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THE CONSOLATION OF NARRATIVE:

FIGURAL SELVES

FROM AUGUSTINE TO THOMAS MORE

A Dissertation in

English

by

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ABSTRACT

Augustine’s *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* served medieval Christendom as canonical autobiography and historiography, respectively. Both works present variations upon a single narrative model derived from sacred history. First, events foreshadow a climactic revelation which, when it comes, provides a summary meaning to history. Then a posthistorical space follows, in which the implications of that climax are tentatively interpreted and performed. Thus the narrative ends in anticlimax or lack of closure, not the triumphalism of a Eusebian historiography or a saint’s life. If an end-stopped, triumphalist narrative generates fixed meaning, an Augustinian narrative produces consolation in the absence of meaning because authoritative sacred metanarrative predicts such absence. Following Augustine’s example, important medieval narrative structures of the self (Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum*, Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and More’s *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*) use the anticlimactic structure of sacred history in order to provide consolation for their own lack of closure. This consolation arises from grounding the meaningless autonomies of their characters in inscrutable transcendence and from exploring a previous climactic moment through a provisional authorship. In short, this dissertation chronicles the role of the literary use of sacred history in the late classical and medieval construction of narratival selfhood and identity.

This dissertation contributes primarily to three important discussions in medieval studies. First, it provides partial motivation for the frequent lack of resolution in medieval narrative form. By grounding itself in a posthistory governed by indiscernible divine form, medieval Augustinian narrative recontextualizes the formal problem of closure within religious culture. Second, it identifies a distinctively Augustinian narrative consolation that supplements Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, dominant in the medieval period. The linearity of
Augustine’s sacred history up to conversion or incarnation provides an authoritative narrative absent from Boethius’s strictly philosophical resources. The authority of a climactic event enables Augustine’s return from that event into a posthistory where it can be re-performed.

Third, its analysis of allusive narratives contributes to the history of medieval exegesis and hermeneutics. A figural telling of one’s own story, or the story of another person, is also a reading of individual and sacred history. The texts this project will examine are already provisional interpretive responses to the sacred narrative. However, they exemplify specifically literary interpretation, outside the usual functions of church hierarchy. As neither strictly sacred nor secular narratives because they interpret both sacred (biblical) and secular (individual) history, they offer unique opportunities to examine the competition and fusion of various interpretive techniques in the medieval period.
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To my father,
Arlin,
who obsessed me with language,
and to my mother,
Velma,
who haunted me with time
Introduction

A medieval legacy of consolatory narrative derives from Augustine’s two narratives: *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei*, microcosm and macrocosm, individual and cosmic history. Both these works tell the same story that unexpectedly ends in a posthistory requiring consolation. They begin with a linear narrative arc that ends in a vision of the ultimate, the eternally true. Augustine wanders through essential texts, locations, loves, and missteps toward conversion at the end of *Confessions* book 8. The titular *De Civitate Dei* and its demonic counterpart the City of Man develop on parallel tracks throughout time until Christ provides the definitive form of the City of God at his incarnation into humanity. But both Augustinian narratives keep going. The *Confessiones* moves past conversion into an unforeseen, unstructured ecclesiastical career in which Augustine the bishop must monitor insignificant practical details while still wrestling with his own sinfulness. *De Civitate Dei* moves past the incarnation of Christ into a Christian present in which disastrous events like the fall of Christian Rome can dislocate meaning and hope. Four later authors—Peter Abelard, William Langland, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Thomas More—write from within the posthistorical space Augustine had first described. Like him, too, they demonstrate a need for consolation.

Paradoxically, the unresolved posthistory that demands consolation within Augustinian narrative structure also constitutes consolation when properly understood. Augustine’s *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* present variations upon a single narrative consolation derived from a sacred history *De Civitate Dei* relates and the *Confessiones* imitates. Functionally that sacred history ends in anticlimax or aporia, not eschatological triumphalism. If an endstopped, triumphalist narrative generates meaning by its perfectly closed structure, an Augustinian narrative produces consolation in the absence of a plenitude of meaning because the authoritative
sacred metanarrative predicts such absence. Following Augustine’s example, important
medieval narratives—Abelard’s Historia calamitatum, Langland’s Piers Plowman, Chaucer’s
Knight’s Tale, and (on the brink of the Reformation) More’s Dialogue of Comfort Against
Tribulation—use the forms of sacred history in order to provide consolation for their own lack of
closure, both by grounding the disoriented autonomies of their characters in inscrutable
transcendence and by exploring a previous climactic moment through a provisional authorship.

These consolations of narrative run athwart the most influential consolatory paradigm in
the Middle Ages: Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy. Boethius’s practice of philosophical
consolation is radically dualistic. His Neoplatonist cosmology posits eternal divinity as the
highest unified truth. Souls fall from that divinity into ever more formless expressions of matter
and multiplicity, of which earth and its inhabitants are the lowest we know. Redemption consists
of crawling out from the Platonic cave, or in Boethian terms, of reminding the soul of the divine
height from which it has fallen and to which it can return with the help of philosophy. One
returns to divinity by looking inward toward the philosophical certitudes comprehended by the
soul and mind, not outward toward earthly fame and fortune, which the Consolation assures are
both unreliable and fleeting: false felicity. Imprisoned and expecting execution, Boethius can
escape inward from that prison and his physical circumstances. This flight from the outside in
turns his identity inside out; his mind illumined by philosophy becomes the true path to the
highest mysteries, truths, and forms of the cosmos. Consolation for Boethius thus takes the form
of interpretive closure, the philosophical vision that gives freedom, an individual story that ends
in conversion from earthly mutability to divine stability. By the end of the Consolation,
Boethius has stopped speaking, although Lady Philosophy keeps going. As an emissary of God
she speaks words that Boethius can write down before he passes through earthly death into
higher things. Boethius’s philosophical consolation becomes the default for medieval culture, the first consolation an educated sufferer would think to consult or implement.

Each of the authors in this study quietly eludes the Platonic interpretive closures that the Consolation comes to represent, finding their consolation not within the presence and clarity of philosophical vision but during its absence. Augustine’s life keeps sliding helplessly past the ecstatic visions and climactic insights that his libri platonici, accurately enough, recommend. For Abelard, interpretive closure is the naivete of the young and proud, like himself before castration, back when he knew it all. For Langland, perfect philosophical vision exists but must be vivified and rendered useful in moral performance. Nor, when he finds that vision (Holy Church) and that performance (Christ, Piers), can he keep them; by the end of the poem he must search for them again. For Chaucer, recalcitrant circumstances like a Fury rear up and overthrow philosophical verities and certainties. Most embarrassingly for Boethius’s project, More in an almost identical situation—philosophical humanist and public servant turned political prisoner, about to be executed—scarcely alludes to or uses Boethius even though we know More knew the Consolation. When More repeats Boethius’s circumstances, he does not find himself turning to Boethius’s Consolation for answers or even for existential reassurance. When requiring consolation, each author treats the abstract, intellectual version in Boethius’s canonical work as something to be passed through, transcended, or set aside.

A consolation of narrative, written within an open history that is still unfolding, values time where Boethius does not. None of the authors in this study would have quarrelled with Boethius’s assessment that the eternal is more valuable than the temporal. But a consolation of narrative asks temporal questions about temporal problems. By definition, it categorizes consolation as temporal. Like Boethius, it is interested in eternal heavenly knowledge, but
chiefly where that knowledge manifests itself within time on behalf of time. In so doing, it
distances itself from structural help the *Consolation of Philosophy* can give. The data of mind,
body, and feeling exist within time, irreducible even to a transcendent eternal. They require
consolation in their own temporal terms.

**Controlling Terms**

This study traces the relationship of four ideas or categories (narrative, the self, figural
interpretation, and consolation) from their integration within Augustinian thought to their
subsequent implementation *as a group* in key medieval texts. The presence of all four elements
in solution places a medieval work at least loosely within an Augustinian tradition of consolatory
narrative. Direct influence from Augustine is not always easy to trace, although each of the other
four authors considered Augustine’s work a continuing source of philosophical, spiritual, and
literary authority. Augustine’s narratival response to Christian catastrophes like the fall of Rome
seems both ingenious and inevitable. Perhaps if Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* had not existed
someone like Thomas More would have had to invent it. At the least, Augustine was the first to
tell the kind of story that Abelard, Langland, Chaucer, and More told after him.

Augustinian narrative form in both the *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* is asymmetrical,
first linear, then fraying to shapelessness. When told in (often first-person) retrospect, the first
and generally longer section of the narrative moves in a straightforward linear motion toward a
climactic revelation. The revelation often reveals the linear shape, in fact: it comes as a shock
that everything had been leading up to this particular moment. For instance, who could have
guessed from prophecies and inchoate inklings that Christ’s Incarnation would culminate
Hebrew and pagan histories? Yet Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* reads the incarnation as just that:
the perfectly fitting focal point of all histories. Augustine’s telling of the sacred story is the
pattern for other, smaller, stories like the *Confessiones*. Such a narrative achieves remarkable stability of meaning. The light cast by the ending illuminates each preceding event. Each event means itself, but more than itself when firmly anchored in the revelatory future, a rewarding surplus of meaning. Linear historiography is worth writing and reading because it yields almost immediate interpretive satisfaction once the story is complete.

After that clear, crisp narrative trajectory comes a second section that undoes the first. Events oppose and reverse the gains (interpretive and otherwise) that previous linearity provided. Augustine in his *Confessiones* admits that he does not have as much control over his desires and senses after conversion as he would wish. *De Civitate Dei* addresses the highly embarrassing fall of Rome after it had fallen under Christian influence. Abelard founds the Paraclete Abbey but then moves on to an abbey full of lethal monks. Will finds Piers Plowman but then loses him. Arcite dies just after winning Emelye’s hand, instantly reworking his triumphalist narrative into a tragedy. More has to contend with his own imminent execution and imperilled Catholic England. At worst, the triumphant linear narrative ends in tragedy, at best in chaos. Events mill around without obvious connection, making no sense with the sense that had just become clear. In fact, if the events look catastrophic, like the fall of Rome in *De Civitate Dei* or Henry VIII’s declared independence from the Catholic Church—the author tries to make them look meaningless instead. The Augustinian narrative project is to tell this second stage of the story, no matter what its shape, as if it has no shape.

Because the second section leaches historiographic meaning from itself, the form in its various instantiations has looked to critics like anti-narrative, a force against meaning. The whole bipartite structure looks like a linear narrative that fails. Critics have said that about
Augustine’s *Confessiones*, Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*. They have not said that about More’s *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, perhaps because critics strongly influenced by poststructuralism have not found their way to it yet.

The structure fails as a narrative only if we define narrative as an ordered movement through time, a history. Obviously, an open ending escapes such order. But if narrative consists of movement through time (whether or not the relation achieves a well-digested, well-articulated order), then this Augustinian form is a narrative indeed. The shapeless endings of Augustine’s

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Confessiones and De Civitate Dei are part of the story. Their anticlimax is the story’s true climax: the question it poses and the answer it proposes. These authors do assume that time has a final meaning, guaranteed by an eschaton that will resolve all remaining history in the same way that the Incarnation did its prior history. Having little access to the history shaped by that eschaton, since it has not yet arrived, Augustinian narrators must be content with temporal events, the raw material for history.

This Augustinian philosophical and literary background addresses one of the major conundrums in medieval literary criticism: the open narrative forms of the Middle Ages. For instance, John Burrow notes that narratives written in the flowering of vernacular writing under Richard II have curiously muted or irresolute endings.\(^5\) Piers Plowman ends with the renewal of a quest for Piers, whom the narrative has already found on more than one occasion. Sir Gawain fulfils his vow to the Green Knight but feels bad about it. Chaucer has a quiver full of open endings. The House of Fame ends by rushing toward a man of great authority who never gets a chance to use it. The Parliament of Fowls postpones a decision until next year. The frame of the Legend of Good Women never closes. Even Troilus & Criseyde ends several different ways (Troilus ascends to a heavenly sphere; Chaucer addresses young fresh folk, then Gower, then the Trinity), as if Chaucer was having a hard time wedging it shut. As for the Canterbury Tales, critics have suggested a number of motivations for the lack of resolution in individual tales: Chaucer’s high value on depicting various perspectives, his emphasis on an audience’s continual process of (re)interpretation, his insertion of carnivalesque elements into narrative structures predicated on transcendent meaning, and his medieval religious commitment undermined by his

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artistic commitment to realism. Nor is it clear what sort of conclusion the Retraction provides to the Tales as a whole. Is it the summa of a work exploring the tension between religious ideals and medieval political life, an empty rhetorical nod to those religious ideals once they are safely ironized by the tales themselves, a conventional plea for readerly intercession, or the genuine contrition of an author slamming shut the door to his work out of fear for his soul? The resolution of consensus on any of these issues has obviously proven elusive. By grounding itself in the Augustinian saeculum governed by indiscernible form, this project recontextualizes the formal problem of closure within the narrative structures of medieval religious culture.

These narratives are the stories of selves, our second term, and so the history of Augustinian narrative participates in the history of the Western self. In that history Augustine assuredly plays a major role. His Confessiones is the first recognizable autobiography in the Western tradition, if by such we mean a close attention paid to the inner life of the writer in order to assign a meaning to that life. Augustine does not pursue his life’s meaning for its own sake. The Confessiones begins and ends with praise for an ineffable God. But Augustine has come to believe that God resides inside his soul, and thus that inward knowledge is somehow divine

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6 See Rosemarie P. McGerr, Chaucer’s Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 12; Leonard Koff, Chaucer and the Art of Storytelling (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Barbara Nolan, Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), ch. 1; Laura Kendrick, Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Alfred David, The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer’s Poetry (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), respectively. Chaucer’s fifteenth-century readers wrote continuations of and conclusions for the Squire’s Tale and Cook’s Tale, two of the most notoriously unfinished. John Lydgate presents his Siege of Thebes as the first tale told on the way back from Canterbury, aiming the pilgrimage more directly toward its announced end and, because this second tale the Knight tells echoes his first, providing a partial structural closure through repetition.
knowledge. Augustine’s innovation is that one can learn the highest knowledge to which philosophy aspires by looking within the interior of a self, particularly into the memorial history a self accretes over time. He subjects his self and its history to an intense, unprecedented scrutiny.

In contrast to the modern and even the early modern self, the Augustinian self finds its definition primarily in a community, specifically that of the church. Augustine surrounds his conversion with the conversion narratives of others, before and after, like tremors bracketing and determining the great quake. He defines his own conversion by means of these others. The conversions (of various friends) that follow his respond to his, defined reciprocally by it as well. His conversion completes itself in baptism, absorption into the church. Once converted, his self locates itself through corporate rites like psalm-singing or the Eucharist.

That definition of the self Augustine bequeaths to medieval Catholics, who also find themselves by mapping their positions within existing social, political, and spiritual structures. Elizabeth Fowler argues that medieval literary characters are the nexus of various overlapping “social persons,” conventional social roles (e.g., crusader, pilgrim) that serve as data points building a more three-dimensional representation. Even the twelfth-century “discovery of the individual” deepens its self-definition only by sustained interaction with various communities.

