTER 3 HUMAN TEXTS AND TEXTUAL HUMANS

Humans, like all of God's creations, are changeable things and change frequently in a number of ways: physically, mentally, and spiritually. In Chapter 2, we considered how the raw material from which works of art are made diminishes over time—the weathering of stone, the fading of pigments, etc. The raw material of humans similarly diminishes; from the point of full maturity, the body begins its withering descent: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19). God makes this pronouncement as part of the curse of the fall. Our human form dissolves back into the material of the earth; not the formless matter of the abyss, though, for God created the earth out of that formless matter.

Physical death is not the only consequence that followed humanity's fall. The fall itself marks a crucial change in humans, their proximity to God. Adam and Eve enjoyed a close relationship with God, both physically and spiritually, in Eden, demonstrated by the creative synergy between Adam and God of naming the animals. We receive another striking picture of God's physical closeness in Genesis 3:8a: “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day....” But this intimacy is quickly lost in the second half of the verse: “and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen. 3:8b). This moment takes place after Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit from the forbidden tree. As a result of their disobedient act, they alienate themselves from God, a concept which we will discuss further in Chapter 4. Thus, the fall from God, the great estrangement between God and His creations, occurs prior to the humans' physical exile from Eden.

The change in humans' closeness with God stems from another important type of change: humans change in obedience to God. But we can extend this to say that they change in

obedience to their purpose, since the underlying purpose of humanity is to obey God. We need not think about this in legalistic terms; rather, the concept is easier to grasp in terms of creativity. When an artistic work veers away from the artist's intention, the artist might deem the work "disobedient" and either revise the work or cast it aside to begin a new one. The purpose of the creative work is wrapped up in the intention of the creator.

Returning to Genesis, one can see in the interaction between God and the humans, before He banishes them from Eden, that Adam and Eve have strayed from their created purpose. Not only do they eat the fruit they were told to avoid, but they also hide from God and wish to conceal their nakedness from Him when He finds them. God acknowledges that His creations have gone awry with His anguished question, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9).

In Book VII of the *Confessions*, Augustine meditates upon the movement of humans toward and away from God and the concomitant variations in obedience. According to him, God is supremely good and unchanging. Everything that God creates is good, but not supremely good, since complete goodness is not prone to change, which humans (and all other created things) clearly are. Thus, everything that He creates is prone to destruction, "because if they were supremely good they would be indestructible" (C 7.12.18). Augustine defines *destruction* as diminishing the good. Everything that God creates also has being, but only God has *complete* being: "[T]hey are real because they are from you, but unreal inasmuch as they are not what you are. For that alone truly is, which abides unchangingly" (7.11.17). Being, substance, and existence all possess goodness then, according to Augustine's thinking. "Hence if they are deprived of all good, they will be simply non-existent; and so it follows that as long as they do exist, they are good. Everything that exists is good, then" (7.12.18).

God creates nothing that has no substance and therefore no goodness. Augustine thus intuitively understands that evil is without substance. It is an *absence* of goodness, a *lack* of being. Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes come to mind: "What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted" (Eccl. 1:15). That cause of the deformity, that thief of the missing, cannot be extricated—there is nothing to seize. Augustine refers to this non-being or non-creation as *villainy*: "the perversity of a will twisted away from you, God, the supreme substance, toward the depths—a will that throws away its life within and swells with vanity abroad" (C 7.16.22). Augustine's description of the perversion of humans by villainy illustrates humans' rejection of their created purpose—the life they throw away—which manifests itself as an outward distortion (note Augustine's use of the word "swells"): because of this villainy, humans cease to understand who they are and what they are meant to do. Paul sums up this distortion in his letter to the Romans: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen" (Rom. 1:25).

As a result, they move back toward the depths of formless matter; the imprint of God on the human material grows fainter. Augustine reminds us later in Book XII, though, that "the primal abyss was *almost* nothingness, for it was still totally without form, although it did exist, *since it had the capacity to receive form*" (C 12.8.8; my italics). The inherent changeability of humans allows us to turn away from the depths and move back toward God by rediscovering the purpose with which He created us. Thus, we have the two movements of human creation: the movement away from God, or sin, and the movement toward God, or sanctification.

Believers can hope in a reunion with God at the end of the process of sanctification because the sinfulness that opened the gap between God and humanity, exacerbated by the perpetual presence of villainy in the fallen world, has been closed by the life and death of Jesus

Christ. Recall from Chapter 2 that in the artistic analogue of the Holy Trinity, the Son represents the work of art,¹ which is humanity in the scheme of creation. Jesus is both perfectly God and perfectly man, and he embodies the Word from which creation was made. As such, He was able to don the worldly material and live in the fullness of God's purpose for humanity: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5:17).²

His disgraceful death to atone for all the sins of humanity means that God's intention for humanity is restored and attainable; His resurrection means that the physical death of the body will not impede the progress of sanctification for those who believe. In terms of humanity as God's creative work, Jesus acts as the magnum opus—He fulfills both the inherent purpose of humanity by living perfectly, and He satisfies the consequences for humanity's divergence from their created intention by enduring their punishment. The implications of Jesus Christ's sacrifice and resurrection for humans as creative works are tremendous. The disfiguration of humanity due to the ravages of sin will gradually heal as the believer clings to God's creative intention; she will die to sin and grow in the Holy Spirit:

The mind of the sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace....But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Rom. 7:6, 10-11)

Once again, the Spirit is God's intention, which is now breathed into the created work that is the believer. No longer does sin make the believer the broken machine, the incomplete manuscript, or the smudged portrait. Rather, "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good

¹ The Father represents the artist, and the Holy Spirit represents the artistic intention.

² At this point, we can take the Law to mean the express intentions of God for how humanity is supposed to live. We will momentarily set aside the historical context of the term, as well as its deeper implications for salvation.

works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). The redemptive work of Christ is God’s restoration project, in which the restored works of art take part in the process.

In this part of the discussion so far, we have treated physical and spiritual changes which humans undergo—the process of aging and death, the disobedience of humans, and the redemption of repentant believers. Another crucial way that humans exhibit mutability will be useful to a formulation of Christian literary theory channeled through Augustine, which is the constant change of human perception. Recall from Chapter 2 that the reception of human works changes over time. A novel written one hundred years ago may have been loved by its readers when it first was published, but present-day readers may view it disdainfully. Such a scenario exemplifies a change in the audience—different groups of people reading the novel at different points in time. But a single person’s reception of a work changes over time also, either from one reading to the next, or from the first reading to the reader’s memory of the work.

The former example, representing a change in audience, seems to be what D. W. Robertson advises about in “Some Observations on Method in Literary Studies.” A creative work written at one historical point will not have the same impact at another historical point because the creative works of humans, like any other “human formulations and institutions...are contingent phenomena without any independent reality of their own” (Robertson 77). In other words, since the world around the text changes, the unchanging qualities of the text only reflect one point in time, and to understand that text, the reader must familiarize herself with the text’s historical context, that is, what the world looked like at that point in time. As a result, Robertson argues, “What we call the past is, in effect, a series of foreign countries inhabited by strangers whose manners, customs, tastes, and basic attitudes even partially understood widen our horizons

and enrich our daily experience” (82). This interpretive visitation that Robertson describes captures the essence of historical criticism.

Robertson’s goal of appreciating a text within its historical context is admirable on some levels, but perhaps it draws too simplistic a picture of textual interpretation. For instance, Paul Ricoeur, in analyzing Augustine’s meditation on time and memory, makes this observation:

In the name of what can the past and the future be accorded the right to exist in some way or other? Once again, in the name of what we say and do with regard to them. What do we say and do in this respect? We recount things which we hold as true and we predict events which occur as we foresaw them. It is therefore still language, along with the experience and the action articulated by language.... (Ricoeur 9)

This observation presents the problem for Robertson’s goal: the way that we access the historical context in which a text was written is through language. Even “the experience and the action” are rescued from the oblivion of an ungraspable past through language.

This means, then, that the historical context becomes an enveloping text around our original text. Interestingly, Robertson’s metaphor of the past as a confederation of foreign countries resonates with Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory. Unlike spoken conversation, in which interlocutors share a common reality of references to which they can point, within a written text “there is no longer a situation common to the writer and the reader” (Ricoeur 141). In spite of this disconnection, the written text does not necessarily “destroy the world,” but rather establishes a new world with its own set of references, what Ricoeur calls “the world of the text” (140). Ferretter writes, “A text...frees reference from the limits of the situation in which speech occurs, and opens up to the reader a ‘world,’ which comprises ‘the ensemble of references opened up by texts’” (Ferretter 121-22). This world is the subject of textual interpretation: “Ultimately, what I appropriate is a proposed world. The latter is not *behind* the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of* it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text* (Ricoeur 143).”

