

# Response to *A Theology of Reading*

## Chapter One – Contexts and Obstacles

p. 11

The universal applicability of Jesus' twofold commandment makes Augustine's charitable imperative just as relevant to the interpretation of epic poems and national constitutions as it is to the reading of Holy Scripture.

p. 14

The Reformers found themselves obliged by their polemical situation to show that they could specify a set of reliable safeguards against error – safeguards which would serve a similar liminal function to the concept of "tradition" in the Roman Catholic Church – and this need to provide safeguards and eliminate error came to dominate the hermeneutical tradition for the next several centuries. The chief goal of theological hermeneutics naturally, then, comes to be associated more closely with "getting it right" than with a deepening of understanding of a growing in love.

## Interlude A: The Illuminati

p. 39

Readers may love; critics care nothing for love, desiring instead to be among the Few initiated into mysteries which for the Many will be ever inaccessible.

p. 41

Kermode takes it for granted that this is Matthew's flinching from the harshness of the Jesus he inherited from Mark, but it may also be possible for Matthew's version to offer us another take on the passage from Mark. Why are the outsiders outside? Could it be possible that they bear some responsibility for their failure to understand?

## Chapter Two – Love and Knowledge

pp. 45-46

For Augustine, moreover, the will is governed by what it loves: Love determines will, and will in turn (to extrapolate to our present concern) governs interpretation. This is a wholly un-Aristotelian picture, and therefore one who wishes to develop a hermeneutics of Christian love will have to part company (however reluctantly) with Gadamer and other Aristotelian hermeneutical thinkers, just as he or she will have to part company with those who would contend for a scientific rationalized hermeneutics.

p. 48

The Christian Church, by contrast, need not suspect the partiality of friendship, but it is not concerned with developing such relationships; rather, it is bound to weave a web of mutuality for everyone who participates in the community.

## Interlude B: Transfer of Charisma

p. 73

In short, what Kinbote wants from John Shade is a transfer of charisma: to be not the recipient of energy but the source of energy, not the reflector of light but the generator of light.

p. 75

In Aristotelian terms, the friendship is flawed because it is based on instrumental rather than intrinsic goods. But I think that, in the literary and hermeneutical terms of this study, what Baker desires and

imagines is a genuine friendship – as opposed to the trivial, unfruitful gnosticism of the narrator of “The Figure in the Carpet” or the cannibalistic annotations of Nabokov’s *Kinbote*.

### **Chapter Three – Love and the Suspicious Spirit**

p. 77

I have also noted that we can and often do love a particular book in a way that is very like – almost indistinguishable from – the love we give to persons, and yet that love is not precisely to be equated with love for the author or any particular character.

p. 83

From this dread, Ricoeur says, “suspicion is born” (Symbolism 41). One suspects others: One preserves oneself from the defilement of their attention, of their personal comprehension. “Every profound thinker is more afraid of being understood than of being misunderstood” because any thinker understood by the herd is *ipso facto* not profound.

### **Interlude C: Quixotic Reading**

p. 91

The Quixotic reader dwells in a world of mirrors: Looking into a book or a poem, a Quixotic reader sees himself or herself reflected.

p. 92

Quixotic reading is always highly attentive, and we noted back in Chapter 1, with reference to Derrida, that attention tends also to be of this ambiguous character – which perhaps accounts for the radically different views readers have of Don Quixote himself: Is he a tyrant of fantasy, bending the world around him into conformity with his hermeneutical will to power, or is he a generous and playful giver of the gift of imagination?

### **Chapter Four – Kenosis**

p. 103

The private reader or listener can become an executant of felt meaning when he learns the poem or musical passage by heart. To learn by heart is to afford the text or music an indwelling clarity and life-force.

p. 104

Simone Weil believes a kenotic movement to be necessary for the love of others, as she explains in the continuation of a passage quoted in Chapter 2: “This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (115). Here again – now in her claim that real attentiveness to, and hence love for, the other depends upon the evacuation of the ego.

### **Interlude D: Two Charitable Readers**

p. 118

Iris Murdoch: “Coherence is not necessarily good, and one must question its cost. Better sometimes to remain confused” (Metaphysics 147)

p. 124

“But with successive readings one’s doubts grow, one begins to react against the overemphasis on one aspect of the truth at the expense of all the others, and one’s first enthusiasm may all too easily turn into an equally exaggerated aversion” (183) It is characteristic of Auden’s charitable reading that he recognizes

this danger, too: that one can become ashamed of one's own enthusiasms and determined to repudiate them – but at what cost?

## **Chapter Five - Justice**

p. 128

The tiny personal claims of love seem, many of us think, to carry little weight when compared to the sovereign demands of justice.

p. 129

... for as charity comes to be identified with philanthropic benevolence it comes to be seen more and more as a work of supererogation – the fruit of personal graciousness, a free “gift” beyond what duty demands – rather than as an obligation due to others. Only by making benevolence to the poor and oppressed a matter of justice rather than charity can the sense of obligation be effectively restored.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What specific outcomes came from the “alienation from the text” that resulted due to the Reformation's need to “get it right” and the modern period's focus of controlling the text?
2. Can a person who is comprehended still be regarded as profound?
3. How can a writer avoid an overemphasis on one aspect of truth and the equally exaggerated aversion once he or she realizes his or her overemphasis?