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7 Philip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3-4, suggests that Augustine may have originated, and at the least substantially developed, the concept of “private inner space”—the memory as a spatial configuration or inner geography.

8 Elizabeth Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). She concludes, “Although people had and represented the experience of subjectivity before the ideology of individualism came to dominate Western culture in the modern era, the meaning of their subjectivities differs from ours because it existed within an archaic set of relations to other kinds of socially defined agents,
These identity-defining communities can be diachronic as well as synchronic. Our third term, figural interpretation, describes one way that ostracized individuals or cultures align themselves with and define themselves by other figures: a community that spans not only space but time. Figural readers encounter this diachronic community through texts and participate in it by interpreting and performing what they have read. Paradigmatically, the early Christian church had a diachronic problem because its leaders argued that Christianity both fulfilled and transcended its Jewish roots. In order to maintain continuity with a Jewish past while claiming their own unique Christological identity, early gospel and patristic writers constructed Christian history out of the Old Testament with hermeneutical innovations that came to be called figural.10

Figural interpretation finds resonances in characters or events across history: suffering sacrifices like Christ, castrati like Abelard, a fratricidal genealogy like Thebes’. Those resonances are the meaning of history. Their diachronic context elucidates literal historical data. Thus figural interpretation has an abstract, propositional component. Historical people and events find their full contextual meaning in a pattern that repeats itself across broad swathes of history. The present, the individual, or the experiential is not enough. But it also has a narrative intentions, and possible acts. Subjectivity exists, in short, in a contingent relation to dominant forms of social person” (p. 250).


10 Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 78-99, argues that Christian narrative production is midrashic interpretation from its beginning, as far back as the narratives of the canonical gospels.
component, because a climactic figure can fulfil and forecast subsidiary figures and serve as a pole around which a narrative can turn. Usually one figure originates or resolves all the others that lead toward or away from it. Historical meaning appears most clearly within that figure.\textsuperscript{11}

The central figure for Christian history is obviously Christ. Reading the Hebrew scriptures in light of Christ meant finding figures of Christ in those same scriptures: Joseph, David, Daniel. But in the patristic era and forward, reading the Christian scriptures like the Hebrew scriptures means finding the church in those scriptures: in figures of Christ, his apostles, Old Testament saints, and (for Augustine) the entire sweep of sacred history. Figural interpretation for a self means constructing the self of the \textit{Confessiones} in light of the historiography in \textit{De Civitate Dei}.

Using figural interpretation of textualized history, an isolated self can create a stabilizing community either by seeing its own reflection in those prior texts or by trying to become what it sees. Augustine sought to join a community he found in books. Hearing conversion stories made him feel isolated and ashamed. “Did you hear that story?” he asked his friend Alypius. “Non-philosophers surge ahead of us and snatch heaven, while we, with our cold learning—we, just look at us—are still mired in flesh and blood” (\textit{Conf.} 8.19).\textsuperscript{12} In two monographs Brian Stock has excavated how Augustine formed himself through meditative reading, filtering the data he

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12}“Quid audisti? Surgunt indocti et caelum rapiunt, et nos cum doctrinis nostris sine corde ecce ubi uolutamur in carne et sanguine!” (\textit{Conf.} 8.8.19.4-6)
\end{itemize}
read all the way through to what he thought of as his inner core. But in reading Hebrew scripture and pagan history for *De Civitate Dei* Augustine also formed for himself a city.

The protagonists of Abelard, Langland, Chaucer, and More also read, write, or act to alleviate a keen sense of isolation. At first an opportunity for self-congratulation, isolation becomes a problem for Abelard. The young Abelard, wielding an unprecedentedly keen *ingenium* (according to his own assessment), acknowledges no contemporary peers, mocks all his teachers, and has to plunder history for adequate comparisons to himself: gods (Mars, Christ), heroes (Ajax), renowned philosophers (the Peripatetics). When others sense his uniqueness, they acknowledge him as leader. He is isolated on the top of the heap. After the public shames of his castration and trial for heresy, however, his later followers most often prove recalcitrant, and he is left at the head of a rebellious and murderous abbey. Langland’s Long Will grapples with isolation both in the nature of his quest and in its object. He has no constant companion in his search; indeed, at the end Antichrist and the forces of deadly sin join him trying to get in the gates of Unity. Piers, the object of his quest, flits into and out of his vision, never quite staying. Eventually Will has to search back into sacred history to find Piers revealed in Christ, but then Will must stay on the track of sacred history and re-emerge in a Christ-less (so, Piers-less) present. For Palamon in the *Knight’s Tale*, isolation from destructive patterns of his Theban heritage comes as good news and solution. When two Theban princes are present, they inevitably fight each other, but by the end of the story Palamon is the only Theban prince left and needs to fight no more. Rather than perpetuating the recursive violence of Theban royalty,

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Palamon can perpetuate his cousin Arcite’s gentility in death. His political community is recursively imitable but dead, and the story suggests that he may finally be absorbable into a stable polis like Athens. Finally, to deny that his solitary stand against Henry’s coup over the English church is pigheaded self-assertion, More appeals to the spiritual consensus of a “common corps of Christendom.” This mystical body of Christ spans space and time, and includes church fathers like Augustine and fellow heterodoxy-fighters like the Hungarians. That More looks alone in his convictions simply means that Protestant England’s schismatic choices have cut it off from a wider geographical and historical body. In every case, these works describe attempted access to textual or historical presence in the face of physical absence.

Because these figural narratives of the self end in crisis, our fourth term, consolation, motivates Augustinian narrative production. Augustine is the first Christian to have to write a consolation for the illegibility of history. Despite the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. dashing immediate eschatological hopes, the concussive expansion of Christianity throughout its known world felt to its adherents like the unfolding of a linear narrative. Stages of brutal persecution actually accumulated momentum for the church because martyrs imitated Christ’s sacrificial example. Church leaders like Irenaeus actively courted martyrdom, no tragedy but a triumph. Tertullian could boast, “Whenever we are mowed down by you, our number increases; the blood of Christians is the seed.”

Christianity was gradually taking over the Roman Empire—and in fact did so in various official stages throughout the fourth century C.E. Thus early Christianity swept into control of the Roman Empire, then, in the late fourth century, began to recede. The sack of Christian Rome spoilt a satisfying linear narrative the church had told

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itself for three centuries. Augustine wrote *De Civitate Dei* to cope with a historiographical problem the church had not yet faced: how to deal with revoked success, a linearity undone.

Augustine had available classical and scriptural traditions of consolation. The classical tradition, through Cicero’s *Consolatio* and a variety of Seneca’s works, generally consoles over the death of a loved one using the rhetoric of stoicism. Death comes to everyone; be apathetic rather than agitated about what cannot be controlled. Quell the passions. There may be some comfort in knowing the long and illustrious tradition of dead people that the deceased has now joined.\(^\text{15}\) Whether epistles or broader treatises, these consolatory works scarcely engage details of the specific tragedies that supposedly prompt them. Instead, they dissolve those individual cases into conventional rhetorical topoi.

Boethius would later provide a philosophical version of this tradition for the Middle Ages, recommending Stoic implacability because of Neoplatonist dualism. He does not merely reiterate rhetorical topoi; his protagonist progresses from ignorance and forgetfulness to philosophical enlightenment. Lady Philosophy warns the character Boethius against preoccupation with the false accusations of treason that led to his imprisonment and would lead to his death. Individual tragedies on earth do not matter much because no event on earth matters particularly much. More than a welcome distraction, knowledge of the eternal is so potent, so much more truly real, that it engulfs earthly concerns requiring consolation.

As a Christian resource Augustine had the open narrative shape of the Hebrew scriptures. Most scholars now believe Jewish exiles wrote the majority of those scriptures after Israel had

ceased to be a nation-state and its people were carried off to Egypt, Babylonia, and Persia. Consolation for the exile meant a narrative that had room for the immediate experience of exilic perplexity and despair (e.g., the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations), but also for some future hope on the basis of past divine goodness. Thus, on the one end of history the Jews told the certainties of creation, exodus, and a Davidic golden age. On the other they promised a future Messiah in visionary literature such as the books of Daniel and the minor prophets. God had worked and will work visibly, whatever he may or may not be doing now.

Such is the shape of sacred narrative the earliest Christians knew: certain eschatological resolution continually deferred. By the end of the first century C.E., those early Christians were settling into a similar gap between Christ’s first and second comings, an interim filled by the interpretive Spirit in the absence of Christ’s plenitude. Although Christians claimed that Christ fulfilled Old Testament history, and thus that they lived in a time of comparative plenitude, they acknowledged that God’s kingdom had a lot of ground yet to cover. Revelation’s messianic expectation echoes Daniel’s. The early Christians learned well from their Jewish counterparts how to bide their time, in an ambiguous age bracing themselves backward and forward, cruciform between past and future certainties.17

16The summary statement for an early Christian view of history is Heb. 1.1-2a: “God, who, at sundry times and in divers manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days, hath spoken to us by his Son.” The resolving word Christ embodies is last and best, the others no less genuine for it.

I draw all biblical citations in English from the Challoner edition of the Douay-Rheims Bible.

The peculiar Augustinian shape of consolation results when Augustine tries to reconcile the consolations of classical philosophy and Christian narrative but finds them nearly incompatible. In a way he anticipates Boethius by suggesting that Neoplatonist ecstatic vision is the greatest consolatory resource classical thought has to offer. Plotinus and Porphyry did not write consolation; Augustine fits the philosophical vision they recommended at the end of a linear narrative that leads from trouble to resolution. But the fact of the Hebrew and Christian matter is that time moves on, past such visions, or conversions, or incarnations, into a posthistory without natural structure or definition. An extended period of Christian deferral defines itself backward using a previous Neoplatonist climactic clarity. Augustine provides what critics have not found in Boethius: a distinctively Christian consolation. It must inhere in the shapes of time.

What is consoling about an open-ended narrative form that by definition produces neither satisfaction nor understanding, what we might normally think of as consolation? First, stability does happen when the protagonist of an open-ended personal narrative recognizes its figural similarity to an open metanarrative like that of sacred history. Authority validates the meaninglessness; that in itself is a backhanded kind of meaning. The sufferer can rest in authority, if not in understanding.

Second, that a climactic revelation has occurred enables figural imitation and reperformance of the truth that revelation brought. Posthistory becomes a period of deferral but not inaction. Useful action can be done. In fact, the shapelessness of this posthistory invites human ingenuity, hermeneutic and authorial originality. People can impose a shape upon their history. Every one of our stories of the self ends with someone quietly producing on the basis of what they have seen or learned: Augustine churning out his Confessiones and a spate of conversions to echo his; Abelard trying to pass along his consolation to someone else;
Conscience getting ready to go look for Piers again; Palamon filling the role Arcite had won; and Vincent starting the literary transmission that would bring the *Dialogue of Comfort* to England.

Third, by refusing historical structure to contemporary events, posthistorical form denies their apparent tragedy. Catastrophic events like the fall of Christian Rome, the death of Arcite, or the imminent beheading of More are terrible in themselves but destroy no triumphant narrative. There is no triumphant narrative available for them to destroy. It has ended a while back, in a resolution (like conversion or incarnation) no current catastrophe can threaten. Posthistorical form quarantines contemporary horrific events from any history that they might contaminate.

Finally, as we have anticipated, through figural reading sufferers can assemble a diachronic community to accompany them in crisis. Abelard compiles an ingenious hodgepodge of allusions to Mars, Christ, Origen, Susanna, Athanasius, Ajax and more. Long Will joins a succession of Faith (Abraham), Hope (Moses), and Love (the Good Samaritan) waiting for Piers. Isolated from his violent Theban line through its near-extinction, Palamon can enter the Athenian polis without threat. More imagines a common corps of Christendom that stretches throughout space and time, anywhere but England.

Thus, Augustinian consolatory narrative proves a tool of great ingenuity and flexibility. It beautifully accommodates human epistemological failure within a stable narrative form. A story with a strong central anchor of meaning ends in an author or protagonist creatively interpreting that prior meaning within a meaningless present. Authors can read the past in service of the present, according to how the present descries need of the past. That is a narrative consolation for time, within time, not a philosophical consolation against time. Our diverse group of authors reached for this consolatory form when they had to tell their own, perplexing, open-ended stories.
Chapter One: For the Time Being: Interpretive Consolation in Augustinian Time

Augustine was a primary narrative warrant and exemplar for the Middle Ages. His *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* served the medieval period as canonical autobiography and historiography, respectively. The *Confessiones* was present from the first stirrings of the medieval autobiographical impulse. For instance, Guibert of Nogent in his *Monodiae* (1115) pastiches its prayerful opening, its self-deprecation, and the dominant personality of its author’s mother. Although the latter part of Guibert’s account diverges from the form and content of the *Confessiones*, clearly Guibert needed the *Confessiones* to get him started. In on the ground floor of the genre, the *Confessiones* appeared also at its height. Dante’s *Commedia*, the premiere medieval history and fiction of the self, owes a tremendous amount to the *Confessiones* both theologically and structurally, as a burgeoning critical discourse has clarified.\(^1\) Similarly, Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* cast a tremendous, some would say catastrophic, shadow over medieval historiography. Opposing Eusebius’s triumphal merger of church and Roman state, *De Civitate Dei* drains secular space of historical meaning and diverts practitioners of history, such as Bede, into strictly ecclesiastical matters. Lee Patterson has argued that *De Civitate Dei* salted the field of Christian history so thoroughly for medieval secular historiographers that they had to reach all the way back to Vergilian linear narrative and the matter of Troy for models of

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narrative form. Later medieval and early modern political theorists had to misread *De Civitate Dei* as an account of secular history and power relations in order to use it to ground their own such accounts.

This specifically narrative influence is startling because of Augustine’s strong philosophical affinity with Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism mitigated against narrative because it was radically dualistic. Expounded by Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry (circa 250-305), it posited the “fall” or fragmentation and scattering of individual souls from the One eternal Soul into the evils of time and material bodies. The shape of such a Neoplatonist “story” in time generally consisted of one headlong curvilinear trajectory: getting back out of time as rapidly as possible and reacquiring a transcendent, self-nullifying vision of the One. Any production of emplotted narrative along the way would be accidental; Neoplatonic narrative ruthlessly focused on a closure that escaped what came before. That this vision of the One transcends not only time but language further demeaned narrative texts as failed attempts to communicate or to effect the incommunicable. In contrast to narrative authorship, the Neoplatonist philosopher preferred silent contemplative stasis, the closure of perfect understanding. For this reason, critics have been comparatively slow to treat Augustinian narrative influence as fruitful for subsequent

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3 Plotinus’s *Enneads* I.6, V.8, and VI.9 document the Neoplatonic path toward unity with the Divine.

4 Plotinus must admit to and address the philosopher’s return to temporality after ecstatic earthly union with the Divine, but he says that the philosopher spends that subsequent time in time trying to re-ascend the height of vision once again (*Enneads* VI, 9.11). This shift in emphasis from the trans-temporal intellectual vision to service within time is a fundamental difference between Neoplatonic and Augustinian narrative.
literatures, although histories of ideas that begin with Augustine and invoke his influence remain legion.