Thus, in our example of the century-old novel, the interpreter has the option of looking at two texts: the novel itself, and the historical circumstances one hundred years ago that encase the novel. In either case, the fruit of interpretation, what Ferretter refers to above as “non-ostensive references,” seem to be those aspects of an artistic work that possess some immutable character. Clearly, Robertson favors the historical context, for he writes, “[I]f we impose our own terms on [the text, rather than terms relative to the text’s historical context], we might as well be studying ourselves rather than the past” (Robertson 80).³ Ricoeur shows us that any act of interpretation, be it text or historical context, is an act of studying oneself *before* the text. Teresa Reed agrees when she writes, “[A]ny investigation of the past is already tinted by present concerns.... Similarly, any view of the past is bound to be tinted by every aspect of our present being” (Reed 2).

Let us return to the second situation, in which the individual human reader’s reception of a work changes over time. As Brian Stock writes, “the relationship between the inner self and its outward representation is not something stable, objective, and enduring but is instead involved with changing relations between subject and object” (Stock 4). In other words, all aspects of an individual are affected by who and what he encounters in the world and vice versa. So, not only does the significance of an artwork change with each person’s interpretation, as we established earlier, but the person changes with each encounter with a work of art.

Martin Heidegger observes this dynamic between human and text, that a human’s interpretation of a text is affected by a “fore-structure,” which consists of experiences, ideas, and

³ The separation of the creative text from the historical context is exaggerated here, since they rely upon each other to varying extents for their interpretive significance. The exaggeration also may result in treating Robertson’s stance unfairly, since he certainly does not believe in putting the historical context in such stark isolation. When I argue that Robertson favors the historical context, I am intending to show that he believes that text and historical context are inextricably linked, so that the creative text loses a measure of its transcendent character. Robertson begins his essay by critiquing the tendency to universalize or trans-historicize artistic works (Robertson 74).

concepts that the interpreter already possesses (Ferretter 101). Hans-Georg Gadamer embraces the notion of fore-structure, asserting that an interpreter cannot avoid such “prejudices”; rather, she must try to understand them and their influence on the interpretation (102).⁴ Therefore, in the same way that Robertson argues that one cannot extricate a text from its historical context, so Gadamer agrees that the interpreter cannot remove herself from her fore-structure:

We do not study a text from the past, that is, as an object from which we as interpreters are independent, disinterested subjects of knowledge, but rather as a part of the very process of tradition by which our thinking, and all that which structures our interpretation in advance, is determined....It is impossible to interpret the past, in short, without already having been affected by it, in a way that determines both what one interprets and how. (105)

Gadamer refers to this concept as the “fusion of horizons”: a human interpreter is constrained by her historical situation, as well as by the amount of understanding she already possesses; when she encounters a text from the past, it “tests her prejudices” so that she arrives at a new point in understanding. She has not lost the understanding she had prior to the new text; instead, the text reshapes that understanding for her next textual encounter. The prejudices of the present cannot be formed without contact with the past. Robert Forman observes a similar theory at work in the meditations of Augustine, that of *memoria oblivionis*, or “memory of forgetfulness”:

This is actually memory’s most valuable form since it joins some previously acquired information with a present experience to yield new insight. This, too, has an aesthetic application, for the satisfaction produced in encountering any work of art largely consists in recalling some aspect of one’s own experience in terms of the work encountered. (Forman 99)

Indirectly, then, Gadamer forms a link with Robertson, in that a chain of tradition joins a text from the past, complete with its historical context, to the reader of the present, complete with her own historical context and her collective understanding. Ricoeur enriches this scheme by de-emphasizing the linear connotation tied to phrases like “historical context.” His view of texts

⁴ Gadamer’s term “prejudice” should not come with the negative connotation it currently has in modern usage. He uses the term simply to mean the interpreter’s collective understanding with which he comes to a text.

opening up possible worlds takes the retrospective hermeneutic circle and redirects its view toward the future: “To appropriate the meaning of a text is to actualize in the present the possible world it proposes” (123).

Thus, encountering a text reshapes the reader’s understanding but also reshapes the possibilities of that reader’s world. Each subsequent text also affects this metamorphosis; more interestingly still, a reader who returns to a text later in this hermeneutic circle will have a new understanding. The interpreter is no longer the same human she was when she first read the texts; other texts have since added to her understanding; her prejudices have changed. But then the text itself will be different; it will offer a different meaning to this “new” reader; it will present different possibilities. We can extend this hermeneutic process to multiple readers, whose understandings are different in some way. They each respond uniquely to the text, and the text responds uniquely to them. Augustine himself already seems to understand this plurality of interpretation. As he writes in the *Confessions*,

[a]mid this profusion of true opinions let Truth itself engender concord; may our God have mercy upon us and grant us to make lawful use of the law for the purpose envisaged by his commandment, pure charity...But let all of us who, as I acknowledge, discern rightly and speak truly on these texts, love one another and likewise love you, our God, the fount of truth, if truth is really what we thirst for, and not illusions. (C 12.30.41)

Augustine observes that the Scriptures speak differently to different readers, and he believes that, if readers are following the Holy Spirit, upholding God’s intentions, then Truth will bring harmony among the various interpretations and understanding to those who seek it.⁵

The changeability of humans is central to Augustine’s *Confessions*; indeed, change within himself marks the climax of the first nine books, his conversion to Christianity. For the remainder of this chapter, we will examine Augustine’s account of his conversion to see how the

⁵ Recall that Augustine uses Truth as another name for God (p. 11).

various types of human change we have already addressed interact to reveal important resemblances between human texts and humans as texts that will help formulate a Christian literary theory.

Augustine's conversion account begins in the sixth book of the *Confessions*, when he meets Ambrose the bishop of Milan and hears in the latter's sermons frequent allusions to Paul's statement in his second letter to the Corinthians that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). "This he would tell [his parishioners] as he drew aside the veil of mystery and opened to them the spiritual meaning of passages which, taken literally, would seem to mislead" (C 6.4.6). Most scholars focus on this moment for its significance in Augustine's eventual polysemous interpretations of Scripture—the four levels of meaning. But this initial meeting with Ambrose is significant in two other ways.

Robert Forman marks this meeting with Ambrose as the moment of Augustine's "aesthetic conversion," when he turns from the styles of Virgilian poetry and Ciceronian rhetoric to the deceptively simplistic style of the Scriptures. Forman declares that this is "a dramatic about-face" for Augustine, the first step in a complete alteration of lifestyle for Augustine that will culminate in his theological conversion in the garden (Forman 80-81). The second point to apprehend relates to the first. Ambrose as a catalyst for aesthetic conversion also represents a key figure in Augustine's hermeneutic circle.

Augustine comes to Ambrose following his disappointing encounter with Faustus, the sophisticated Manichaean orator. The two men stand in stark contrast to each other: whereas Faustus appears unavailable to his followers, is poorly read in the liberal arts, and has only a shallow understanding of Mani's writings, which he disguises under his oratorical skill (C 5.6.10-7.13), Ambrose spends most of his time counseling his parishioners, encouraging them to delve deeper

into the mysteries and meaning of the Scriptures; when he is not offering tutelage, he reads voraciously (6.3.3).

The frustration Augustine feels from his interrogation of Faustus and his failure to reconcile the confusions within the Manichaean texts bring him to Ambrose, who addresses those frustrations. Ambrose's teaching encourages Augustine to grapple with issues like authority, ambition, astrology, and promiscuity as he peruses the works of the neo-Platonists and finally discovers Paul's writings. Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine informs his readers what he is reading at each stage of his life, offering a sort of providential canon for his journey to finding Christ. From these details, we can see the hermeneutic circle at work in Augustine and see how his reading gathers the various strands of his life—physical, social, intellectual, spiritual—and unifies them in his narrative of conversion.

The centrality of the hermeneutic circle in Augustine's conversion is apparent also in the stories related to him by his close friends. Literal texts are supplemented by humans-as-texts, beginning with Alypius, a fellow native of Thagaste and one of Augustine's students in Carthage. Alypius overcame his addiction to the bloodthirsty spectacles of the circuses because he heard Augustine ridicule circus-goers as an illustration in a lesson he was teaching. Augustine was unaware that this criticism affected his student so strongly. From this incident, he realized that “[y]ou [God] brought about his correction through my agency, but without my knowledge, so that it might be clearly recognized as your work.... You make use of all of us, witting or unwitting, for just purposes known to you” (6.7.12).

He drew from the text before him a parallel in which God's intended meaning appears for Alypius who, responding to Augustine as if to a text, reconsiders his prior understanding and

alters his behavior.⁶ Augustine does not realize he has become Alypius' text; conversely, Alypius probably does not realize that he has become a text for Augustine, revealing this lesson about God's "just purposes."

Next, Augustine hears a story from Simplicianus, Bishop Ambrose's mentor, who recounts the conversion of Victorinus, a famous Roman teacher of rhetoric. Victorinus confessed to Simplicianus that he was already a Christian, but he did not want to declare that before the church because it would enrage his colleagues who worshipped in pagan cults. *As he read*, he realized his prideful error, went to church with Simplicianus, and declared his faith in Christ to the parishioners and angry colleagues. Due to the emperor's decree that Christians could not teach rhetoric, Victorinus willingly gave up his post (8.2.3-5.10).

Simplicianus intended his story to motivate Augustine to convert. The similarities between Augustine and Victorinus are striking: both are accomplished teachers of rhetoric, both are well read and have searched for spiritual meaning in their research, both are ambitious men. Simplicianus saw these similarities and wanted to interpret Augustine-as-text in the same manner as Victorinus-as-text. But whereas pride hindered Victorinus' full conversion, lust prevented Augustine from accepting Christianity. Thus, Simplicianus misread Augustine, but Augustine also misreads himself, as he admits later:

I had grown used to pretending that the only reason why I had not yet turned my back on the world to serve you was that my perception of the truth was uncertain, but that excuse was no longer available to me, for by now it was certain. But I was still entangled by the earth and refused to enlist in your service, for the prospect of being freed from all these encumbrances frightened me as much as the encumbrances themselves ought to have done. (8.5.11)

⁶ Although Alypius realizes that the circuses are detestable, he does not become a Christian at this time. He actually converts moments after Augustine.

To a certain end Augustine's reading was "complete," in that he was certain of Christianity's truth, but unlike Victorinus who "from his avid reading" felt compelled to "confess [Christ] before men and women," Augustine had yet to come across the text that would produce such a compulsion in him.

He acquires the necessary motivation from the next story. Ponticianus, a court official originally from Africa, visits Augustine and Alypius. As he speaks to the two of them, Ponticianus notices a book lying on a table. Once he picks it up and sees that it is the epistles of Paul, he remembers the story of two court officials in Trier who similarly discover a book sitting in the cottage of some peasants. The book they found was *The Life of St. Antony*, the most famous of the first Egyptian monks. As one of the officials started to read it,

a change began to occur in that hidden place within him where you [God] alone can see; his mind was being stripped of the world, as presently became apparent. The flood tide of his heart leapt on, and at last he broke off his reading with a groan as he discerned the right course and determined to take it. By now he belonged to you. (8.6.15)

At this point, he told his compatriot that he was quitting his post to devote his life to God. When the other official heard this declaration, he too determined to give up his career to serve God. Ponticianus' story sets in motion the final moments leading to Augustine's conversion, but before we examine those moments, let us consider the official's tale.

The fact that Ponticianus is African, like Augustine and Alypius, may suggest an instant accord between the three of them—they share a common background. It is important to look at similarities within this story, because they played a significant part in the success and failure of Simplicianus' account. But unlike Victorinus, Ponticianus does not seem to share many commonalities with Augustine; they seem to be of different stations. Ponticianus appears knowledgeable before Augustine because he is familiar with the story of St. Antony, as well as the proliferation of monasteries throughout the empire, information Augustine is astounded to

learn (8.6.14). So the two men's origins are similar, but their opening conversation promises to move Augustine in a new direction.

Ponticianus next picks up the collection of Paul's letters, of which "I was applying myself to intensive study." When the official picks up the book, a convergence occurs of the written texts Augustine has studied so fervently over the years and the stories his friends have been telling him recently. Also, his holding the book suggests that what he tells Augustine will enable the latter to receive the truth of God's purpose, which is expressed in Paul's letters. Recalling that Augustine was unaware of God's intention in his instructing Alypius, there seems to be no confusion of intention in Ponticianus regarding what *he* can offer Augustine.

The book reminds Ponticianus of the story of the Trier officials, which he begins to relate to Augustine and Alypius. This incident parallels the events of the story: one official picking up the book, confessing his faith, and convincing his friend also to convert (although Augustine's conversion does not happen during his conversation with Ponticianus). As the official tells this story, though, the lines between human and text become blurred – from the book in Trier (which is *The Life of St. Antony!*), to the one official convincing the other to convert through his excitement, to Ponticianus' narration, to the book in his hand, to the already existent ambiguities of Augustine and Alypius as texts. Across this chain, however, the intention of its author, God, reaches Augustine, that is, to bring His creations back into His created purpose.

After Ponticianus finishes his story, Augustine is distressed. He takes leave of the official and retreats to the garden adjacent to the house where he and Alypius are staying. His conversion to Christianity takes place in this garden, and the details of this profound experience bring together all the types of change we have discussed so far. First, Augustine describes changes to his physical body. Before he flees to the garden, he speaks with a crazed urgency to

Alypius: “[T]he cadences of my voice expressed my mind more fully than the words I uttered”

(8.8.19). His eyes looked wild, and his face flushed. He enters a physical state that is

simultaneously spasmodic and paralytic:

While this vacillation was at its most intense many of my bodily gestures were of the kind that people sometimes want to perform but cannot...If I tore out my hair, battered my forehead, entwined my fingers and clasped them round my knee, I did so because I wanted to. I might have wanted to but found myself unable, if my limbs had not been mobile enough to obey. (8.8.20)

Although he does not physically die, Augustine identifies his mental and physical agitation with the death of his will: “All I knew was that I was going mad, but for the sake of my sanity, and dying that I might live, aware of the evil that I was but unaware of the good I was soon to become.” Augustine observes that his confusion of movement is his will desiring to carry out any motion except surrendering to God’s will. Cornered in this garden by the truth of God’s intention that now faces him, his only recourse for staying in a fallen, disobedient state are these bodily convulsions, which themselves are stifled as his will grows submissive.

Augustine takes this opportunity to discuss the presence of conflicting urges in the mind and to reject the Manichaean theory that two natures—good and evil—play a tug-of-war in the mind. It is interesting that he chooses to argue against this during his account of conversion. He argues that the conflict is not as simple as “two hostile minds at war” (8.10.24), that there could be multiple evil impulses within the mind, or several good impulses vying for attention. Does this multiplicity of impulses within the human soul not remind one of his discussion of multiple interpretations of scripture in the twelfth book?

Why not both, if both are true? And if there is a third possibility, and a fourth, and if someone else sees an entirely different meaning in these words, why should we not think that he [Moses] was aware of all of them, since it was through him that the one God carefully tempered his sacred writings to meet the minds of many people, who would see different things in them, and all true? (12.31.42)

Thus, his acknowledgement of multiple interpretations of scripture under God's guidance echoes his meditation on the variety of impulses—both good and evil—within the human soul “until one is chosen, to which the will, hitherto distracted between many options, may move as a united whole” (8.10.24): this is the resolution he seeks in the garden, that he will finally answer “when the joys of eternity call.”

Once he has solved for himself this issue of conflicting impulses, he envisions his struggle as an allegory, in which he is the main character. The temptations of his sinful ways tug at him and whisper in his ears, but he pulls away and walks toward a country “into which I trembled to cross,” until the “chaste, dignified figure of Contenance” stands before him, beckoning to him with her “calm and cheerful” although “modest, pure and honorable” charm. She urges Augustine to trust in the Lord for His support and healing (8.11.26-27). This allegory, this text, that plays in Augustine's mind comes to this tense moment of decision, where Augustine must decide to commit the ending of the story to God, allowing God's authorial intention to take over.

Breaking out of this allegorical vision, Augustine brings us back into the garden, where he runs to a secluded spot under a tree as “a huge storm blew up within me and brought on a heavy rain of tears” (8.12.28). Within this tempest of emotion he begins praying that God will forgive him his sins and end the struggle. At this point, perhaps the most famous moment of Augustine's conversion occurs; he hears children nearby chanting the phrase “Pick it up and read,” which he interprets to be a divine command to read the Scriptures. He admits that he does this because “I had heard the story of how Antony had been instructed by a gospel text” (8.12.29). By adhering to the children's command, he internalizes the narrative chain that he had heard from Ponticianus; Augustine accepts his identity as a text, the created work of God, and commits himself to the Author's intention.