Augustine’s grafting of sacred historical resources onto a Neoplatonic flight from narrative resulted, however, in a more complex and supple narrative usable for later, non-dismissive accounts of the temporal *saeculum*. The Neoplatonic interest in absolute closure meshed well with Christian concepts of conversion and eschatology. Whether they called it the flesh, the old man, or the *regio dissimilitudinis*, Christians knew that they needed to escape from something inherent in time. This escape was implicit in the very notion of salvation. Yet personal experience and careful attention to the arc of sacred history taught Augustine that the closure of Christian salvation took a long time in coming and did not extricate its adherents from time when it came. The incarnation of God as man definitively saved, redeemed, and illuminated humanity, but it did so within time. Submitting as it did to the strictures of time, the incarnation thus lent time a value unimaginable within pure strains of Neoplatonism. From the perspective of the human knower, sacred history contextualizes Neoplatonist insight, because its time contextualizes the inbreaking ruptures of eternity, extending before and after.\(^5\) Understandably Augustine resisted this shift in emphasis from eternity to time. He frequently

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\(^5\) Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 5-30, argued that Augustine’s placing time in the context of eternity made close attention to narrative plot impossible; Ricoeur had to resort to Aristotle for a classical theory of emplotment. I owe this characterization of Ricoeur’s remarks to M. B. Pranger, “Time and Narrative in Augustine’s *Confessions,*” *The Journal of Religion* 81.3 (2001), p. 377. Viewed broadly enough, Augustine’s history contextualizes time with eternity before creation and after apocalypse. But divine interventions within time are of course contextualized by time.
confessed himself perplexed over the value of time and narrative. The titanic energies involved in his authorship of narrative, however, reveal the urgency in his mind of reconciling the related dichotomies of time and eternity, history and Neoplatonism, narrative and divinity.

The reconciliation of time and eternity (or, in structural terms, lack of closure and closure), is the shared burden of Augustine’s two great narratives: the Confessiones and De Civitate Dei. The exigence of each work is consolatory because such reconciliation seemed impossible at the time of writing. According to Peter Brown, the Confessiones is not the work of an arrogant interpreter using his current sureties to close off his past confusions, but of a disillusioned Neoplatonist trying to discern sense from a personal history that had dashed his ideal of an idyllic Christian philosophical lifestyle. For its part, De Civitate Dei responds to the fall of Rome, which was disastrous to Eusebian historiographies that had identified the Christianization of Rome as the eschatological closure to Christian history. Answering pagans (who implicated the Christianization of Rome in its fall) and fellow Christians (panicked at the loss of their triumphalist metanarrative), De Civitate Dei leaches meaning from the fall of Rome in particular and Christian history in general. Because the City of God has no clearly visible,

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6 See, for example, Enarr. 61.13, 72.34, 142.15, and Conf. 8.6-8.


8 The major monograph on the subject is R. A. Markus, Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). A programmatic statement occurs on pp. 20-21:

One of the fundamental themes of his [Augustine’s] reflection on history: that since the coming of Christ, until the end of the world, all history is homogenous, that it cannot be mapped out in terms of a pattern drawn from sacred history, that it can no longer contain decisive turning-points endowed with a significance in sacred history. Every moment may have its unique and mysterious
inarguable movement on earth after the Incarnation, and is unidentifiable with, for, or against any political institution, overthrow of a political Christendom does not undermine the Christian faith. Thus, in both narratives, Augustine attempts to provide narrative resources to an audience (himself, his coterie, Roman Christians) whose previous triumphalist interpretation of personal or universal history has recently been undermined.

Sharing a consolatory exigence, the *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* also share a consolatory narrative form. Provisional moments of closure foreshadow a climactic revelation or disclosure which, when it comes, produces an uncertain, anticlimactic posthistory that offers the paradoxical consolation of re-performance. The time of writing is the uncertain, anticlimactic posthistory that requires consolation. Recorded narrative gives incomplete but indispensable access to a prior consolidation of history that recedes as time passes, taking its realized meaning with it. In the absence of fully present meaning, consolation can still interpret, albeit inadequately, the encoded memory left by meaning’s textualization. Further, it can re-present the climactic locus of meaning by performing it in deeds or words.

This narrative form ends in specifically figural interpretation, of a piece with Augustine’s broader strategies of reading signs and texts. As Augustine and other patristic writers practiced

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9 As Augustine and other patristic writers practiced significance in the ultimate divine tableau of men’s doings and sufferings; but it is a significance to which God’s revelation does not supply the clues.

The coming of Christ served as the culmination of all prior history, but subsequent history is virtually unreadable.


9 As Brian Stock has demonstrated, Augustine’s theory of time intersects with his theory of reading and textuality to engender a theory of paraenetic interpretation. Repeated provisional readings of a story or a past which has not yet reached its end generate increasingly fruitful, if always still provisional, interpretations of that story, gradually
it, figural interpretation reads an historical past that had produced a surplus of meaning harvested only by an authoritatively and retrospectively interpreting vantage point in the future. The most easily recognizable kind of figural reading is typological. Literal “types” (historical events and prophecies, deeds and words, of the Hebrew scriptures) find their ultimate meaning in a divine “antitype” (the Word/Deed of Christ during his incarnation). Events or things are also divine signs denoting an eternity impinging upon time at a crucial moment like the incarnation. A figural exegesis of one’s own narrative and contemporary situation could be prospective (current events are types foreshadowing an eschaton or apocalypse) or retrospective (current events are aftershocks explicating a prior antitype). Patristic figural exegesis had strongly accumulating its particular shape until a reader participating in that story may be able to project what comes next, and even what to do next. See Stock’s *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1996), and *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).


11 Auerbach, pp. 53-59, classified *figura* as roughly synonymous with typology and sharply distinct from allegory. Typology or *figura* retains the historicity and value of a pre-Christian type (person or event) that prefigures a Christian antitype in addition to its own historicity, while allegory flattens historicity into static abstract meaning.
retrospective elements, because it grounded the identity of the church and the soul in a written record (the Bible) of prior history whose interpretation recapitulated historical signs and patterns in that contemporary church and soul. As the incarnation proved the central New Testament interpretive grid for earlier Hebrew scriptures, so also the incarnation became the central principle of later Christian figural history and identity-formation. Although both the center and the end of history, Christ could give Christian meaning only as the center, a lost center because a past center, beautiful but absent (*Enarr.* 127.8).

*De Civitate Dei* is the first systematic figural historiography, reading the church as the latest version of an institution singular throughout history: the City of God that culminated in Christ’s incarnation and would end in his return. Furthermore, Augustine’s innovation in the *Confessiones* was an essentially figural autobiography, retrospectively grounded in a climactic conversion in the same way that ecclesial history grounded itself in a prior incarnation. Ending in their own consolatory interpretive performance of past events, each text thereby provides a stimulus toward its own interpretative re-performance by readers. Later authors construct their own narratives in this figural tradition, interpreting personal and sacred history according to the example of the Augustinian text.

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A Common Structure

In a variety of treatises Augustine insists that the individual human life and the history of the world have the same narrative structure. He makes the parallel explicit in *De Civitate Dei* 16.43, labeling the historical periods he is discussing as the childhood (Noah to Abraham), adolescence (Abraham to David), and adulthood of Israel (David forward). Although the parallel is not explicit in the *Confessiones*, scholars have seen its transition from personal (books 1-10) to sacred history (books 11-13) as implying a structural link between the two histories. The conceptual links between personal and sacred history seem solid across every stage of Augustine’s career and in every narrative that he wrote.

Despite this evidence, scholars have rarely associated the structures of the *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* with each other to suggest a narrative form that encompasses them both. Instead most see the two works as opposed forms: the first triumphalist in its premature terminus, the second systematically amorphous in its destruction of potential meanings and endings. On the one hand, the peculiar power of the *Confessiones* as a narrative derives from where its trajectory halts: after Augustine’s capitulation to the Christian way of life in the famous garden scene and after his mystical ascent with Monica at Ostia. It is a triumphalist narrative; he quits his story once he has the sense of an ending. On the other hand, the *De Civitate Dei* destroys the possibility of meaning within contemporary history. However linear history was until the

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13 There are six ages of man and the world in DGAM 1.23.35-1.25.43, and DVR 26.49-27.50 (a seventh, after death or apocalypse, is generally understood), while Serm. 259 gives eight ages to history, Quaestion 66 four ages to individual lives, and Enchiridion 118 four ages to history. Augustine did not settle upon one structure exclusively; the connection between the two narratives seems to be the crucial point.

Incarnation, after that authoritative event it fragments. By refusing to proceed authoritatively beyond the biblical revelation, it refuses historiographical structure to present circumstance. This trajectory from triumphantist to aporetic narrative complies with a broader scholarly portrait of Augustine’s evolution from early Neoplatonism to a later, more thoroughly Biblicist theology, all the more reason to dissociate works from these opposing periods. Perhaps Augustine always believed that personal and sacred narrative coincided, but it is assumed that he changed his mind about the shape of that narrative.

Rarely comparing it with *De Civitate Dei*, scholarship on the narrative of the *Confessiones* has discovered either a chiastic or a linear structure. Those who emphasize Augustine’s early Neoplatonism generally opt for the chiastic descent and ascent, the soul’s return to its pre-existent union with the Divine. Although important studies by Paul Henry, Pierre Courcelle, and Henri-Irénée Marrou placed the author of the *Confessiones* firmly in a Neoplatonic philosophical milieu,\(^\text{15}\) Robert J. O’Connell, in *St. Augustine’s Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul* (1969), was the first to provide a comprehensive account of the *Confessiones*’ structure as Neoplatonic. The Augustine of O’Connell’s *Confessiones* is a Plotinian soul fallen from its pre-existence into time, wandering away from the Divine by pursuing corporeal desires. In book 3 this Neoplatonic acolyte begins a return not to the Christian church but to the contemplation and mysticism of Cassiciacum and Ostia. By book 13 he can realize that his personal ascent to vision follows the cosmic hexameral scheme of Genesis 1-2 by returning from the material and active world to a seventh day of rest in God. The philosophical and exegetical

books 10-13 are an exercise of and reflection upon the ascent acquired narratively through books 1-9. Book 13 in particular is a proclamation from the height of vision. A chiastic return to the Divine is essentially complete.

Though he framed his interests as structural, O’Connell wrote primarily as a theologian. It remained for Robert McMahon in *Augustine’s Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the Confessions* (1989) to give a Neoplatonic reading of the *Confessiones* in self-consciously literary, formalist terms. Sensitive to the old accusation from Marrou that “Saint Augustin compose mal,” McMahon argues that Augustine’s work must appear to be planless because it presents itself as a spontaneous prayer. In reality, however, Augustine’s prayers for wisdom are answered incrementally throughout the text, until book 13, again, exemplifies the confident exegete Augustine operating from the pinnacle of spiritual wisdom. This progression of authorial understanding mirrors the spiritual progression of the autobiography and the trajectory of all human history, one of whose Augustinian descriptions McMahon adopts as a motif in his own analysis: “return to the origin.” 16 As a return, the shape is chiastic. 17

The apogee of scholars within O’Connell’s tradition is Phillip Cary. His trilogy—*Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (2000), *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul* (2008), and *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine’s Thought* (2008)—constructs an Augustine whose intellectual tools and categories remained Neoplatonist throughout his long career. Unlike McMahon and O’Connell, however, Cary entirely discards (as he believes Augustine did) the concept of

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16 This phrase summarizes *Conf.* 11.10.

Neoplatonic climax within time.\textsuperscript{18} Rather than conversion, Cary prefers to speak of Augustine’s conversions,\textsuperscript{19} seeing each (e.g., a conversion to philosophy through Cicero, to Neoplatonism through \textit{platonicorum libros}), as a stage within an ascent whose goal is hidden in the afterlife. Cary is definitive, however, that Augustine’s goal is the sight of God, that humans are epistemologically capable of this vision, and that the path to such vision is conceptually if not chronologically progressive: inward into the soul, then upward.

The older critical tradition, against which these Neoplatonic readings have defined themselves, identifies book 8 as Augustine’s conversion to Christianity and therefore the climax of a more-or-less linear trajectory that begins not with a pre-existent soul but with an infancy marked by the disordered desire Augustine will later theorize as original sin.\textsuperscript{20} Recent proponents of this linear model emphasize the retrospective potential such linearity provides. John Freccero, looking back at Augustine from the standpoint of Dante, argues for both authors

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\textsuperscript{18} Cary, \textit{Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.172, contends that the late Augustine originated the concept of punctiliar conversion, and therefore that it has no place in the \textit{Confessions}.

\textsuperscript{19} The concept is not uniquely Cary’s; see Jean-Marie Le Blond, \textit{Les Conversions de Saint Augustin}, Théologie Études Publiées Sous la Direction de la Faculté de Théologie S. J. De Lyon-Fourvière 17 (Paris: Aubier, 1950), pp. 89-171.

\textsuperscript{20} To Cary, \textit{Inner Grace}, pp. 99-112, the equation of book 8 with a unique conversion experience is distinctively Protestant. Conversion is not a “count-noun” (p. 104) or “a particular episode in one’s life but an ever-renewed turning of the will in the right direction” (p. 99), until the later Augustine made it so in his account of prevenient grace. According to Cary, then, reading book 8 as a punctiliar, proto-Protestant \textit{initium fidei} is anachronistic even within the evolution of Augustine’s own thought (p. 102). Although Cary does not see book 8 as the crucial narrative moment in the \textit{Confessions}, he does not deny it a certain climactic structural importance as a final dedication to the church or the Christian way of life.
that only the ontological shift of “conversion, the death and resurrection of the self;” guarantees a properly authoritative autobiography and confession of faith. A radical break detaches the narrator absolutely from his own previous self and events and permits him to interpret them from this transcendent perspective.  

For Freccero, however, the inevitable climax of autobiography is not conversion but autobiography itself: “Logically, autobiography is a sequential narrative that moves toward its own origin.” Moreover, an autobiography of conversion will construct its experiences first linearly as if unique, but after conversion, “retrospectively as a repetition in one’s own history of the entire history of the Redemption.”

Brian Stock concurs that the goal of Augustine’s narrative is the meaning its perspective provides to its events. He, however, sees this aim as Neoplatonic. Augustine’s progression from oral to silent reading throughout books 1-9 enables a Neoplatonic rise into ethical improvement and self-understanding through reading the narrative of one’s own existence. Stock assigns three stages to Augustine’s self-exegesis. First, the reading is sensory, empirical (Augustine lives the events of his life); then cognitive in interpreting the signs; then meditative, uncoupling the images from the text and being mystically “taught from within” by them. In this account, Augustine’s shift in reading practice, not his conversion, is the primary impetus for his autobiographical retrospective, although the shift and the conversion roughly coincide.

In contrast to the vigor of *Confessiones* narratological scholarship, attention to the historiographical form of *De Civitate Dei* has been surprisingly listless. Where the work follows

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22 Freccero, p. 264.
23 Freccero, p. 4.
24 Stock, *Augustine the Reader*, pp. 1-19. Stock also assigns significant structural importance to Augustine’s silent communion with Monnica at Ostia.
the biblical narrative, its chronology adheres so closely that critics have found little room to measure the distance between. Some have considered it a linear sacred history.\(^{25}\) If so, they focus on either the incarnation (book 18)\(^{26}\) or the eschaton (books 19-22) as climactic.\(^{27}\) Where the work departs from the biblical narrative, to address pagan Roman history or Christian history, it actively destroys attempts to foist form onto stubbornly formless events. According to Peter Brown, “There are no verbs of historical movement in the *City of God*, no sense of progress to aims that may be achieved in history.”\(^{28}\) F. E. Cranz believes that Augustine’s view of history evolves from a Neoplatonic linear history to a static contrast between the damned and saved throughout history, the impermeable borders rebuffing progress.\(^{29}\) Oliver O’Donovan disagrees with the notion that Augustine exhibited “no sense of historical development” in *De Civitate Dei*;

\(^{25}\) History in the divine mind is necessarily linear, after all (*DCD* 12.21).


on the contrary, “he had a strong sense of it, and found it inherently ambiguous.”  

History did move, just not in a straight and fortuitous line.

What few have noticed is that the combination of linear biblical narrative with a shapeless present is itself a form. The most promising attributions of structure to *De Civitate Dei* have in fact compared it with the *Confessiones* and discerned a shape leading from linearity into a nonlinear posthistory. One such comparison by Carol Harrison aligns the two works thus: after an ordered beginning,

> just as Augustine then turns in *Confessions* 10 to examine his present life as a Christian in the sixth age of the world, and presents it very much as one wholly dependent upon God’s grace, incapable of realizing the good or attaining the truth without it, so in Book 19 of *City of God* he turns to examine the lives of the members of the city of God in the present age, unable to realize true justice, peace, love or order in this life but longing for their eschatological realization in the life to come. Both works also conclude with three books which anticipate the seventh age of eternal life in the life to come.

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31 Harrison, p. 206. Her warrant is the “six ages of man” narrative model, although this model seems not to be a clearly marked structural principle in the *Confessiones*, save for the conversionary fifth age and the anticlimactic sixth. Although her emphasis is on their climactic eschatologies as times of redemption, Marjorie Suchocki, “The Symbolic Structure of Augustine’s *Confessions,*” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50.3 (1982), pp. 365-78, also directly aligns the *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* structurally: “Each uses its own distinctive mode to tell the same story” (p. 377).
First she gives the linear progression of the biblical narrative, then the unsatisfactory and
epitomologically compromised present time after it, then the eschatology.

The narrative structure of neither work is, then, reducible to chiasmus followed by
authoritative exegesis, linearity followed by authoritative retrospect, or shapelessness.32 Both
begin with a pattern of events that moves steadily toward a climax assigning meaning to all that
has come before and will come after. For *De Civitate Dei*, this climax is the incarnation of
Christ in book 18. For the *Confessiones*, it is Augustine’s conversion in book 8 to the Christian
church. The ultimate end of Augustinian narrative structure is the Neoplatonic vision of the
Christian God by the converted Christian as member of the City of God. At this vision, taking
place in eternity, the meaning of time will be finally assigned. Augustinian readers hope and
orient themselves toward this inaccessible event, but cannot rely upon it for temporal meaning.
Instead, they must orient temporal meaning toward a revelatory climax, God’s intervention, that
to the Christian has already occurred in personal or sacred history. Continuing to exist after this
intervention, the Christian and the church occupy a gap that always appears in Augustinian’s
description of time and narrative. Meaning has always already been revealed; meaning will
always be wholly understood only in the future. An Augustinian narrative returns into time after
a meaning-grounding climax. That return is what makes it Augustinian. The way forward, the
path toward understanding, is on earth a reversion: “Let them . . . be drawn forward to the prior
things” (*Conf.* 11.40).33

32 Stock is more explicit than Freccero that the closure enabling autobiography is never final. Although the narrative
of reading as a means to understanding is Neoplatonic, that understanding is always provisional, subject to rereading
(*Augustine the Reader*, p. 111).

33 “Extantantur ... in ea, quae ante sunt” (*Conf.* 11.40.10).
Augustine himself is definite about what separates Christianity from the chiasmi of (Neo)Platonism. The Platonists get the human quandary absolutely right; we are in a regio dissimilitudinis of exile. They get the destination right: a clear and complete (thus timeless) vision of the eternal God. But they do not get the way right. The Christian way, through the humiliations of time and incarnation, is inexplicable to a reductive Platonism. Because the way occurs in time, it is epistemologically compromised and thus impossible to understand with a closure that can bring satisfaction. If there is chiasmus within narrative, it is not a Neoplatonic chiasmus. Rather than a return to original ecstatic communion with God, it is a return (suitably changed through conversion) into the time from which Augustine longs to be extracted.

**Provisional Closures in Linear Time**

In the view of time governing Augustinian figural exegesis, the historical exists both for its own sake and for the sake of a future which it prophesies. A characteristic figural formulation occurs in *De Civitate Dei* 15.2: “The earthly city [here, Jerusalem] has two aspects. Under the one, it displays its own presence; under the other, it serves by its presence to point towards the Heavenly City.” Each event is historical or literal but also takes its place in a signifying chain.

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34 He primarily responds to Plotinus and Porphyry, whom today’s scholarship would categorize as Neoplatonists, but Augustine knew them only as the current, cutting-edge thinkers in the Platonist tradition.

This prophetic possibility contextualizes the events of history into a linear narrative that the earthly city can only guess because the narrative is not complete. The City of God in De Civitate Dei and Augustine the individual in the Confessiones each trace a linear trajectory at the beginning of their narratives, until a climactic revelation (conversion and incarnation, respectively) decisively fulfills its prophetic foreshadowings within that previous linear history.

Despite the formlessness of Christian history in De Civitate Dei, Augustine is emphatic that divine time is linear when seen properly (from divine perspective). In response to pagan cyclical models of time, he provides three proofs for linearity in books 11-22. The first two collapse the distinction between histories of the individual and the universe. The first is creation, both of the soul and of the universe (11.4). There is no infinite succession of universes or infinite reincarnation of souls; creation marks a decisive break with previous history (or, paradoxically, previous eternity). Second, redemption of any soul is a linear change that cannot be assimilated into a cyclical view of history: “If . . . the soul passes to blessedness and leaves miseries behind it, never to return to them, then something new comes about in time which does not have an end in time” (12.14). If something or someone within the universe changes irrevocably, so that it cannot be run back through its cycle of blessedness and misery, then the constituents of the universe are changed also.

Third, Christ’s incarnation provided a revelatory newness making sense of all preceding sacred history: “Before Christ suffered and rose again, . . . the Christian faith had not yet taken on its definitive form for all believers. It was defined in this form by Christ’s resurrection”

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36 “si ad miserias numquam ulterius reditura ex his ad beatitudinem pergit: fit ergo aliquid noui in tempore, quod finem non habet temporis.”
In his exegesis of sacred history from the Old Testament which precedes this discussion of the resurrection, Augustine ruthlessly flattens various prophetic passages into one meaning: the New Covenant in Jesus. In one sense, then, sacred history leads up to the incarnation of Christ in a kind of progression; in another sense, the incarnation fulfils these prophecies by making explicit what could never otherwise have been understood. As such, it stands both inside and outside the processes of time, fulfilling them without being implicated in them. Moreover, an event of such revelatory decisiveness, predicted and emulated but unrepeatable in time, undoes a cyclical view of history and demands some semblance of linear movement within it.

Augustine applies this linear model to Scripture in *De Civitate Dei* according to the conventions of figural interpretation. The incarnation of Christ fulfils, reveals, and secures the meaning of prior Jewish history. The Old Testament is one extended prophecy (16.2). The blessings God promised through the prophets were authentically temporal, but a select few understood them spiritually—thus, properly—as well (4.33). These prophetic signs therefore signified both literally and spiritually; the spiritual signification was Christ. Expecting and receiving temporal blessings as the results of prophecy, Israel was using signs for things. But

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37 “*prior quam passus esset et resurrexisset a mortuis, nondum fides omnibus fuerat definita (in resurrectione quippe christi definita est . . .)”* (*DCD* 18.54).

38 Augustine believed that in the incarnation God added humanity to himself without his divinity being lessened by the finitude of humanity (e.g., *DCD* 1.13, *Epist*. 137.3.10, *Serm*. 80.5).

39 A Neoplatonist view of history such as Porphyry’s would acknowledge the necessity of a final escape from evil (*DCD* 12.21). Porphyry did not recognize that the end to evil occurred *within* time, not just after or outside it. Porphyry’s Neoplatonist narrative has no Augustinian gap between climax and end. Not coincidentally, Porphyry, unlike Christians, could not be saved through history, which for him contained no defining revelation (10.32).
they were supposed to. Even this partial, literal reading of prophecy made them better prepared for the spiritual fulfilment when he came (DDC 3.6). Only after Christ had come were the Jews to be faulted for not understanding the spiritual meanings within the carnal scriptures.  

Yet the carnal fulfilments were not adequate to the carnal prophecies, rendering the literal meanings partial if not suspect. Events in general in the earthly Jerusalem were much different from what had been promised. For instance, Christ, not Solomon, obviously fulfils the promises to David concerning his son (DCD 17.8-10). Christ came to bring secure spiritual meaning, manifested in its Christian “definitive form” [“definita”] through his resurrection (DCD 18.54).

Christ’s agglutinative antitype even takes possession of Roman literature and history. The story of Romulus and the origin of Rome can be read typologically: “The remission of sins which gathers together the citizens of the eternal country resembles, in a certain sense, as though foreshadowed by it, that asylum of Romulus by which the multitude which was to found the city

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of Rome was brought together by the promise of impunity from all its crimes” \((DCD\ 5.17)\).\(^{41}\) Romulus here achieved an incomplete redemption, yet it resembles the Christian redemption positively, as two good things of the same kind must. Like many other church fathers, Augustine also sees prophetic types in Vergil. In particular, through Vergil’s \textit{Aeneid} the Sybil prophesied Christ’s coming. Augustine even categorizes her, tentatively, within the borders of the City of God: “She speaks out against such gods and their worshippers so forcefully that she is, it seems, to be included among those who belong to the City of God” \((DCD\ 18.23)\).\(^{42}\) She is perhaps on the same epistemological plane as a Hebrew spiritual reader. Conceding that her words through Vergil literally signify someone else, Augustine states the presupposition that permits him to plunder Christian types out of the Egyptian gold of pagan writings: “The words are true if you refer them to [Christ]” \(\text{[ueraciter tamen, si ad ipsum referas]}\) \((DCD\ 10.27)\).\(^{43}\) If the words are speaking about Christ, they are true because they have a true referent. If not, they lapse into unimportance. In order to make sense of their own history and identity, Roman readers of \textit{De Civitate Dei} must read sense through Christ back into their past, and must learn how to find sense in that unlikely place. That they have not yet found the interpretive key that fulfils their

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\textbf{41} “remissio peccatorum, quae ciues ad aeternam colligit patriam, habet aliquid, cui per umbram quandam simile fuit asylum illud Romuleum, quo multitudinem, qua illa ciuitas conderetur, quorumlibet delictorum congreguit inpunitas” \((DCD\ 17.44-48)\).

\textbf{42} “quin immo ita etiam contra eos et contra cultores eorum loquitur, ut in eorum numero deputanda videatur, qui pertinent ad civitatem Dei” \((DCD\ 18.23)\).

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own history—“although he has fled rich from Egypt, he cannot be saved unless he has observed the Pasch” (DDC 2.41)\textsuperscript{44}—is no excuse to miss it once they see it, like the Jews.

Although written much earlier than De Civitate Dei, at a time when Augustine’s exegetical practice had not yet matured, the narrative form of the Confessiones similarly grounds its interpretive meaning at its climax, in high figural fashion. The conversion scene near the end of book 8 forms and is formed by a long procession of types, both internal and external to the work. As Michael Cameron has dryly put it, Augustine “was a man of several large conversions and a number of small ones.”\textsuperscript{45} Each of these conversions both enabled and prefigured the decisive one. Without the conversion to philosophy, to the catechumenate, or to a version of Neoplatonism, Augustine’s wholehearted conversion to the Catholic church and lifestyle would certainly not have taken the form it took.

The conversions are not merely repetitive but sequential. The philosophical quest begun upon reading Cicero’s Hortensius led through the materialistic theodicies of Manicheanism, from which a disillusioned Augustine turned to a catechumenate under the spiritual mentorship of Ambrose. Ambrose in turn pointed Augustine toward the Neoplatonists, who enabled him to see both that God was a spirit and that pure spirit inadequately accounted for the divine incarnation in Christ. Yet from the perspective of the final conversion, without that final conversion this linear causality would have been nothing more than random, aimless wandering. By the time Augustine got to Rom. 13.13-14, he knew very well how to convert, but each of those conversions had done him only a preliminary, preparatory good.

\textsuperscript{44}“quamvis de Aegypto dives exeat, tamen nisi Pascha egerit, salvum se esse non posse.”

\textsuperscript{45}Cameron, “Christological Substructure,” p. 74.
At the end of this wandering/progress, his conversion to Christianity was an unrepeatable moment, “the moment when I would become someone different” (8.25). Its context, his curiously patterned wanderings, identifies as triumphalist the progress of his life toward its punctiliar climax. The description of the event in 8.29 as a fundamental alteration of Augustine’s identity implies that the conversion of 8.29—not the visions of books 7, 9, or 11-13—is the true functional climax of the *Confessiones* narrative. It makes sense of what had gone before; it places on a different ontological plane the Augustine who will come after.

Depending for its structure upon the resources of sacred history, the narrative of the *Confessiones* is externally allusive as well as internally progressive. The final conversion of book 8 not only culminates a linear chain but participates in a call-and-response between Biblical figures. The trees of books 2 and 8 and the gardens of books 8 and 9 echo Eden. The movement away from and toward God recalls the Prodigal Son. The immediate account of the conversion itself has important similarities with Paul’s punctiliar conversion on the Damascus road. Scholars have used its symbolic structure and resonances to argue against the historicity of the conversion scene in particular, because the scene is so clearly modelled after texts Augustine has previously read. These readings tend to mistake figural reading for allegorical, to assume that if

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Augustine senses spiritual meaning in his own history he must dismiss the literal as unimportant. On the contrary, books 1-9 are unprecedented in their close, systematic attention to the personal, temporal experiences of an ancient author. The logic of figural reading would indicate that Augustine is using the literal events of his life as grounds and warrants for spiritual meaning. This spiritual meaning he finds in biblical accounts of redemption or conversion: the beginning and the end of history (Paradise, Creation), individual narratives that mimic a restoration from a fallen state.