He finds the collection of Paul's epistles where Alypius had left it, opens it, and reads the first passage he comes to, Romans 13:13-14⁷: "No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away." It takes an act of reading to complete Augustine's conversion. In a sense, a hermeneutic circle is closed when Augustine accepts Christ, if we view the texts that he encounters merely building to this one epiphany. Certainly, the works that he read in his life up to the Milanese garden are significant to his conversion—otherwise he would not have mentioned them in the *Confessions*—but their influence on his writing subsequent to the *Confessions* is undeniable. Thus, Augustine's conversion actually reveals *the* hermeneutic circle of his thinking. The passage he reads in Romans opens up the new world of possibility, which Ricoeur describes as the object of interpretation.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics and Augustine-as-text give the *Confessions* as a work a meaning crucial to the mission of the Christian literary interpreter. In terms of hermeneutics, Augustine's writing becomes the moment of testing his prejudices, of fusing his horizons. He looks back on the significant memories of his life with the perspective he has gained from his reading history, and he makes an interpretation of those memories that may not be historically accurate but useful to Augustine in the continuation of his spiritual and intellectual narrative:

While most modern readers would agree that there is nothing of consequence that is false in Augustine's account of his conversion, it is unlikely that they would agree all of these remarkable details occurred exactly as he records them. Even so, Augustine's *memoria* recalls the conversion as an experience in which all details of person, setting, and event assume the role of symbols and images. All of these, in turn, point to higher meaning. (Forman 90-1)

⁷ Romans 13:13-14: "not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

In terms of Christian faith, Augustine takes the opportunity in the *Confessions* to submit his life up to his conversion to God for revision and restoration. Augustine writes the work in the second person, as an extended prayer to God, so that the details of his life receive divine scrutiny. The children's chant of "Pick it up and read" suddenly takes on another meaning; not only should Augustine go to the Scriptures, but he should also pick up and read his life with the intention and understanding that the Holy Spirit can provide. As Paul writes, "[t]herefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, and the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Brian Stock also sees this goal in Augustine's writing:

Our understanding of our lives is inseparable from the stories by which we represent our thoughts in words. Every understanding, therefore, is a reading of ourselves, every genuine insight, a rereading, until, progressing upwards by revisions, we have inwardly in view the essential source of knowledge, which is God. (111)⁸

Having reread his life following the intention instilled by the Holy Spirit, Augustine now stands at the end of the *Confessions* with a world of interpretive possibility. We now know the environment in which the Christian interpreter functions; we see the intermingling of humans, texts, and humans-as-texts; thanks to Augustine, we have a model for retrospective analysis of ourselves as part of God's process of restoring believers as His creative work, what we refer to as sanctification. The next step is to look at texts in this world—what is the role of the Christian interpreter of literature?

⁸ Also consider, "Texts and selves interpenetrated: it became possible to look upon the building of a new self as an exegetical and interpretive process" (Stock 54-55).

CHAPTER 4 REDEMPTIVE READING OR, READING OF RECONCILIATION

In the first two parts of this essay, I have focused on Augustine's *Confessions*. Chapter 2 showed the centrality of creation and interpretation in his view of how God formed the world. Chapter 3 explored the human as a creation—a text—from the perspectives of both God and humans. The ground we have covered so far allows us to move on to Augustine's later treatise on biblical interpretation called *On Christian Doctrine*. In this final part, I will consider how the believer can extend the restoration project within himself that begins at conversion outward to texts he encounters in the fallen world.

Augustine ends the second book of *On Christian Doctrine* with his metaphor of “plundering the Egyptians.” Just as the Israelites took gold, silver, and clothing from the Egyptians before fleeing to the desert,¹ so too should Christians take from the surrounding culture what is useful to building their faith and leave what is repugnant:

When the Christian separates himself in spirit from their [pagans'] miserable society, he should take this treasure with him for the just use of teaching the gospel. And their clothing, which is made up of those human institutions which are accommodated to human society and necessary to the conduct of life, should be seized and held to be converted to Christian uses. (*OCD* 2.40.60)

In this militant statement Augustine moves from a spiritual segregation to a physical confiscation. He interprets the treasures of gold and silver to be “liberal disciplines more suited to the uses of truth and some most useful precepts concerning morals.” The clothing on the backs of the Egyptians, which represents the structure of society, is to be forcefully taken (note the word “seized”) and altered to suit Christian purposes.

¹ “The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians” (Ex. 12:35-36).

This metaphor offers two troubling possibilities. On the one hand, Christians could take the treasure and run to the desert, away from the kingdom whose inhabitants wear the cloaks of society. Consequently, Christians miss out on numerous advantages that society offers which would further their earthly mission. Their role in the world thus becomes backward and irrelevant, so that they lose their influence as God's witnesses. Furthermore, the question of which treasures one should take to the wilderness becomes problematic—if we make the wrong choice, we could find ourselves in a slavery worse than that endured in Egypt.

On the other hand, Christians could strip society of its cloak and turn it into the cloak of Christian society. Each step of this process involves violence, not necessarily in physical terms, but in terms of sudden, unsolicited force, which, rather than nurturing the progress of a society sincerely beholden to Christian doctrine, breeds disillusion and plants the seeds of a reciprocal coup. After all, a cloak, regardless of its material or its maker, remains a cloak, subject to the same wrinkles, tears, and misfittings.

Augustine's metaphor seems to advise two contradictory movements—either run away from society or take it by storm—neither of which satisfactorily shows how the believer can grow closer to Christ in the world and help to bring other people along on this pilgrimage. The prospect looks just as bleak in the secular world of academics, including our focus in this essay, literature. Either Christian scholars take what they can from the secular field to study a canon of literature limited by the demand that it clearly edify the Christian worldview, or they take over the secular field and force the flow of its progress into a narrow channel, with the danger of losing important streams of truth along the way. Neither of these options promises a greater appreciation of literary creation or the promulgation of faith in Christ.

At this point, the question that the Christian interpreter must answer becomes clear; it is a question that all believers must keep in mind, faced with two challenges of scripture. While John tells us, “Do not love the world or anything in the world” (1 Jn. 2:15), James also urges us “to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (Js. 1:27). How does the follower of Christ live in the world, to carry out the latter command, but not be of the world, to uphold the former? This question is hard enough to answer in terms of interpersonal relationships; how much more so in terms of worldly texts! How does a Christian interpreter take her inner transformation of Christ’s redemption and apply it to a literary work without diminishing the integrity of the work itself or of God’s truth? Is such a question worth answering in the grand scheme of sanctification, that is, one’s spiritual progress toward the holiness of Christ? I argue that it is, and, in spite of his imagery of plundering, Augustine seems to, also. In order to find the answer, let us first return to Genesis to examine the first act of human interpretation.

Earlier we discussed the creative collaboration between God and Adam, when God created the animals and Adam named them (Gen. 2:19). Shortly before this act, God places Adam in the Garden of Eden with one ordinance: “And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die’” (2:16-17). These two events—God’s commanding Adam and the creative collaboration—seem intertwined: the creative order can take place as God conceived it only when Adam (representing humanity) lives in obedience to God’s rule.

When the serpent speaks to the woman Eve, he reframes God’s command: “You will not surely die...for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:4-5). In his argument the serpent uses both truth and falsehood.

Whereas eating the fruit will “open their eyes” and give the humans the godlike power of knowing good and evil, it also guarantees death for the humans. Interestingly, Eve’s next act is to look, as if in response to the serpent’s comment that her eyes needed to be opened: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (3:6).

When Eve looks at the fruit in light of the information the serpent gives her, the serpent’s re-contextualization of God’s command is complete, as well as the separation of humanity from God. Eve’s gaze is an act of interpretation; everything that she observes about the fruit is true, and every quality she discerns makes a positive impression on her—food, beauty, and wisdom are all favorable things. But she has forgotten the one characteristic of the fruit that would put her observations into perspective, that God has forbidden the fruit. Had she taken account of this last fact, would the other facts change? The fruit would still be edible, beautiful brain food, but the *significance* of those qualities would change, not to mention the other instantiations of those qualities around her. By deciding not to eat the fruit, her eyes would be opened *in a different way*.

People often think that the Edenic tragedy is that Adam and Eve gave up blissful ignorance for knowledge. In a world where we are deluged with information, and there are countless things we wish we didn’t know, a pristinely naïve world sounds attractive. But Adam and Eve did not sacrifice ignorance to acquire the godlike ability to know good and evil. They already possessed the tools to gain wisdom and the faculties to utilize those tools. Indeed, Eve correctly observed that the fruit would enable her to acquire wisdom, but was there another way, besides heeding the serpent’s deception?