With one major but fleeting exception (the garden scene at Ostia, a precipitate realization of the eschatological), these figural narrative patterns end in book 8. A tree of life in the garden matches the pear tree of the knowledge of good and evil in book 2. The prodigal son returns to

48 See Courcelle 190ff, McMahon, “Autobiography,” especially pp. 340, 359; Leo C. Ferrari, “Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus” and “Book Eight: Science and the Fictional Conversion Scene,” A Reader’s Companion, pp. 127-36, and Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine.” O’Meara, “Augustine’s Confessions: Elements of Fiction,” Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian, pp. 77-95, confusingly blurs the boundaries between the terms “history” and “fiction” while claiming not to challenge the historicity of the work. Most of these arguments assume that imposing retrospective structure, particularly literary, upon an historical experience compromises a real, unmediated encounter with its unstructured historicity. Symbols are fictional; history takes place outside signifying systems. In short, this debate hinges upon whether to read the Augustine in the Confessions as an allegorical, non-literal sign or an historical figure. Figural exegesis, however, reads history as text, the signifying system of God; the two categories are not mutually exclusive. It seems likely to me that Augustine intends the account in book 8 to be read as essentially historically accurate. For this view, see also Starnes, Augustine’s Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Confessions I-IX (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990), pp. 241-42, and Henry Chadwick, “History and Symbolism in the Garden at Milan,” From Augustine to Eriugena: Essays on Neoplatonism and Christianity in Honor of John O’Meara, ed. F. X. Martin and J. A. Richmond (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), pp. 42-55.
his parent (Monica) to tell her the story of his great change. The Pauline figure of resistance suddenly capitulates. Then, as book 9 begins, Augustine finds himself launched past the all-too-briefly realized stabilities of typological pattern into a post-climactic existence of inadequate closure (books 9-10), time and memory (books 10-11), and exegesis (books 11-13).

This climactic, linear narrative is most familiar and most influential to Augustine’s readers. A climax discontinuous with but fulfilling prior history can anchor a powerful narrative of present legitimacy. Such a form makes it possible to read one’s converted self, religion, or (eventually, in the medieval period) nation as divinely appointed and foreshadowed telos. Post-classical and medieval hagiographers could end-stop their histories of saints with confidence in the figural patterns thus created. Accounts of conversion to monasticism exhibited a similar confidence in that break from worldly existence. Dante’s resolutely linear Commedia retraces Augustine’s epistemological narrative to acquire a transcendent autobiographical perspective through conversion. This clear and empowering linearity made Confessiones book 8 and its typological foreshadowing in book 2 some of the most widely and carefully read passages in Western literature. Ecclesiastical narratives were also quick to exploit the supersessionist potential of De Civitate Dei. Augustine’s protégé Orosius seems to have ignored Augustinian epistemological ambivalence altogether in his Adversus paganos historiarum, complacently describing a triumphalist Christian history in the best Eusebian tradition. Once the Christian religion became firmly established in Europe and the Mediterranean, though, it required less

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50 See Freccero, especially pp. 1-28.
narrative defense. People groups and nascent nation-states in the Middle Ages began to appropriate the City of God to legitimize their political order as well as their religion.

The time before and during such a climax to linear narrative is not, however, a zone of consolation to Augustine, and thus does not properly correspond to the existential situation of the Christian life and church. The Jews had their rewards and consolations on the literal level, within their life on earth. They lived in literal expectation of divine intervention within history, not eschatological hope. The Augustine wandering through the first seven books of the *Confessiones* wandered wilfully; he needed the closure of salvation from himself, not consolation within his present and continuous state. Augustine and the City of God have already received all they could feasibly expect in time, yet they still suffer and do not fully understand. The true urgency of Augustinian narrative therefore resides in the time after climactic revelation, when closure has already been given but consolation is still required.

**Posthistorical Form**

Besides its figural climax an Augustinian narrative has an eschatological end. The climax is, to some degree, accessible within time to the human memory; that accessibility is why God would have intervened in time at all. The end, however, is inaccessible and can only be hoped for. Time between climax and end moves forward but, for the purposes of understanding, is oriented backward. It is a period of epistemological insufficiency. Decisive change within time and the human soul occurs at the climax, but human realization of that change is incomplete because the human epistemological process is inevitably temporal, not punctiliar.\(^{51}\) Thus the

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51 Augustine’s semiotics holds together the necessity of transitory signs and the temporal dilation required for their interpretation. The present can never be seized upon; in time, events and their interpretations are continually passing away. Yet humans must experience phenomena in time and sequence in order to view their totality. Meaning-making requires rumination, a process in which tentative interpretations are continually made and revised as
human soul and the Christian church are placed in the remarkable position of having both to understand and to live up to the identities already conferred upon them. This period of coming to realize what has already happened is a period after meaningful history, the gap that creates Augustinian posthistorical narrative. In the Confessiones, books 9-10, Augustine tries but fails to gain satisfactory divine perspective on his current circumstances; he has stopped trying by De Civitate Dei. Divine resources are present for him but offer something other than the formal satisfactions of comprehension by means of narrative structure.

If meaning available through the contextualization of narrative structure is absent from Augustine’s accounts of time after conversion and incarnation, ought we to call these posthistorical accounts narrative at all? Both the Confessiones and De Civitate Dei end outside phenomena appear until they cease to appear upon arrival at a meaning-full end. Tentative and partial attributions of meaning are the only (pseudo-)closures available in time. In an influential essay, Rowan Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s De Doctrina,” Journal of Literature & Theology 3.2 (1989), p. 140, argues that Augustine’s identification of temporal signs as pointers toward an eternal God “entails that there is no finality, no ‘closure’, no settled or intrinsic meaning in the world we inhabit.” Augustine’s semiotics warns Christians against the false closures of pride, “the end of desire,” and Platonist untrammelled ecstasy; his “learning from Scripture is a process—not a triumphant moment of penetration and mastery, but an extended play of invitation and exploration” (p. 142). R. A. Markus, “Signs, Communication and Communities in A’s De doctrina christiana,” De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture, eds. Duane W. H. Arnold and Pamela Bright, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 9 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 101, also describes the cessation of desire with mere earthly enjoyment as “premature closure of the Christian life, a denial of the restlessness in the depth of the human heart.” Other useful accounts of Augustine’s semiotics include Markus, “St. Augustine on Signs,” Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 61-91; B. Darrell Jackson, “The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana,” Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 92-147; the essays collected in De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture; and Cary, Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine’s Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
their own history, in exegesis and eternity respectively. Because of this, both appear to escape from narrative, as Neoplatonist narratives presumably should. Yet, although the linear trajectory leading up to conversion and incarnation seems to exhaust the formal structures of these works, Augustine continues to relate events a little while after the narrative structure falters. Rome falls. Martyrs suffer. Miracles occur. Augustine weeps at his mother’s death and sins through four of his five senses. Things happen. Augustine cannot move directly from revelatory climax to extra-temporal end. He must narrate the gap of time that comes between, and that gap contains the raw material of events, even if they resist assimilation into narrative structure. Historical events are still signs, even when illegible.

In *De Civitate Dei*, part of Augustine’s project is to make the signs of Christian history illegible. To do so he must undermine the two metanarratives that incorporate those signs structurally. Eusebian triumphalism read the Constantinian and Theodosian alliance of Christianity and the Roman Empire as a crucially significant event for the historical development of the Catholic church. Against this narrative of an ascent, the pagan Romans placed a narrative of descent: the Christianization of Rome led directly to its conquest by Alaric.

Augustine simply ignores Constantine’s and Theodosius’s integration of the Christian faith into their political establishment. This omission is deafening, coming as it does after an enthusiastic century of Christian political triumphalism. Augustine mentions the two emperors Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and Prudentius, *Contra Orationem Symmachi*, are notable exponents of this triumphalism. Although Augustine commissioned Orosius’s *Historiarum Adversum Paganos*, that work is primarily in the Eusebian tradition. See Markus, *Conversion and Disenchantment*, p. 38, for Augustine’s personal evolution away from his political triumphalism of the 390s, and Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 3-26, for the early fifth century as a zone of competing Christian triumphalist and anti-triumphalist historiographies.
briefly in book 5, only to draw a sharp distinction between their temporal duties and prosperity and their hope as Christians. Constantine was a fortunate man, but “no emperor…should be a Christian merely in the hope of securing the felicity which Constantine enjoyed; for every man should be a Christian only for the sake of eternal life” (5.25). The good deeds of Theodosius as emperor do have positive results, but in eternity not in time: “these deeds… are the good works that Theodosius bore with him from this temporal life where the greatest of human attainment and exaltation is but smoke. The reward of these works is eternal felicity” (5.27). Christian emperors are not Christian for the sake of their temporal empire. Just as the fall of Christian Rome was a false climax, the Christianization of Rome was a false climax. That toward which all history tends is the first, then second, coming of Christ.

Although he allots little space to Christian triumphalist historiography, throughout the first ten books of De Civitate Dei Augustine systematically wrecks the causalities and interpretations of pagan historiography. Pagans claimed that the Christian metanarrative failed at the fall of Rome, but such a claim depends upon a clear, sequential connection between human piety or impiety and divine blessing or judgment. As the pagans told the story, the impious Christian rejection of the pagan gods of Rome resulted in the withdrawal of divine protection from Rome. Military disaster naturally ensued. Augustine’s own revisionist account of Roman history in these books obliterates this sequential narrative form and undermines the possibility of Roman historiography as a sense-making enterprise. The pagan gods are no more satisfactory causes of events than the Christian God (2.3); the pagan past yields no better results than the

53 “Ne imperator quisquam ideo Christianus esset, ut felicitatem Constantini meretur, cum propter uitam aeternam quisque debeat esse Christianus” (DCD 25.14-16).

54 “Haec ille secum . . . bona opera tuit ex isto temporali uapore cuiuslibet culminis et sublimitatis humanae; quorum operum merces est aeterna felicitas” (DCD 26.57-60).
Christian present (2.2-3). Pagans cannot look to notable events in their past to justify their current religious practices and beliefs. Instead, an authoritative Seneca admits, “The greater part of the Roman people do not know why they perform [their rites]” (6.11). Or, when they unearth books that contain the embarrassingly demonic origins, the Senate burns the books and destroys the evidence (7.34). Because civil religion derived from humans and demons, inquiry into the temporal origins of pagan religion results in shame to its adherents and forces its intellectuals to spiritualize those shameful temporal events through allegory. Allegory marks shame, not pride. Whether in their empire or their religion, Romans have every reason to be afraid of history, because it does not turn out the way they think it should. In place of Christian and pagan metanarratives, Augustine can appeal only to “the hidden providence” [“occultae . . . prouidentiae”] or to “the mysterious dispensation” [“secreto omnipotentis arbitrio”] of a God (2.23) “Whose judgments no man wholly understands and no man justly condemns” (2.23). Divine meanings and intents are out of reach of human epistemological capabilities. Within De Civitate Dei, the primary image of the illegible workings of God in history is of course the mingling of the two cities. The cities will be separated at the last judgment. What they have always been will become plain, available to the vision of everyone. Now, who belongs to which city is not always evident to church officials, to government officials, or even to the soul in question.

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55 “maior pars populi acit, quod cur faciat ignorant” (DCD 6.11).

56 “cuius plene iudicia nemo comprehendit, iuste nemo reprehendit” (DCD 23.61-62).

57 DCD 1.34, 18.49; see also DGAL 11, Serm. 80.8, Enarr. 64, and DDC 3.32.
Although Augustine readily describes the time of the Church with terms like “training” or “progress,” that progress does not escape but rather depends upon the illegibility of current history. Augustine even summarizes its current condition confidently:

In this wicked world, and in these evil days, the Church is preparing through her present humiliation for her future exaltation. She is being tested by the stings of fear, the torments of sorrow, the hardships of toil, and the perils of temptation; and she rejoices only in hope, when her joy is wholesome. At this time, therefore, many reprobate are mingled in the Church with the good. (18.49)

The mingling of the two cities and the resultant epistemological ambiguity is part of the Church’s testing and preparation for future glory. Thus the Church’s mode of progress is inextricable from and even identical with its operation within various uncertainties.

If even confident assertions about Augustine’s current historical moment circle back to apparently formless mystery, the gap between incarnation and apocalypse that is Christian history is best characterized as an epistemological void. When Augustine begins in book 20 to discuss the apocalypse, he reverts for a moment to his own time in order to describe that time in light of its future end. In comparison with the great future day of clarity via divine judgment, our time is little more than a holding pattern (“for the time being” [“nunc”]; see also 19.6-8) in which “we do not know” [“nescimus”] (20.2). “Nescimus” begins a stupendous Latin sentence, seven

58 The Church itself has definitely grown, expanded outward from its initial base in Jerusalem. Augustine also explains that the whole world will receive the Christian gospel before Christ returns (Epist. 199, Enarr. 101.2.9). Such a goal provides an end toward which the church can advance and, presumably, mark its linear progress.

59 “In hoc ergo saeculo maligno, in his diebus malis, ubi per humilitatem praesentem futuram comparat ecclesia celsitudinem et timorum stimuli, dolorum tormentis, laborum molestiis, temptationum periculis eruditur, sola spe gaudens, quando sanum gaudet, multi reprobis miscenent bonis” (DCD 18.49)
subjunctive clauses worth of what we do not know.\textsuperscript{60} We do not know why a good man is poor, a wicked man is rich, an immoral man is joyful, a praiseworthy man is sad, an innocent man is condemned, a malicious adversary is vindicated, and so on. In other words, we do not understand the gap between existence and value, between “is” and “ought to be.” Nor can we even say that the world is reliably topsy-turvy, because good men do meet good ends, sometimes, and bad men bad ends (20.2).

The certainty of just future judgment does not provide Augustine with the capacity to make accurate present judgments. Quite the opposite—it makes him less confident to do so. In Book 19, he bemoans that a judge must act, sentence, exonerate, even though inevitably some of those most weighty judgments will be disastrously incorrect (19.6). The fact of future judgment does, however, provide one and only one point of clarity for the confused Christian in the time being: “In this matter one thing is not hidden from the faith of the godly; and that is, that what is hidden is nonetheless just” (20.2).\textsuperscript{61} There is a good end coming, although in the time before that end it is impossible to discern precisely how or why.

\textsuperscript{60}“Nescimus enim quo iudicio dei bonus ille sit pauper, malus ille sit diues; iste gaudeat, quem pro suis perditis moribus cruciari debuisse maeroribus arbitramur, contristetur ille, quem uita laudabilis gaudere debuisse persuadet; exeat de iudicio non solum inultus, uerum etiam damnatus innocens, aut iniquitate iudicis pressus aut falsis obrutus testimoniis, e contrario scelustus aduersarius eius non solum inpunitus, uerum etiam uindicatus insultet; impius optime ualeat, pius languere tabescat; latrocinentur sanissimi iuuenes, et qui nec uerbo quemquam laedere potuerunt, diuersa morborum atrocitate affligantur infantes; utilis rebus humanis inmatura morte rapiatur, et qui uidetur nec nasci debuisse, diutissime insuper uiuat; plenus criminibus sublimetur honoribus, et hominem sine querella tenebrae ignobilitatis abscondant, et cetera huius modi, quae quis colligit, quis enumerat?” (\textit{DCD} 20.2)

\textsuperscript{61}“Cum tamen in hac re piorum fidem non lateat, iustum esse quod latet” (\textit{DCD} 20.2)
A similar gap in understanding marks the authorship of the *Confessiones*. As we have seen, however, scholars have been reluctant to attribute existence in an epistemological or interpretive “gap” to the author of the *Confessiones*, since his conversion in book 8 or his Neoplatonic clarity of vision in books 7, 9, and 11-13 imply the interpretive authority or certainty that come from an arrival, from the end of a story. Should the *Confessiones* follow a narrative trajectory similar to *De Civitate Dei*, the post-conversion or post-visionary Augustine must be in “a time being,” and there must be significant things he does not yet know. Such a time being would most likely consist of the ambivalent end of Augustine’s personal narrative in Book 9, and his anticlimactic current condition in Book 10.