At this juncture, a distinction arises between wisdom and knowledge. In the *Confessions*, Augustine defines *wisdom* in this way:

[W]isdom is known to be the eldest of all created things. The wisdom here referred to is obviously not the Wisdom who is fully coeternal with you, his Father, who are our God, and equal to you; no, not that Wisdom through whom all things were created, not that Beginning in whom you made heaven and earth. The wisdom of which I speak is a created wisdom, the intellectual order of being which by contemplating the Light becomes light itself. Wisdom it is called, but it is a created wisdom, and as there is a vast difference between Light as a source and that which is lit up by another, the difference is just as great between Wisdom that creates and the wisdom that has been created. (C 12.15.20)

Augustine uses Wisdom as another appellation for the Word that creates all things, which he identifies as God the Son. This would compliment the Book of Proverbs, in which Wisdom is personified: “Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom” (Prov. 4:6-7). Wisdom’s supremacy would seem to point to Jesus’ later words, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well” (Jn. 14:6-7). Knowledge and wisdom do not appear to be synonymous; in fact, it would seem that one acquires knowledge through wisdom, as in Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Fearing the LORD, that is, coming to the Father through Christ the intercessor, is wisdom. Once one “gets wisdom,” she can acquire knowledge.

Applying this dynamic between wisdom and knowledge to Eve’s situation, it seems that she lacked wisdom because she did not adhere to God’s command. In spite of her efforts to know the fruit through her empirical observations, she could not know it fully without the wisdom of fearing God. Adam and Eve, then, seek wisdom by getting knowledge first, which is backwards to what Augustine calls “the intellectual order.” The problem with gathering knowledge first is that knowledge is a heterogeneous mixture of truth and falsehood, like the

serpent's argument. The serpent offered Eve knowledge, but she did not employ wisdom to interpret the knowledge.

Readers of Genesis often wonder why God would plant a tree in the garden of which Adam and Eve, the caretakers of the garden, couldn't partake. What purpose does a forbidden tree serve? Here, Augustine's discussion of *things* in the first book of *On Christian Doctrine* comes in handy. He informs us that there are two types of things: those that are to be used and those that are to be enjoyed (*OCD* 1.3.3). Things to be enjoyed make the individual blessed and are characterized by their eternality and immutability (1.22.20). Thus, he writes, "The things which are to be enjoyed are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a single Trinity, a certain supreme thing common to all who enjoy it" (1.5.5). Humans use the things-to-be-used in order to attain those things that make us blessed, the Things-to-be-enjoyed—God.

Using Augustine's definitions of things, what could the forbidden tree and its fruit be except things-to-be-used? How would they be used except in order to access the Thing-to-be-enjoyed? God, then, did not plant a tree that bears fruit; in that case, Eve's use of the fruit would be correct and God would be the deceiver. Instead, God planted a tree that bears *forbidden* fruit, meaning that inherent within the fruit is its forbidden quality. Eve misuses the forbidden fruit by treating it like any other fruit in the garden. By eating the fruit, she fails to understand the significance that God attributes to it. When the interaction between Eve, the fruit, and God follows the created order, Eve acquires greater insight into all three; by using the forbidden fruit as a thing-to-be-used in order to enjoy God, Eve gains wisdom. But when Eve does not acknowledge God's intention for the forbidden fruit, the creative synergy that existed between the humans and God is lost. Rather than trusting God's wisdom, Eve demonstrates bad faith by

relying exclusively upon her limited, inaccurate knowledge and attributing her own significance to the forbidden fruit.

Let us take to heart the lesson of Eve's misinterpretation as we consider literature. First of all, using Augustine's classifications for things, we can say that literature is a thing-to-be-used. What type of thing is literature? Apparently from Augustine's definition in the second book, literature would fall under the category of conventional signs:

Conventional signs are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign. (2.2.3)

At the most basic level, literature is a human creation, imbued with one human's mental action—what we will tentatively call intention—so that another human can receive that intention. In addition to the writer's intention, literature possesses a divine significance, which filters down through the created order, as we discussed in Chapter 2. Because humans, who are God's created works, take the material of this world, which is also the created work of God, to make their own literary work, God's creative intention, to some degree, shines through.

But humans and their literature live in the world after the fall, where all information contains that serpentine mixture of truth and falsehood. We no longer work in creative synergy with God, so there is no certainty that our literary works are in accord with the created order. Literature thus produces a tension for the Christian interpreter: on the one hand, it evinces humans' divine resemblance; on the other, it seduces with potential untruths that could lure the reader into disobedience. If he embraces it completely for its own sake, he makes the same mistake that Eve made; he rejects the wisdom of God and submits himself to whatever thoughts, feelings, or actions the literary work may provoke. Yet if he categorically rejects literature for its

own sake, then he also demonstrates a lack of faith in God: he assumes that God's wisdom will not shield him from deception or that God's truth cannot withstand the attacks of a critical work.

In truth, God never commands humans "Don't read," as He commanded Adam and Eve, "Don't eat." The avoidance of literature because of its potential snares is not biblical; rather, the scriptures seem to encourage believers to meet the challenges posed by some literature. For instance, Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Later in the same letter, he says this: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" (13:5). The scriptures urge the Christian interpreter to grapple with criticism of the faith that he may encounter. At those points, he must not turn away from God's wisdom but rather embrace it more fully, so that he may understand the critiques. Furthermore, deceptions in literature are moments of testing for the believer, when his faith must endure and grow stronger.

The acquisition of wisdom and the strengthening of faith seem like worthy rewards for dealing with deceptive or critical literature, but why should the Christian interpreter come to literature looking for trouble? Why should he not find his cozy academic niche reading and analyzing literature written from a Christian perspective? In order to answer these questions, let us digress from literary interpretation and consider Augustine's explanation of human love:

[I]t is commanded to us that we should love one another, but it is to be asked whether man is to be loved by man for his own sake or for the sake of something else. If for his own sake, we enjoy him; if for the sake of something else, we use him. But I think that man is to be loved for the sake of something else. In that which is to be loved for its own sake the blessed life resides; and if we do not have it for the present, the hope for it now consoles us. But 'cursed be the man that trusteth in man.' (*OCD* 1.22.20)

Humans, like literature, are things-to-be-used—they do not possess the eternality and immutability characteristic of things-to-be-enjoyed, and Augustine argues that we love humans for the sake of a Thing-to-be-enjoyed (who bestows upon us the blessed life). He comes to this conclusion by recalling Jesus’ response when a Pharisee asks him which commandment is the greatest in the Law:

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. *And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’* All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Mt. 22:37-40; my italics)

Since the first commandment compels the believer’s entire being, the love in the second commandment is subsumed within the first, so that the love a human has for himself and for his neighbor is a facet of the love devoted to God.

As it is true from the human perspective, so is it true from God’s perspective that humans are things-to-be-used. Augustine further explains the relationship between believers and God:

Therefore He does not enjoy us but uses us....But He does not use a thing as we do. For we refer the things that we use to the enjoyment of the goodness of God; but God refers His use of us to His own good....That use which God is said to make of us is made not to His utility but to ours, and in so far as He is concerned refers only to His goodness. (*OCD* 1.31.34-32.35)

Recall from Chapter 3 that God is complete being and supremely good (*C* 7.12.18), and the being and goodness that humans possess come from God. His “use” of us goes to our good, in that we align more with our created purpose when we are of use to Him, that is, when we are obedient. Again, obedience to God is becoming aware of His intention for us (our artistic metaphor for the Holy Spirit, who comes upon us in our conversion), listening to that intention, and acting in accordance to it. Because that intention comes from God—*is* God, in fact—the enjoyment we receive by adhering to our intended purpose is also His enjoyment; as Augustine observes, it is “to His own good.”

We described this process of coming into accord with God's intention a restoration project, sanctification. In artistic terms, this is the effort to regain the creative synergy between humans and God—Adam's naming of the animals—so that the creative intention expressed by humans is synchronized with, or is provided within, God's intention. But this reunion extends beyond outward expressions of creativity; it is also the happy moment of reconnection, when God's question in the garden "Where are you?" is finally answered (Gen. 3:9). This moment is described by Jesus in the parable of the good shepherd:

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice....I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. (Jn. 10:3-4, 14-15)

This call and response that Jesus describes between the shepherd and his sheep parallels God's resonance within His human creations that becomes all-encompassing within the believer when the process of sanctification is complete.

Although the process of sanctification begins at the moment of conversion, it cannot be completed in the fallen world, like a line plotted on a Cartesian plane that approaches an asymptote; the line will draw infinitely closer to the asymptote but will never reach it. The believer can grow ever closer to God as she becomes more receptive to the Holy Spirit, but the sinfulness within the world—and in the members of her body, as Paul writes—prevent her from embracing God with her total being. But this is why Jesus promised that He would return: "They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Mt. 24:30-31). The eschatological moment of the Christian story is when the asymptotic divide between the believer and God is obliterated and the

Cartesian plain of the fallen world is “rolled up like a scroll.” Jesus describes this moment in His parable of the good shepherd, when the shepherd leads the sheep out of the pen; then the intention of God’s creative work will be fully realized.