What is immediately clear in Augustine’s account of the subsequent events in book 9 is that the meanings of events were not immediately clear to him. His first post-climactic impressions of the world do not align with his authorial perspective years later; he needed to reread them to make better sense of them. He thought he knew the next thing to do after conversion: phase out of teaching and devote himself, in a small company of devoted celibates at Cassiciacum, to “behold that you are God” [“uidendi, quoniam tu es dominus”] (9.4). Yet Peter Brown has imagined the wry irony of this intention as it must have appeared to the Augustine of ten years later, hounded out of that idyllic retirement into a frenetic bishopric, haunted in the tumult of administrative activity by his “lost future” of static Neoplatonic vision. Whether Augustine the author would have seen his initial dreams of earthly philosophical contemplation as misguided, at the least the author would have recognized that Augustine the Catholic proselyte did a poor job of projecting his own future. Unlike the texts of Cicero’s *Hortensius*, the perfect lucidity of Aristotle’s Ten Categories, the Neoplatonist books of book 7, and the concussive

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62 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 139-50.
appositeness of Rom. 13.13-14 in the garden, the Scriptures remained opaque to Augustine after his conversion, even though Ambrose had started off the fledgling exegete with the undemanding, “obvious” (“apertior”) prophecies of Isaiah (9.13).

Augustine’s final unsolved event is his own grief over the death of his mother, Monica. He believed he knew that she had gone to a blessed afterlife, yet “why, if this is so, was I inwardly shaken with grief?” (9.30)\(^63\) While others made funeral arrangements, he retired “to ruminate on the meaning of this event,” grieving with great inner violence although remaining outwardly composed (9.31). This sharp division between inward discomfiture and outward composure persisted; during her burial day he concealed his depression, and a bath for his body could not alleviate the pain in his soul (9.32). The sharp divisions within his new ecclesial existence made him an illegible text to others. Eventually he could weep honestly before God and God alone, but this account in the Confessiones is his official admission of grief to a human audience, coming a full ten years after the fact. Whereas before he dreaded how people would analyze or interpret his suffering, now he invites them to decide if his grief was excessive (9.33). The question of whether his grief was excessive is still open at the time of his writing, even at the time of our reading. Neither he nor God in his presence has produced a satisfactory conclusion.

Most epistemologically ambivalent is the Ostian vision, during which Augustine and Monica touched “the ageless wisdom that outlasts all things” [“aeternam sapientiam super omnia manentem”] (9.25). Critics who read the Confessiones as a narrative of Neoplatonic vision have often assigned this event climactic place.\(^64\) It does seem to describe an ultimate intensity of

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\(^63\) “Quid erat ergo, quod intus mihi grauiter dolebat . . .?” (Conf. 9.12.30.14-15)

\(^64\) O’Connell, *St Augustine’s Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul*, 2nd ed (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), p. 54 sees in the Confessions “an Augustine whose eye was peering always [as storyteller] toward the philosophic
absolute knowing, yet Augustine frames the experience with an event they do not yet know: Monica’s imminent death (9.23, 27-28). Retrospectively, knowing that Monica was going to die soon, Augustine can see “one of your [God’s] own secret disposings” [“procurante te occultis tuis modis”] (9.23) in the fact that he and his mother shared this potent visionary experience at that time. This experience of eternity is framed, grounded, and made meaningful by its temporal, narrative context. What they thought they knew absolutely, then, later changed shape in the context of an event they had not foreseen.

Augustine’s status update in book 10 portrays a man confident in his spiritual identity (grounded solidly in that past narrative) but not so confident in an achieved stasis of spiritual experience. On the basis of his spiritual identity—“In you my ‘scattered selves are reunited,’ not to be ‘parted in exile’ from you”—God may “at times . . . admit me into feelings of deep sweetness, honeyed I know not how, which, were they made complete, would make this life something beyond this life. But then I am toppled back to earth, weighted with heavy burdens, haven of Cassiciacum, and past it, to the soaring heights of Ostia.” See also Paul Henry, The Path to Transcendence, p. 11, and Stock, Augustine the Reader, p. 112.

65 Similarly, Colin Starnes, “Augustine’s Conversion and the Ninth Book of the Confessions,” Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), pp. 59, 61, points out that, in contrast to the vision of book 7, physical details ground the experience of Ostia in bodily reality. Cary, Outward Signs, p. 12, describes Ostia as a conversation between Augustine and Monica; the experience itself, because it was shared, included its own mediation and interpretation through words. Vessey holds the opposing view: that Ostia was a mystical, textless, hyper-Neoplatonic experience occurring in silence; see his “The Great Conference: Augustine and His Fellow Readers,” Augustine and the Bible, p. 65.
plunged into compelled ways . . .” (10.65),\(^{66}\) as at Ostia. The sharp linear narrative book 8 conferred upon its preceding books now subsides into gentle spirals of improvement or even mere repetitive circles: “I have not so much stopped wounding myself as you have not stopped healing me over again” (10.64).\(^{67}\) Each of his senses but smell betray him by making him sin against his Lord; he must constantly struggle against them. Augustine has very definitely returned from the heights of illumination to which his conversion or vision had taken him. The Neoplatonic fall back from vision in book 7 serves as partial prefiguration of the more emphatic Christian thud in books 9 and 10. Unwilling, Augustine has fallen back into time and exists in a gap between conversion and death, climax and end. Christian eschatology promises the final break referred to in *De Civitate Dei*, but before that end, the abstract patterns of Neoplatonist and Christian narrative experience seem qualitatively about the same.\(^{68}\)

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\(^{66}\) “quo conligantur sparsa mea nec a te quidquam recedat ex me. Et aliquando intromittis me in affectum multum inuisitatum introrsus ad nescio quam dulcedinem, quae si perficiatur in me, nescioquid erit, quod uita ista non erit. Sed recido in haec aerumnosis ponderibus et resorbeor solitis…” (*Conf.* 10.40.65.20-24).

\(^{67}\) “uulnera mea magis subinde a te sanari quam mihi non infligi sentio” (*Conf.* 10.39.64.9-10).

\(^{68}\) The close likeness between Augustine’s Neoplatonist vision in 7.23 (while yet outside the church) and his mystical experience with Monica at Ostia in 9 (having committed himself to the church) clearly invites comparison between them. Scholars have disagreed on whether to characterize Ostia as fundamentally Neoplatonic and thus quite similar to the vision of book 7, or fundamentally Christian and thus contrastive to the earlier vision. For Ostia as Neoplatonic, see Henry, *The Path to Transcendence*, pp. 27, 40; and John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine: The Hulsean Lectures for 1938* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), p. 32. For it as Christian, see William Mallard, *Language and Love: Introducing Augustine’s Religious Thought Through the Confessions Story* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 174-76; Kim Paffenroth, “Book Nine: The Emotional Heart of the *Confessions*,” *A Reader’s Companion to Augustine’s Confessions*, ed. Kim
But it is exactly the way of deliverance, the experience in time and history, that Neoplatonism is supposed to have gotten wrong, claims Augustine in both the *Confessiones* (7.27) and *De Civitate Dei* (10.32). In books 9 and 10 of the *Confessiones*, two characteristics of Augustine posthistory indicate an experience qualitatively different from that of a frustrated Neoplatonist visionary. First, book 9 locates the importance of Augustine’s post-conversion life outside himself, in proclaiming his conversion narrative and performing its implications. The book contains a flurry of post-climactic climaxes; they happen not to be Augustine’s. He has essentially lost the role of subject in what heretofore had been a self-focused narrative. The meaning his life acquired in book 8, though still partially realized in his own self, instead infuses the narratives of others immediately. Those narratives end sharply in conversion or death. Communication and repetition of his own narrative has become paramount to this converted rhetorician. First he relates the conversions of Nebridius, Alypius, and Adeodatus. Then he includes a short but complete biography of his mother, the high point of whose life did not occur at her conversion, but at his. She spent much of her life patiently serving, loving, and praying for her unconverted family members, like Augustine’s father Patrick (who had converted years earlier, before he died) and Augustine himself. After Augustine’s conversion, she too enters a post-climactic gap, and says so explicitly right after their shared vision at Ostia: “What further I should do, or why I am still here, I know not. What I hoped for in this world is accomplished. One thing alone made me linger in this life a bit longer, to see you a Catholic Christian before I

should die” (9.26). His Christianity proven in dramatic fashion at Ostia, she could not imagine further purpose to her life. Unlike Augustine in his protracted gap, however, she quickly died. Evidently her mission truly was finished, allowing her to depart. If her gap closed so quickly once her purpose had been accomplished, then Augustine’s life past his conversion must have a similar ministerial, external purpose—to see others come and follow him.

Second, although in book 9 Augustine distributes his narrative for the benefit of others, book 10 demonstrates that he is not finished with his own narrative, and book 11 demonstrates how he can extend his understanding of it. He has not yet found God in a wholly satisfactory way and must pursue him not forward into some further consummation within time but inward and backward into the organizational abilities of memory (10.9-12). Memory is the organ of interpretation, thus of knowledge, for Augustine. Through memory the words of a psalm (11.38) or the syllables of Deus creator omnium (11.35) proceed, to be known fully only when they are complete and silent, when memory can assemble them into a final shape. Understanding is necessarily involved in time, and complete only when physical presence or important event has receded into the absence of the past. Viewed as a point, the present is never present and has no being. Viewed as a function of the mind, the present as a time of understanding dilates to encompass past (the present of the past) and future (the present of the

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69 “Quid hic faciam adhuc et cur hic sim, nescio, iam consumpta spe huius saeculi. Vnum erat, propter quod in hac uita aliquantum immorari cupiebam, ut te christianum catholicum uideram, pruisquam morerer” (Conf. 9.10.26.56-59).

future) (11.26), since only in the mind can present, past, and future be available to the inquiring interpreter simultaneously. Only when events are gone can Augustine revisit and understand them. The older and wiser he grows, the more the context and content of his life accumulates, and the better he can understand cruces such as his conversion and his vision at Ostia. Although the Confessiones remains (despite Peter Brown’s magnificent rival) the canonical account of Augustine’s life,\(^71\) the discipline of revisionist history undergirds much of the rest of his writings, especially De Civitate Dei and the Retractiones.

Although Augustine uses posthistorical narrative form to designate both personal and sacred history, it would prove particularly amenable to later accounts of the self because of its epistemological emphasis. It is a record of the narrative process of coming to know that which is necessarily already complete. For Augustine, the self, not an institution, knows. Augustine’s term for “self” is anima; he is widely credited with originating, or at least with greatly advancing, the concept of an individual human zone of subjectivity.\(^72\) Nevertheless, the Augustinian self looks suspiciously corporate because it continually recognizes itself in something else: Christ, Christ’s body the church, Christ’s body the Eucharist, the voices of the Bible. It knows itself in the context of broader ontological categories and narrative arcs. In an important statement for his exegetical program, Augustine says of the psalms, all of which he believes are prophetic and spoken by Christ, “When Christ speaks, he sometimes does so in the person of the Head alone…but at other times he speaks in the person of his body, holy Church diffused throughout the world. We are within his body, we are members of it, and we find ourselves speaking those words”\(^73\)

\(^71\) Even Augustine admits that he seems to have gotten it right (Retr. 32.1).

Similarly, with reference to Idithun the psalmist, Augustine’s figure of spiritual progress, Augustine states, “If anyone among us is able to be an Idithun, that person will find and hear himself or herself in what is sung” (Enarr. 38.1). Both voice and self are found not made, in an epiphany not an act of imaginative creation. This epiphanic recognition consists of the self in and through the voice of the self. People would find themselves speaking and find themselves in what they spoke, as long as they spoke through the larger entity of the church.

As Stock has argued, Augustine was converted through reading himself into stories and text. Hearing of two soldiers converting, Augustine felt the words wrenching “me around to front myself, dragging me out from behind my back, where I had cowered to avoid seeing myself” (Conf. 8.16). The story held Augustine in front of his own face because it kept on being told. That same story demanded his interaction: “Did you hear that story?” he asked Alypius. “Non-philosophers surge ahead of us and snatch heaven, while we, with our cold learning—we, just look at us—are still mired in flesh and blood” (Conf. 8.19). Imaginatively, he had located himself sufficiently within the story to engage its characters in a footrace. Then, when a voice compelled him to open the Bible, he did so believing that whatever text he found

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73 “Cum enim Christus loquitur, aliquando ex persona solius capitis loquitur . . .; aliquando ex persona corporis sui, quod est sancta ecclesia, diffusa toto orbe terrarum. . . . sumus in corpore ipsius, et membra ipsius, et inuenimus nos ibi loqui” (Enarr. XXXVII, 4.6.9-12.14-15).

74 “si esse unusquisque nostrum potuerit Idithun, in eo quod cantat inuenit se, et audit se” (Enarr. XXXVIII, 1.1.4-5)

75 Stock, Augustine the Reader, 75-111.

76 “. . . me ad me ipsum, auferens me a dorso meo, ubi me posueram, dum nollem me attendere” (Conf. 8.7.16.2-3).

77 “Quid audisti? Surgunt indocti et caelum rapiunt, et nos cum doctrinis nostris sine corde ecce ubi uolutamur in carne et sanguine!” (Conf. 8.8.19.4-6)
would be “meant specifically for him” [“admonitus … tamquam sibi”] (Conf. 8.29). He found himself in the texts of writing or history—it did not much matter which—because he found himself through the discipline of reading. The Augustinian self within the Confessiones is primarily that entity which reads history and writes autobiography and performs lyric (Psalm 4; see Conf. 9.8-11) in order to recognize itself through the authorship that is exegesis. What we might call self-formation Augustine, absolutely doubting the human capacity to form itself, would call self-recognition, the epistemological reconstruction within memory of the prior ontological work of God. Regardless of how we should construe the end that is self-knowledge, for Augustine, reading oneself through authoritative texts was unquestionably the means.

In this he was not unique. The classical world had a word for constructing oneself along a prior pattern or model through education: paideia. Augustine participated in the early Christian church’s appropriation of paideia in order to perform a reduced curriculum: the solitary canonical text of the Bible. Through its Jewish and Christian historiography, however, the Biblical model gave Augustine a narrative paideia that accommodated flaws and aporias, unlike the classical model. It contained climaxes of grace coming from outside human causation in time, but also periods after those climaxes in which humans struggled and failed to appropriate the divine grace that had been given. The converted Augustine has to live up to moments of

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79 Frances M. Young chronicles this appropriation throughout her Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture, although she emphasizes its effect on culture, not the self. See also Jaeger, Early Christianity and Greek Paideia (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1961); 86-100 explicates Biblical self-formation in Gregory of Nyssa’s thought as an exercise in paideia. Markus, The End of Ancient Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) continues the story of the shift, until by Gregory I Roman culture had wholly converted to a strict Biblicism.
insight and decisive change, not complete patterns. That the pressure to be exemplary does not exert itself on every particular of his narrative enables a greater degree of what we would call realism. Augustine admits to realistic passions because passions provoke movement, narrative. Disciplined, they can move him toward the stasis he longs to find. Augustine asks any reader of his work to discern the good movement of his passions from the bad, not to “imitate me when I err, but rather when I progress toward the better” [“non me imitentur errantem, sed in melius proficientem”] (Retr. Prol. 3). Augustinian paideia is not mindlessly obedient but actively critical.