Until that moment of Christ’s return—the arrival of which is unknown to us (24:36)—we still exist in the fallen world.² But the process of sanctification is not simply an act of waiting for His return, as the apostles learned after Jesus ascended into the sky:

They were looking intently up into the sky as he [Jesus] was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:10-11)

Prior to His ascent, when He tells the apostles that they will be His witnesses, Jesus does not intend this witnessing to be staring into the sky. If we are not simply to wait for Christ’s return, and if we don’t know when it will happen, our only recourse, our only way of acting as witnesses, is to go about living life. As Slavoj Žižek writes, “[f]ar from providing the conclusive dot on the *i*, the divine act stands, rather, for the openness of a New Beginning, and it is up to humanity to live up to it, to decide its meaning, to make something of it” (Žižek 136).

Žižek shortly thereafter refers to Jesus’ act of Redemption as the Event, a term central to Alain Badiou’s ethic of truth. Before we continue our investigation of the believer’s role prior to

² Consider a similar realization by Fredric Jameson concerning Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism:

Even the Freudian model of the unconscious...is everywhere subverted by the neo-Freudian nostalgia for some ultimate moment of cure, in which the dynamics of the unconscious proper rise to the light of day and of consciousness and are somehow ‘integrated’ in an active lucidity about ourselves and the determinations of our desires and our behavior. But the cure in that sense is a myth, as is the equivalent mirage within a Marxian ideological analysis: namely, the vision of a moment in which the individual subject would be somehow fully conscious of his or her determination by class and would be able to square the circle of ideological conditioning by sheer lucidity and the taking of thought. (Jameson 282-283)

The hope for a Christian that he will achieve Christ’s perfection of being prior to Jesus’ second coming is like the terminal, Utopian moments of these other intellectual systems. As Solomon writes, “No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot fully comprehend it” (Eccl. 8:17).

the eschatological moment, let us consider this ethic. According to Badiou, an event is an occurrence that cannot be explained within the context of the situation in which it occurred; the event is a “supplement,” it supplants the normal situation and “compels us to decide a new way of being” (Badiou 41). This new way of being takes effect when the individual decides “to relate henceforth to the situation *from the perspective of its...supplement*” (41; his italics). Badiou calls the decision to interpret the situation based on the new understanding produced from the event “fidelity to the event” and the process of that interpretation, operating according to the event, “truth” (42). Therefore, the “ethic of truth” is the principle of “being faithful to a fidelity” (47).

The truth that Badiou describes does not exist prior to the event; if the event is a break from the commonalities of a situation, it stands to reason that the event’s truth could only appear once the event took place. Likewise, those who practice the ethic of truth in the wake of an event, whom Badiou calls the “subject” (43), were not part of the subject prior to the event.³ Badiou identifies within each individual that comprises the subject—each “some-one”—two components of the individual: there is “the animal ‘some-one,’” that is, the person himself, and the “excess of himself,” which exists beyond what is recognizable in one person by another. The fidelity to an event captivates this excess; it “*passes through him*, from within time, in an instant of eternity” (45; his italics).

Within the scheme of Badiou’s ethic, then, there appear to be two simultaneous, parallel conditions: there is the known, which encompasses the banality of the situation and the animal some-one, and the unknown, the process of truth following an event that leads the excess of self on a course of discovery (47). The ethic sets as its goal to “link the known with the not-known,” to subsume the interests of the animal some-one (survival, self-interest) within the perseverance

³ Badiou never refers to the subject of an event as a single individual. When he speaks of an individual who makes up part of the subject, he refers to him as a “some-one.”

of the excess self to remain faithful to the fidelity. Thus, the interests of the animal some-one bend to the pursuit of the fidelity in a “disinterested interest”:

[A]s regards my interests as a mortal and predatory animal, what is happening here does not concern me; no knowledge tells me that these circumstances have anything to do with me. I am altogether present there, linking my component elements via that *excess beyond myself* induced by the passing through me of a truth. But as a result, I am also suspended, broken, annulled; dis-interested. For I cannot, within the fidelity to fidelity that defines ethical consistency, take an interest in myself, and thus pursue my own interests. All my capacity for interest, which is my own perseverance in being, has poured out into the future consequences of [the truth]. (49-50)

Let us now return to the life of the Christian. If Christ’s act of redemption is, as Žižek calls it, the Event, how can we view the believer through Badiou’s lens? The body of believers becomes the subject; the fallen world, the situation.⁴ Following our conversion, our acceptance of God’s creative intention for us, we see within us the animal some-one, what Paul describes as “sin living in me” (Rom. 7:20), the interests of a “mortal and predatory animal.” The truth of the Event passes through our excess selves, what will become the resurrected self: “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42-44). The sinful nature that gradually dies within the believer, like the interests of the animal some-one, are “suspended, broken, annulled; dis-interested.” In the meantime, the excess self follows in fidelity the truth, discovering the process of sanctification. We know the ultimate destination of this process of truth, but we do not know the directions it will take before then.

⁴ How is it that the historical event of Jesus’ death and resurrection can be the Event for believers today? Recall, from Chapter 2, Augustine’s description of God’s word that is spoken both within time and eternally, so that His intention to form the world in Genesis 1:1 is also that which creates a newborn today. The Event of Redemption takes a similar form as God’s creating word, so that Jesus atones for the sinfulness of believers in that historical moment, allowing the conversion or “rebirth” of believers to this day. So a baby is born in the hospital of a small town in Florida, to parents who conceived her nine months prior, but she was created by God’s creating word at the beginning of time. Saul of Tarsus repents of his sins because of a conversation he has with God on the road to Damascus and becomes Paul, but his becoming Paul happens due to Jesus’ redeeming work on the Cross.

Which brings us back to the challenge posed by Žižek, that we have to make sense out of Jesus' act of Redemption. Badiou frames the question this way: "How will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known?" (Badiou 50). And, once again, we have the Christian's puzzle, "How do I be *in* the world, but not *of* it?" Jesus gives us the challenge—witness while you wait: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8). Jesus' final words before going up to heaven remind the disciples of things He has said previously: the time of His return is not known, but believers are to be prepared for it (Mt. 24:36-51, 25:1-13). Also, believers are to make disciples in His name and teach them to obey God's commands (28:18-20). Thus, the waiting-game for believers is an active game: implicit in our waiting is the spreading of our faith to non-believers, and at the same time, our evangelizing brings new believers into the same game of waiting.

We must examine closely what this active waiting looks like, not only as believers but as interpreters of literature, because both waiting and witnessing are essential to our literary theory.

At one point, prior to Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples ask Him when He will return:

Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many....At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (24:4-5, 10-14)

Three actions characterize the waiting Christian: he watches out that no one deceives him, he stands firm, and he preaches the gospel. The latter action describes witnessing; let us consider the first two, those that describe waiting. The believer must not be deceived by false prophets

who declare they are Christ; their actions oppose the act of witnessing. Therefore, the believer's waiting must oppose their opposition—as charlatans claim, “I am the Christ,” believers must be able to counter, “He is *not* the Christ.” Christian waiting, then, is a process of identifying and negating. Just as the sheep know and come to the voice of the shepherd, so they must also know not to heed the call of the thief.

By identifying these false prophets as “not-God,” believers re-create in their negation that same moment of wondrous watching when Jesus ascended into the sky. It creates the same void but also the *same promise* that Christ is returning. The believer must have faith that Jesus is who He says He is. If the believer is fooled into thinking that the false prophet speaks truthfully, his recognition of the truth will be delayed, but it will also spring from disillusionment, which is a further hindrance to faith. If the believer makes the negative identification as an act of faith in Christ, though, disillusionment will not result; rather, hope will grow in the believer. This hope then inspires the believer to take action out of love (*caritas*).

In addition to this identification of things as not-God, the believer is also to stand firm. He stands firm by not letting his love grow cold. Let us revisit the two great commandments that Jesus tells the Pharisee: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind; love your neighbor as yourself. God's creative intention for humans rests in abiding by these two commands. To stand firm in love is to stand firm in one's intended purpose. The Holy Spirit, God in the form of His intention, that driving force that brings believers inexorably toward Himself, dwells within Christ's followers—an inner resonance that sounds with the call of the Shepherd, that hand or whispering voice that directs you to your purpose. To stand firm in love is to stand firm in the Holy Spirit.