Thus posthistorical narrative form activates the possibility of the narrative formation of the self according to meaning grounded securely in an authoritative and textualized past but free for current interpretive improvisation. In order to provide meaning for his life, Augustine had to compose an autobiography using the materials of sacred history. And that is all. No one told him what events to use. No one would call him a heretic if he scrambled his allusions or talked about the Prodigal Son before the Garden of Eden. He would himself give six, or seven, or four clear narrative stages for the microcosmic individual and macrocosmic City of God, but neither in Confessiones nor De Civitate Dei does he show sustained interest in adhering to any of those structures. The only absolute structural demand of Augustinian narrative is that it ends in provisional interpretation of a climactic, fixed past.

The Consolation of Posthistory

Inheriting from his Neoplatonist influences a deep concern with knowledge of the eternal real, Augustine sees the shapeless temporal period of posthistory as requiring consolation. In limbo before an eschatological end to history that includes complete vision and perfect rest, Augustinian narrative must exploit whatever resources it can to content itself with waiting. At
the same time, the Christ and the conversion that once manifested clear vision in time have receded into the absent past. Neither future nor past can be fully present to the present understanding. Augustine’s solution to this epistemological impasse is a consolation of performance. Deeds and words provisionally reproduce the meaning once clear in the punctiliar climaxes provided by Christ but now accessible only through the epistemologically compromised retrospects of memory and text.

From the perspective of posthistory, all three aspects of time—past, present, and future—demand consolation. As part of time, posthistory is subject to the inevitable loss of the past, as what was once in the present absents itself into nonexistence. Occasions of genuine personal and cultural loss prompt both the *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei*: the dissolution of Augustine’s philosophical ideal at Cassiciacum and the fall of Christian Rome, respectively. Passage of time inevitably results in loss; movement is always movement away from as well as movement toward.  

What is still present demands consolation also, however, because it is unambiguously wretched. When Augustine narrows his focus to his present life and circumstances, horrors meet his eyes. His inventory of his own converted heart is full of failure and grief, mitigated only by external incursions of divine grace (*Conf.* 10.39-64). His inventory of the human condition is similarly a litany of forty-four horrors that the Christian cannot hope to escape within time.  

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80 See *Enarr.* 136.3, as well as 127.15 in which the stages of time are like a succession of deaths, none of which bring a plenitude of being.  
81 “mordaces curae, perturbationes, maiores, formidines, insana gaudia, discordiae, lites, bella, insidia, iracundiae, inimicitiae, fallacia, adulatio, fraus, furtum, rapina, perfidia, superbia, ambitio, inuidentia, homicidia, parricidia, crudelitas, saeuitia, nequitia, luxuria, petulantia, inpudentia, inpudicitia, fornicationes, adulteria, incesta et contra naturam utriusque sexus tota stupra atque inmunditiae, quas turpe est etiam dicere, sacrilegia, haereses, blasphemiae, periuria, oppressiones innocentium, calumniae, circumuentiones, praevericationes, falsa testimonia, iniqua iudicia,
The human condition in aggregate “is a state of life so miserable that it is like a hell on earth” [“tam miserae quasi quibusdam inferis uitae”] (DCD 22.22). Because this misery will never quite make sense on earth, the epistemological process is impossibly inadequate before an apocalyptic future. Posthistory finally requires consolation in the absence of finalized meaning. Augustine insists that the epistemological gaps and shapeless spaces of time are when people require, and are given, consolation from God (Enarr. 73.19).

The alignment of posthistorical individual and ecclesial circumstance with the wider model of sacred history is consolatory precisely because the authoritative sacred narrative predicts and accommodates the absence of narrative structure. Biblical narrative suspends after Acts and resumes only in the Apocalypse of Revelation after a long series of interpretive books has intervened. Sacred history characterizes the gap between incarnational climax and eschatological end as a period of absence. Although he promises to return, the physical Christ has extracted himself from time. No church and no self should ask for more than the absence of perceptible structure, because the narrative resources of the Christian tradition promise no more. The opposite is true: although the times are unsatisfactory, even bad, Christ predicted that they would be so (Serm. 81.7). Christ’s prophecy confers meaning to the inadequacies of time, their lack of fulfillment itself a fulfillment. Posthistory can reassuringly find its place in a larger narrative structure.

In the predicted formless time of his absence, Christ remains for Augustine the active agent of consolation only by re-presenting himself through the performance of his church. He “is preaching himself, telling the good news of himself even through his members, those who
already belong to him. Through them he can attract others, who will be joined to the members through whom his gospel has been spread” *(Enarr. 74.4).* In a productive ambiguity, Augustine does not specify whether that preaching manifests through the deeds or the words of Christ’s church. Augustine is certainly capable of conceptualizing a lived life as a text. By this re-presentation, textualized words, deeds, and events provide access to the authoritative past necessary to make provisional meaning by which humans can currently live.

Although every Christian should certainly perform the deeds of charity, Augustine’s own preferred medium of performance is words. Despite Augustine’s oft-expressed reservations about the uses of rhetoric, rhetoric was what his Church wanted from him from 391 on, and rhetoric was what it got, in sheaves. Augustine believed in his rhetorical project. Even his

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82 “Euangelizat Christus seipsum, euangelizat se etiam in membris suis iam existentibus, ut et alios adducat, et accedant qui non erant, et copulentur membris eius, per quae membra eius praedicatum est euangelium” *(Enarr. LXXIV, 4.28-32).*


early and (upon retrospect) ill-considered works he tries to salvage through judicious
*Retractiones*. With suitable guidance his readers can find something of value in every work
(*Retr. 3*), just as he readily claimed truth even from the rhetorical production of pagans.\(^8^5\) Words
have value because they are catalysts for human understanding—productions in time, to be
written down over time and ruminated on in time. The rhetorical arts, like charity, put a human
in *motion* (by persuasion) and thus promote narrative progress appropriate to time.\(^8^6\)

Augustine’s notion of authorial performance is consolatory, moreover, because it
validates the exploratory flexibility of improvisation. Current events are not crammed
unconvincingly into a resistant, thus inadequate, narrative model. In a temporal world where the
eternal, perfect Word of God is not directly accessible, and where understanding itself is a
temporal process like the recitation of a psalm, words have a quantitative value. The more words,
the more meaning, especially if the words are interpreting a prior intervention of God in history.
For example, Augustine’s exponential expansion of Gen 1.1 into *Conf.* book 11 and Gen 1.2-3
into book 12 is, according to him, the kind of verbal dilation interpretation ought to perform.\(^8^7\)

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\(^8^5\) His oft-cited statement on the subject is *De Doctrina Christina* 2.18: even in pagan literature or mores, “every
good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord’s” [“uero quisquis bonus
uerus que christianus est, domini sui esse intellegat”].

\(^8^6\) Cavadini, pp. 164-81.

\(^8^7\) Like a spring, “the text of your attendant, though meted out in few words, sends out a strong stream of truth
through many expositors, each drawing this truth or that according to his capacity, for dissemination in longer and
more circuitous language” [“ita narratio dispensatoris tui sermocinaturis pluribus profutura paruo sermonis modulo
That Augustine’s interpretation does not align exactly with Moses’ intent does not alarm him as long as the same Spirit was whispering in the ears of author and reader (12.42). “See, Lord my God, how many words about few words I have written!” Augustine cries triumphantly—imagine the prolific results of going through the whole of Scripture (12.43)! Within time, interpretive truth, settling into cultural forms and the idiosyncrasies of the exegete, is nearly infinite. The present has the right to shape the past for application to the needs of the present, but also has the security of grounding present interpretation in past authority. Such a view of interpretation powerfully invites the discipline of authorial invention.

The goal of hermeneutics is comfort from temporal loss through the narratival form of charity. In Augustine’s reductively distilled definition of charity as the only reality behind desire, charity’s genus is motion: “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”

scatet fluenta liquidae ueritatis, unde sibi quisque uerum, quod de his rebus potest, hic illud, ille illud, per longiores loquellurum anfractus trahat”) (Conf. 12.37.4-7).

88 “Ecce, domine deus meus, quam multa de paucis uerbis, quam multa, oro te, scripsimus!” (Conf. 12.32.43.10-11)
89 The belief that eternal truth condescended into the vicissitudes of time and space in order to become a sign gave Augustine room to address many cultural data in his attempt to decode the spiritual meaning from the literal appearance (DDC 3.12-22; Conf. 3.13-14, 13.27; Epist. 138.1.2).
Cupidity is merely perverted charity moving in the opposite direction. Charity and cupidity thus describe a narratival motion; the soul is regularly or irregularly drawn by passions toward either a heavenly or an earthly end. If the mechanism of charity reorders temporal priorities so that humans can satisfy their desires in an eternal God who cannot be lost, consolation for loss is inseparable from involvement in a narrative-shaped existence.

The Middle Ages has a dominant model of Neoplatonic consolation: Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. Boethius provides a rudimentary narrative of knowing, as the dreamer’s knowledge and acceptance of philosophy progresses across the work, but vacates accessible meaning from the histories of both dreamer and cosmos. The Boethian God is radically inscrutable, as are his works. Augustine’s career-long engagement with his Neoplatonic intellectual milieu provoked him to identify significant inadequacies with a Neoplatonic consolatory model and to provide his own narratival consolation. He would agree with Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Boethius about the end of meaning and history, but he would disagree about the way to get there because he takes seriously the historicity of the incarnation.


92 According to this definition, it is not entirely clear that charity as such would be possible in an Augustinian heaven. One could praise, adore, be oriented toward God, but one could not *move* toward God. For this reason Augustine insists that emotions are appropriate in this life and apathy inappropriate, although in heaven the reverse will be true (*DCD* 14.9). In heaven, there would be no need for the motion that emotions enable. Charity, and its attendant emotions, would have arrived.
In both his major narratives he posits a climactic but not final divine break into history. History comes to fruition at incarnation as well as apocalypse; life comes to fruition at conversion as well as death. The authority of the climactic Augustinian event enables Augustine’s return from that event to the *saeculum* as a zone of its re-performance. This return, again in both narratives, recommits him to the utility of narrative time, albeit for the sake of eternity. A prior narrative climax absent from Neoplatonic philosophy anchors Augustinian posthistorical narrative form, and an invitation to interpretive rhetorical performance absent from Neoplatonic ethics provides a way to implement that authoritative past provisionally but effectively. Augustine owes these resources to a careful figural reading of sacred history and his own life. Such a strategy of reading and narrative practice he recommends to his own readers.

Following Augustine’s invitation, important medieval narrative structures of the self use the anticlimactic structure of sacred history in order to provide consolation for their own lack of closure. This consolation arises from grounding the meaningless autonomies of their characters in essentially inscrutable transcendence but also from exploring a previous climactic moment through a provisional authorship. In times of genuine personal crisis an Augustinian model often proved useful when patterning consolatory narratives, not philosophies. To such a medieval autobiography, characterized by post-conversion illegibility, we will now turn.
Peter Abelard wrote his autobiographical *Historia calamitatum* explicitly to console a friend through his own example. Paradoxically, the narrative arc of that example bore Abelard away from a location called “comfort” (the Paraclete abbey)\(^1\) and into a post-consolatory, calamitous space and time. Himself well past and nowhere near consolation, he declared that his history and current situation should console. This clash of narrative form and announced intention seemingly dooms the *Historia* to deconstruct itself. Ever since Heloise’s immediate and thorough demolition of its arguments, readers have been loath to agree with Abelard that his *Historia* provides a successfully consolatory narrative structure. Heloise’s complaint is structural: the *Historia* ended badly. Michael Clanchy concurs, claiming that the author’s miserable circumstances sit uneasily at the end of a triumphal narrative: “Abelard’s ‘history of calamities’ comes close to denying the integrity of his experiences. He purports to confess that his prowess in scholarship was no more than overbearing pride and that his joy in Heloise was lust, and yet he finishes up confused and directionless.”\(^2\)

Scholars who seek integrity for the *Historia* in a revelatory climax of conversion must find such a climactic event earlier in the narrative—in Abelard’s fortunate castration, his ensuing conversion to monasticism, or his founding of and tenure at the Paraclete abbey.\(^3\) Yet Abelard writes the *Historia* having clearly

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\(^1\) “Parakletos” means “comforter” in New Testament Greek.


\(^3\) For his castration as climactic, see Vitz, pp. 28-29. For his integration of desire into a monastic lifestyle as climactic, see Robert R. Edwards, *The Flight from Desire: From Augustine and Ovid to Chaucer*, The New Middle
outlived all of these climactic consolations. Any consolatory meaning they might offer seems to lose potency past the expiration date of the conversion narrative they bring to fruition.

The gap between consolation and Abelard is, however, an Augustinian gap of consolation. It derives from a posthistorical Augustinian model of sacred history as discussed in the previous chapter. Abelard structured his life according to this narrative model, using roughly chronological allusions to numerous figures from classical and Christian history. Such a direct identification of his personal story with a sacred story that has outlived its own climax would have been enough to anchor his plight in a consolatory metanarrative.

But, using techniques from his logical expertise, Abelard goes further. He reifies the Augustinian temporal (and spatial) gap between himself and an absent consolation into a source of consolatory stability as the interstice of a proportion. He announces in both introduction and conclusion that consolation derives from finding one’s place as the lesser term in a proportion: “In comparison with my trials you will see that your own are nothing, or only slight, and will find them easier to bear” (57) and “let [it] suffice to enable you . . . to think of your trouble as little or nothing in comparison with mine, and to bear it with more patience when you can see it in proportion” (104). Then, throughout his allusions to figures of sacred history in the body of

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the work, Abelard preserves a distinction between figures at his level and figures greater than he. Generally, allusion asserts the likeness of comparison, but Abelard uses allusive deference as well. When he compares himself to figures of classical and ecclesiastical history, he usually employs either explicit simile markers or direct quotations tagged with the speaker’s name. But he more subtly alludes to his betters, Christ and the apostles, in unattributed quotations and verbal echoes as well as simple correspondences of narrative form. Placing the more overt comparisons at either end of his story, Abelard construct the story’s centre from deferential examples, forming a sacred history of his life in which Christ and the Holy Spirit are climactic. This history has a fourfold structure: first, the young Abelard is constructed by equivalences to classical figures and Christ before experiencing a fortunate fall; second, his sufferings of castration and the humiliating trial at Soissons employ deferential and indirect allusions to the passion of Christ; third, after the Paraclete comes, references to figures of the early church (some deferential, some equivalent) sharply increase; fourth, the allusion-free present-tense situations of both Abelard and the Christian church demand eschatological redemption.  