How do these two actions—the identification of things as not-God and the standing firm in love—play out in the life of the believer? We now shall consider as an example one of Jesus’ commands from His Sermon on the Mount before applying these actions to literary analysis: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (5:43-45). In this command, Jesus first distinguishes between the two, neighbors and enemies. Then He follows with a “but,” suggesting that this classification is subverted. Does loving one’s enemies fall under the great commandments? If we demonstrate our full love for God by obeying this command, we must re-define *enemies*. Certainly we easily perform the negation, that our enemies are not-God. Where, then, do enemies fall in this scheme? They become our neighbors, whom we are to love as ourselves. Neighbors, enemies, and believers all participate in this act of love.

But they are our enemies; we have perceived an opposition to us within them, or we have experienced some sort of wound at their hands. A tension remains that leads us back to the negation. Where else can not-God be identified? We must identify ourselves as not-God. For while the Holy Spirit lives within us, there is still Badiou’s “animal some-one,” the part of us in which sin still lurks. This self, where our instincts of survival and interest-protection reign, must be identified as not-God in order for Jesus’ command to work. Once we identify ourselves as not-God, we recall our identity, as His creation. Then our enemy’s identity falls into place, as a fellow creation, *as our neighbor*.

What, then, is the enmity between “us” and “them”? It has been a distorting agent, hindering us from adhering to God’s commandments and therefore our created purpose. We can then recognize it as sin and reject it, allowing us to take the third action, exhibiting our belief of

and love in Christ to our enemy, which will take different forms, depending on if this enemy is a believer or non-believer. Is our goal then to have our enemies love us? If we expect love *from* our enemies, then we once again misinterpret God's command. We neglect to identify ourselves as not-God, because we are trying to love our enemies for *our* sake, in the hopes that they might finally "play nice." No, we must love them for God's sake. When we do this, a tension still exists in the scheme, but rather than tension between our enemies and us, it becomes tension between us—that is, Badiou's excess, that which the Holy Spirit has captivated within us—and the distortion of the fallen world. We can see, then, that loving our enemies is a movement toward God in the process of sanctification.

We can extend this active waiting to our encounters with literature, if we cling to God's wisdom in the process. On the one hand, we know that God has not prohibited us from reading, writing, or thinking about literature. On the other hand, we know that, while the finger of God has touched every thing in this world, every thing, including literature, is not in line with His created intention. Not even believers, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, are free from the sinfulness of the fallen world:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom. 7:21-25)

This is the struggle of the believer in his process of sanctification, transcending the sinful influence of his ties to the fallen world, or as Badiou would say, continuously exceeding his own being. While this struggle plays out within us, how much more do we realize the havoc that sin wreaks upon non-believers! Jesus has called us to witness to these individuals who have not reclaimed their purpose as creations, God's intention. We invite non-believers to take part in the Event of Christ's Redemption, to experience alienation from this world by identifying it as not-

God and begin the process of redeeming their life in this world through an interpretation of love. This love that awakens in us is not for our sake, for the sake of non-believers, nor for the sake of the fallen world; the love that takes place is for God's sake. Embodied in the Holy Trinity, He is the Thing-to-be-enjoyed, that makes the lives of those who enjoy Him blessed.

In our quest to enjoy Him more fully, in the process of sanctification, we see things-to-be-used, which we use "in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love" (*OCD* 1.4.4). Humans are worthy of love, yet Augustine classifies them as things-to-be-used. The love for ourselves and our neighbors is part and parcel of our love for God, once again showing that our love for fellow humans is for God's sake. Within this relationship, though, we see that the use of humans as things-to-be-used is for love—to love and be loved.

Literature, as Augustine established, is a type of sign that attempts to convey the mental actions of humans, a type of intention. For this reason, our emotional and intellectual responses to humans can be reflected in our responses to literature. To the extent that we can alight upon something human within literature, we can treat it similar to the way we treat our neighbors. But to say that we love literature in the same way that we love ourselves, our neighbors, or God is to be "shackled by an inferior love" (1.3.3). Although humans and literature are both things-to-be-used, their uses differ. Whereas the utility of humans lies in their capacity for and ability to give love, the utility of literature lies in facilitating that love.

Perhaps considering the nature of the scriptures will assist us in understanding how to use literature. According to Augustine,

it is to be understood that the plenitude and the end of the Law and of all the sacred Scriptures is the love of a Being which is to be enjoyed and of a being that can share that enjoyment with us....That we might know this and have the means to implement it, the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation. We should use it, not with an abiding but with a transitory love and delight..., so that we love those things by which we are carried along for the sake of that toward which we are carried. (1.35.39)

Thus, we use scriptures to facilitate our love for God as we engage in the process of sanctification. But is literature to humans what scripture is to God? Recall God's traits of immutability and complete goodness. His word and His intention are each part of Him—they make up two thirds of the Trinity—so they do not change either. Humans are neither unchanging nor completely good (in fact, the goodness we have comes from God); we cannot imbue our writings with the steadfastness of scripture.

So literature is not exactly like humans or scripture. If we have access to humans and scripture, and they make up for the inherent weaknesses of literature, then what use is literature to Christians? But in its very unlikeness to these two things, literature finds its use. Consider again Ricoeur's praise of texts: "Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality" (Ricoeur 142). We don't go to literature to get actual human interaction, nor do we go to literature to receive God's word, but we do go to literature to extend the possibilities of human interaction and to understand how God's intention can infiltrate and guide those possibilities.

As Ferretter points out, Ricoeur conceives of interpreting these possible worlds as an appropriation, "a process by which the reader 'makes his own' what was initially alien, because of the distance between writer and reader" (123). For the Christian, then, making literature his own means applying the process of active waiting to the text: identifying the text, the meaning the reader gleans from it, and the internal effect the text has upon the reader all as not-God, and then putting it "in conversation" with God's intention under the auspices of the truth provided by

God in the scriptures. This latter step represents the Christian interpreter standing firm in love, because he cannot set apart his act of literary interpretation from the process of sanctification. Believers are called to listen ever more closely to God's intention in all aspects of their lives, and thus this call holds true in reading.

Therefore, we cannot "plunder the Egyptians" when it comes to reading literature. When we do, we don't live in the fullness of our created intention, because we shortchange our interaction with God and stunt our growth as revised creations. Although his concept of plundering does not satisfactorily guide the Christian's interpretation of literature, Augustine did provide a workable concept for literary study that can be revitalized by our discussion here—charity, or *caritas*:

Scripture teaches nothing but charity [*caritas*], nor condemns anything except cupidity, and in this way shapes the minds of men....I call "charity" the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God. (*OCD* 3.10.15-16)⁵

For this reason, Augustine asserts that if scripture seems to promote cupidity or undermine charity, we must read such passages figuratively. While he can declare the binary facets of scripture with certainty, we cannot do so with literature—a single work could in places embrace and reject charity and shun and uphold cupidity.

Augustine's solution to this confusion was to simply pick and choose pieces of literature that clearly embrace charity, but once again, we don't reap the benefits of literature by doing this, just as we are not fully living up to our created purpose if we shut out worldly people because they do not uphold charity. We are called to go into the fallen world to exhibit and explain our alienation from it. At the same time, we cannot detect cupidity in literary works and

⁵ The quote continues: "But 'cupidity' is a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God" (3.10.16).

claim that the author intended it figuratively. Even though we cannot use *caritas* in the same manner as with the scriptures, it gives us a place to start in literature.

When aspects of a literary work do uphold charity or condemn cupidity, the Christian interpreter should recognize them and appreciate them, but the hard work begins with portions of literature that seem out of line with or opposed to God’s intention. The interpreter first must identify how the work disagrees with doctrine; then he must think about why the conflict is there. Most importantly, he must consider the value of the difference—how does the difference affect the vision of the overall work? How does the difference affect him, both as a reader and as a Christian? What does the difference say about God’s intention? Does it clarify or obscure parts of scripture or the life of the believer (if the latter, then a whole new series of questions arises)? How do the answers to these questions about the opposition affect the aesthetic details of the work?⁶

These questions sound cold and didactic within the confines of this theoretical essay, and they may not take the same shape when interpretation actually occurs. The goal of such questions, however, is to show where the Christian interpreter’s labor really lies. He should not comb the work for “Amen!” statements—a literary work is an artifact of the fallen world, where such statements are frequently oblique and sparse. Rather, the interpreter is serving those readers seeking God’s intention when he focuses on the tendentious points within literature. As he uses

⁶ The practice of charity also applies to other interpretations, other theories of literature. Consider Augustine’s words in the *Confessions*:

But as for those who feed on your truth in the wide pastures of charity, let me be united with them in you, and in you find my delight in company with them. Let us approach the words of your book together, and there seek your will as expressed through the will of your servant, by whose pen you have dispensed your words to us. (C 12.23.32)

As in *On Christian Doctrine*, he is speaking of scriptural interpretation, but one can see how the practice of charity can allow the interpretation and utilization of other theories—even overtly hostile theories—to make his own interpretation.

scripture to shed light on the literary text, that very interpretive work should bring fresh insight into the wisdom of the scriptures themselves. The completion of the analysis should not leave him feeling comfortable; instead, his alienation with the world should be renewed, or the literary encounter should spur him to take the next step in sanctification, to “Keep going!”⁷ and remain faithful to the truth he has discovered.

When the believer has reached the end of the interpretive process, he will have established a reconciliation with the literary work. This does not mean that he has converted it into a Christian work; such an act commits violence to the text and does not leave the interpretation on a note of tension. Rather, he has maintained the integrity of the text but has pointed it in a new direction, leaving the invitation for future readers to look at it in a similar way:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:16-19)

We share this message of reconciliation in literary interpretation when we juxtapose it with the text and let them “speak to each other,” in the same way that the message is shared with non-believers. Recall Simplicianus’ failure in converting Augustine with his story: although Augustine had much in common with Victorinus, crucial details of the latter’s story kept it from fitting the former. We cannot make Simplicianus’ mistake and force texts into the molds of our expectations. We cannot ignore the misfittings; instead, we must engage them and experience the growth of our love because of our engagement with them, for the sake of fulfilling the created intention bestowed upon us by God.

⁷ The maxim of the ethic of truth, according to Badiou (52).

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*, John David Dawson investigates the postmodern critique of Daniel Boyarin that Pauline theology aims to supercede traditional Judaism, that is, to “regard as religiously (and finally, humanly) irrelevant the physical genealogy and embodied practices that formerly identified them as Jews” (Dawson 3). He seeks to prove that Paul’s reinterpretation of Jewish practices is an effect of “a divine, transformative performance in history” (7), the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather than subverting the literal culture and practice of pre-Christian Judaism, Paul’s retrospection of them after the sacrifice of Christ actually extends their meaning and brings them into fuller relief:

The key to the capacity to extend rather than undermine lay in the distinctive quality of Christ’s identity, for it was precisely (and only) Christ whose identity was so singular and unsubstitutable that it could, by virtue of the relation it bore to others, enhance their distinctive identities, even as it transformed them by bringing them into fuller relief. (212)

Dawson’s identification of this “extending without supplanting” that occurs in the figural reading of Jewish tradition translates well into the ethic of literary interpretation I have established in the previous pages, although the practice takes a certain twist.

The Christian interpreter must juxtapose the literary work with God’s intention expressed in the scriptures, to see where they align and where they diverge. Some readers would think that the interpretation was complete when they found the parts of literature that embrace God’s wisdom. In fact, the discovery of such passages might induce some to “out” their authors as “closet Christians.” But this method of interpretation exemplifies the supersessionist attitude that Dawson argues against. Indeed, to illuminate only the Christian crannies of literature suggests that believers need to satiate their thirst for God’s wisdom from the world’s literature,

but those who do again misplace the utility of literature. They are like Eve, trying to acquire the wisdom of God by eating fruit.

Christian interpreters and readers do not need literature to give them wisdom. Recall from Chapter 4 that literary works open up worlds to the reader that she may otherwise never experience. Within these worlds, she discovers new facets of human interaction, between each other and with God. These interactions take place in an experimental space; they offer possibilities. The Christian interpreter then can apply God's wisdom to these potential exchanges, in the same way that he is called to do so in real life. In this way, then, literature does not give us God's wisdom; rather, it gives us new opportunities to think about and employ God's wisdom. Thus the scriptures play a crucial role in the Christian's encounter with another text.

The supersessionist attitude that Dawson points out can lead to another misunderstanding about how Christians should approach literature. Like the misguided idea that the redemption of Christ supplants the Jewish people, Christians may mistakenly consider the Christian interpretation of a literary work to be a conquest, a victory for the "good guys" that forces the "bad guys" to lose ground. This view would explain the defensive tone of much Christian literary theory, the writers of which defend themselves against other Christians who feel threatened by the dangers of secular literature and against secular critics and theorists who have theorized the obsolescence of Christianity. Approaching literature from a defensive standpoint marginalizes the Christian interpreter and characterizes him as a victim. His recourse then becomes vengeance.

Let us reconsider Alain Badiou's ethic of truth for a moment. He writes, "It must...be the case that what the event calls forth and names is the central void of the situation for which

this event is an event” (Badiou 72). So, for example, the proletariat, the workers exploited by the societal domination of the bourgeoisie, are the void of the communist revolution. In terms of Christianity, we identified the event as Christ’s redemption manifest in His death and resurrection. The void of this situation, then, is—not Christians, because the Christian identity was not yet known, but God Himself in all three instantiations of the Trinity—the majesty of the Father, the righteousness of the Son, the intention of the Holy Spirit. The subject, which we established is the body of believers, are those who hear the call of the situation’s void: “[W]hat is retained of [the event] in the situation, and what serves to guide the fidelity, must be something like a trace, or a name, that refers back to the vanished event” (72). This is Peter’s confession to Jesus that “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). This is the believer’s act of witnessing to Christ that He commanded us to carry out, prior to His ascension.

The Christian interpreter makes a mistake if the event of his analysis names anything other than God as the void. Although he may capture the imagination of his readers, his work must invoke the name of the void of the original Event, God, so that the readers will become part of the subject as well. Otherwise, he practices what Badiou calls “fidelity to a simulacrum” and subverts the framework of the actual Event.

To avoid naming the Christian interpreter the void of the event is not to say that the interpreter as subject faces no opposition, though. Badiou is quick to point out that “[e]very fidelity to an authentic event names the adversaries of its perseverance” (Badiou 75). Because a fidelity breaks with the situation, with “opinions and established knowledges,” those who are faithful to the fidelity are prone to feel the banalities of the situation—and those who uphold them—pressing the faithful to return to the animal interests. But one who takes a defensive

stance to those pressures actually surrenders to them, because he attempts to protect a perceived self-interest.

The attitude of “Keep going!” that characterizes a fidelity can be the only response to such adversity; perseverance offers wisdom and brings to the faithful a greater understanding about the opposition, the identity and significance of which become “extended,” to use Dawson’s term. This dynamic between the faithful and their opposition echoes Paul in his letter to the Romans: “[W]e also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:3-5).

When the Christian community or Christian interpreters are placed in the role of victim, they become the void because they then focus their efforts on regaining some influence or power for the community. But such struggle is not the substance of event; it is the substance of situation: “Every invocation of blood and soil, of race, of custom, of community, works directly against truths; and it is this very collection that is named as the enemy in the ethic of truths” (76). We must remember what Žižek declares about the revolution of Christ’s act of redemption:

[W]e are *formally* redeemed, subsumed under Redemption, and we have to engage in the difficult work of actualizing it. The true Openness is not that of undecidability, but that of living in the aftermath of the Event, of drawing out the consequences—of what? Precisely of the new space opened up by the Event. (137)

The revolution has already taken place; those who believe respond to the revolution in their actions. They are forming the community that crosses boundaries of culture, race, class, and gender. We have no need to be defensive or protectionist; rather, we must be proactive in obeying the commands to witness and to love.

Just as Jesus’ identity as the Son of God illuminates for Paul how the Jewish traditions come into fulfillment through the extension of their meaning that results from the Cross, so too

can Christian interpreters envision Christ's fulfillment in the divergences of secular texts from God's intention: "[T]he spirit does not undermine but instead draws out the fullest meaning of the letter; the letter must remain in the spirit because the spirit is the letter fully realized" (Dawson 217). The letter is in the spirit, even if the letter strays from God's intention, because the letter says important things about the fallen nature of the world, the pain of humanity, and the need for God's mercy. The letter calls for the Holy Spirit to respond; the Christian interpreter is in turn moved by the Holy Spirit to understand the letter with God's wisdom and to respond to it with Christ-like compassion.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Zachary Beck was born and raised in Cocoa, Florida. He graduated Valedictorian in 2000 from Cocoa High School, received the Xerox Award for Excellence in the Humanities, and was recognized as a National Merit Scholar. In 2002 he was named an Anderson Scholar for outstanding academic performance during the first two years of his bachelor's program at the University of Florida. His undergraduate honors thesis examined the religious and philosophical motivations of the muckraking journalists at the turn of the twentieth century. He graduated summa cum laude from the University of Florida in 2004 with bachelor's degrees in English and political science. From 2005 to 2006, he edited the quarterly periodical for the Christian Study Center of Gainesville entitled *Reconsiderations*, which "explores Christian thought in the university community." In May 2007, Zachary earned his Master of Arts degree from the University of Florida.