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5 Abelard is highly unusual in the range, variety, and use of these allusions. Medieval preachers used biblical exempla to recommend particular moral action. Historical narrative could construct an exemplary figure out of allusions to Christ or another biblical character, as happens throughout Bede’s A History of the English Church and People. See Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., Romanesque Signs: Early Medieval Narrative and Iconography (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), for typological architecture and texts in the early medieval period. Saints’ lives could
Movement through the *Historia* is both a linear progression through these four stages of sacred history and an alternation between the proportions of equivalence and deference. We can chart the narrative structure of these allusions not merely by the identity of each allusion (to Christ, to Jerome, and so on) but, perhaps more importantly, by the proportional relation Abelard discerns between himself and each figure. The greater the interstice between the terms of the proportion, the more effective consolation an argument from lesser to greater provides.

The logical exchange between equivalence and deference translates into the narrative terms of the *Historia* as a temporal exchange between the consolations of presence and absence. During the premature interpretive closure that characterized his early career, Abelard initially read great heroes of history as types that he fulfilled. The vast resources of history were made present again through the scintillating exercise of his *ingenium*. Great calamities of absence—castration, exile from his wife, estrangement from his abbey and ecclesiastical hierarchy—shatter this naïveté but culminate in a powerful consolation of the Holy Spirit’s presence where Abelard founds the Paraclete abbey. Soon, however, Abelard’s reactions to irrefragable external pressure force him away from the Paraclete. The burden of the rest of Abelard’s narrative is to adumbrate his current proportional relation to a consolation that remains present though inaccessible. Once it is finished, he sends it in a letter to console someone else absent from him, affirming and extending the tenuous community of suffering and consolation he has been able to assemble.

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conform a saint to Christ or, intertextually, to another saint’s life. Christ’s humanity did imply that humans should repeat his example in some way. But Abelard does not attempt to repeat Christ’s example, or any of these others, so his use of them is not tropological. The staggering variety of his allusions to historical characters suggests, rather, that he has a difficult time associating himself definitively with any of them.
Reading the Self Through Similitudes

Abelard’s chosen rhetorical mode of self-construction, allusion, describes simultaneous identity and difference. An allusion is an impassable gap between two entities, acknowledged but provisionally bridged. This practice of allusion has never been discussed as distinctly Abelardian, a rhetorical manifestation of the concepts relatio and similitudo that occupy his wider thought.\(^6\) Abelard is a theorist of relations, of how to identify, map, and manage gaps. His pedagogy in Sic et non forces his students to contend intellectually not just with apparent contradictions but with gaps in patristic explanations. His formal logical treatises view the arrangement of particular propositions into the relations of valid reasoning much more favorably than the simple identification of particular phenomena with universal propositions. His semiotics identifies language as a quasi-thing, attempting inadequately to span the gap between humans and what they describe.\(^7\) His theology measures how close the human forays of similitude come to describing the ineffable divine, and how far they fall short. Although his standards for pedagogy and logic are optimistic, assuming as they do that human reason can reconcile apparent contradictions, his semiotics and theology assume that the gap between word and thing, or man and God, can never be bridged.

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This impassable gap, bounded by *relatio* and *similitudo*, at once stabilizes and frees. It validates semiotics and theology because they discuss things, real if inaccessible to language. The objects of these disciplines are more real than quasi-real language about them. But also the gap between language and things of any kind provides the theoretician the infinite interpretive freedom that lack of closure brings. Nothing can ever be said fully, so there is always more to be said. Abelard compares himself to figures as diverse as Ajax, Aristotle, Mars, Christ, Athanasius, and the apocryphal Susanna, a range so bafflingly broad that no criticism has yet comprehended them all in a single study. This wide variety of allusions constitutes a bold and liberating claim to personal and hermeneutic originality, uncontainable by singular previous models, even as it grounds his ingenious interpretations in a reassuringly authoritative structure.

Most of Abelard’s attention to *relatio* defines a relation not as an accident shared by two substances, but as an accident intrinsic to one substance and categorizable alongside another

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accident from another substance, an ontological gap between them still. The propositional language of universals is established by common and subjective likeness (*communis similitudo*), not ontological relation. Logic (and its synonym dialectic) is an account of words not things, of language as the space of relation between sign and referent, separable from both. This concept of relation as signification and therefore as the object of logical study appears not merely in his *Logica ingredientibus* and *Dialectica* but also in his theological discussions of the Trinity. Along with *similitudo, relatio* helps Abelard to define the equivalent relation of but ontological distinction between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

While both of these terms had identified relational equivalence when applied to metaphysics and had marked technical discussion of the Trinity since Tertullian and Augustine, *similitudo* also had important deferential implications when used in a methodological context. As

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11 Abelard uses *logica* and *dialectica* interchangeably. To him a study of things would be physics. Maria Teresa Beonio-Brocchieri Fumagalli, *The Logic of Abelard*, trans. Simon Pleasance (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), 17, identifies two crucial differences for Abelard between the disciplines of logic and rhetoric that occupy the same *topos*: language. The first is methodological: logic requires rational, not psychological, criteria to judge a discourse. The second is purposive: rhetoric persuades toward an orator’s preconceived end, while logic inquires and explores, oriented toward an end that emerges out of the argumentative process.


13 For example, *Theologica Christiana* 1.104; 3.167-68, 170; 4.82-85, 155 and *Theologia ‘Scolarium’* 2.166.
famously exemplified in Augustine’s near-retraction of *De trinitate* in its book 15, describing one’s theological language as similitude could mean that the author understands human language to be hopelessly inadequate in comprehending the ineffable subject of discussion. Similitudes mean the poor best humans can do because we explicitly acknowledge that they describe an *aenigma* (15.9, 11). Nevertheless, according to G. R. Evans, they are the very best that medieval exegetes could do, because God made humans a *similitudo* as well as an *imago* of God (Gen. 1.26), enabling them to achieve partial knowledge of God through analogy between divine and human. The image of God is substantial and eternal, but similitudes of God are accidental, transitory, dependent on the rectitude of human behavior.\(^{14}\) Because a similitude is accidental or temporal, it is phenomenologically available to humans, an unreliable but necessary starting point to reason from created things to God within time. Not just words but things signify through similitude.\(^{15}\)

Despite Abelard’s widely reputed confidence in human reason, his Trinitarian theology demonstrates that he knows the inadequacy of human language and analogy to describe the

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\(^{15}\) According to Abelard, God prefers to use things of nature not words for his similitudes (*Theologia Christiana* 3.8). Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, pp. 402-03, explains that Abelard is interested in both words and things, but not necessarily together.
Abelard’s separation between words and things is clearest in language about God; he is always careful to measure exactly the extent to which his logical discussion of analogies could overcome the impassable distance to divine reality. Eileen Sweeney argues that Abelard’s theology, and his logic in general, is more apophatic than cataphatic, more tentative than confident, readier to recognize disjunction and difference than authenticity and correlation. Specifying points of comparison between God and his creation, yet disclaiming any pretension toward total or even wholly accurate knowledge, was the procedural mode of Abelard’s dialectical theology. In this he is orthodox for his time. The fallibility of the human reader

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16 See John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 57-61, on Abelard’s revision of the *Theologia Summi Boni* into later forms such as the *Theologia Christiana* and the *Theologia Scholarium*. Marenbon notes Abelard’s increasingly deferential tone, subject to correction by church authorities, although Abelard’s claims that reason could achieve some, necessarily limited, knowledge of the Trinity did not substantially alter.


19 Abelard was not always deferent in exercising his reason. In the *Historia calamitatum*, he characterizes the method of his *Theologia summi boni* as “by analogy with human reason […] for the use of my students who were asking for human and logical reasons on this subject, and demanded something intelligible rather than mere words,” “by analogy with human reason […] for the use of my students who were asking for human and logical reasons on this subject, and demanded something intelligible rather than mere words” (78; “by analogy with human reason […] for the use of my students who were asking for human and logical reasons on this subject, and demanded something intelligible rather than mere words,” 21). This treatise, employing a relatively orthodox method, was later
would compromise even the signification of things, programmed by God into creation. In any case, according to standard medieval semiotics, description of God in things or words is a necessarily inexact concession to time-bound human epistemological processes.

Such deferential caution is not foreign to Abelard’s wider dialectical practice. The deference inherent in the dialectical and rhetorical use of similitudes results from the epistemological inadequacy of subjectivity. Abelard can aggressively correct linguistic usage and sharpen or refute the arguments of his opponents, but he cannot say for certain whether an improved syllogism better corresponds to reality. Much of his methodological innovation is traceable to his conceptual separation of the knower from the known. His dialectical practice refines ways of knowing; it leaves what is known comparatively unscathed. Dialectics improves argumentative processes but does not offer the closure of objectively reliable

condemned as heretical, in part for three reasons evident here. The similitudes rely heavily upon logic, the treatise’s audience and author antagonize its contemporary theological context, and Abelard’s personal attitude showed few external signs of humility before *aenigmata*, although the treatise itself included careful caveats.

20 Evans, *Language and Logic*, p. 1, identifies the epistemological incapability of humans after the Fall as a presupposition undergirding all medieval exegesis.

21 Stock, *Implications of Literacy*, p. 531, argues that, for Abelard, texts reveal *relatio* as a way of knowing. Thus he could separate epistemology from ontology, knower from known, experience from ratiocination. Elsewhere, Stock, “Medieval Literacy, Linguistic Theory, and Social Organization,” *New Literary History* 16 (1984), p. 15 extends his characterization of Abelard’s semiotics: Abelard saw that language permits language to be studied, operative as both subject and object.

22 This is another way of putting Sweeney’s key insight—both throughout her *Logic, Theology, and Poetry* and her “Abelard’s *Historia Calamitatum* and Letters: Self as Search and Struggle,” *Poetics Today* 28 (2007), pp. 303-36—that Abelard is much better at taking apart failed arguments and assertions than he is at constructing positive and stable ones of his own.
propositions concerning the real or true.\textsuperscript{23} Although Abelard confidently applies dialectical method to language of all disciplines, he strictly confines that application to language.\textsuperscript{24}

Nevertheless Abelard writes when the distinctions between text and self were blurring. Brian Stock has shown that a rise in literacy during the eleventh and twelfth centuries resulted in texts increasingly used to frame both orality and personal experience. Aware of heroic or antiheroic patterns from written history, individuals began to interpret and edit their own lives into recapitulations of those patterns.\textsuperscript{25} Fitful stirrings of a monastic autobiographical impulse—in Otloh of St. Emmeram and Guibert of Nogent as well as Abelard—may indicate a link between encounter with textual patterns and the impulse to interpret one’s life according to those


\textsuperscript{25} According to Stock, \textit{Implications of Literacy}, p. 4, increasing textuality means that experience gets edited and that people begin overtly to live out texts. He further, in “Medieval Literacy,” p. 17, characterizes the eleventh and twelfth centuries as reviving old textual models for purposes of self-construction.
patterns. An autobiographical self is a textualized self. If a separation between word and thing applies here, the twelfth-century self is closer to a word than a thing.

A self constructed along patterns discovered in prior texts is the self of Caroline Walker Bynum’s twelfth century: discovered not independent of but in relation to others. It is a self not merely “socially and religiously embedded,” but textually as well. Should an autobiography align with a single textualized pattern, the self would be constituted allegorically, as an iteration of some timeless form. A saint’s life, for instance, often closely replicates Christological patterns. Should an autobiography align with more than one such pattern, however, the self would be constituted more approximately, through similitude.


Abelard constitutes himself through similitudes. He employs a texture of allusions so
various that no reader should identify him primarily with any of them.\textsuperscript{29} Like them all at certain
points, he is the full incarnation or representation of none. Nor do all the allusions cluster around
or refract through an archetype or antitype like that of Christ. Some do; some do not. For the
purposes of self-construction, Abelard reads classical and sacred history as he read theological
authorities in \textit{Sic et non}, culling significant (if initially unrelated) examples and placing them
alongside each other. As a dialectician he is accustomed to criticising texts, using his reason to
pry them open for interrogation and challenge, not blindly conforming to the shape of an
authoritative pattern.

That he uses a variety of allusions does not mean that he escapes an authoritative pattern.
He chooses the pattern of Christian sacred history, the only metatextual form broad enough to
accommodate his diverse calamities. Conforming to this pattern is itself a significant choice,
because in the early twelfth century it was at once an option of increasing viability among other
increasingly viable options. Only around 1120 was the entire Bible (as opposed to individual
books) becoming available as an object of study in the classroom, sufficiently glossed by the
\textit{Glossa Ordinaria}.\textsuperscript{30} The whole Bible, and the history it relates, could therefore wield a new
conceptual weight. However, the intrusion of techniques from other arts into the fledgling
discipline of theology meant that the text of Scripture encountered alien systems of structure and

\textsuperscript{29} Perhaps the most persuasive case is Southern, p. 91, and Edwards, pp. 62-63, that Abelard eventually settles upon
the identity of Jerome. This “settling” is more likely to occur definitively in the fuller correspondence with Heloise,
however, as their epistolary relation to each other increasingly resembles Jerome’s and Marcella’s. See also Alcuin
categorization. Gloss and commentary dependent on the order of the Scriptural text gave way to drastic reorganization of biblical material through systematic theology. One way to follow the evolution of scholasticism in biblical interpretation is to identify whether a given medieval interpreter adheres to the order of the Scriptural text or discusses Scripture according to an order of knowledge borrowed from another discipline like logic.  

Thomas Aquinas is of course the pinnacle of this development, biblical matter in the *Summa* entirely subordinate to a logical structure. Abelard himself occupies an intermediary position. His *quaestiones* interrupt the flow of his Scriptural commentaries yet are contained by those larger commentaries. As Sweeney has indicated, however, the freedom Abelard exhibits in excerpting from a variety of authoritative texts in *Sic et non* is explicitly structural. He disputed so sharply with Bernard of Clairvaux in part because Bernard’s *lectio* hermeneutics submit to the order of the text. Abelard’s *disputatio* hermeneutics restructure texts into dialectical categories in order to create knowledge by solving the dialectical problems that such restructuring creates.

Suffice it to say that Abelard has several structural options into which to fit the biblical allusions of his *Historia*. Rather than organizing the material of sacred history within a

31 Abelard’s contemporary, Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon* VI.6, poses the conflict in narrative terms. He contrasts the order of history required for a literal interpretation with the “order of knowledge” required for an allegorical interpretation.


dialectical structure, he subordinates the conceptual resources from dialectic—namely, proportion—to a narrative structure found mostly in one authoritative but diverse text: the Bible. In the Historia, his hermeneutics in service of the self looks more like the discipline of lectio.

Such a lectio reading, the resources of authoritative biblical narrative articulating the felt experience of the self, occurs in amplified form within his six Old Testament planctus. Each lament greatly expands a lyrical moment that, in the Historia, Abelard might have confined to a one-sentence analogy. Construing the situations and emotions of biblical characters sets up analogies between their situation and his own (or that of Heloise and the Paraclete, for whom they may have been written). The planctus show how Abelard re-historicises and re-literalises the narrative resources of the Bible, granting human experience a new dignity and meaning when compared to abstract spiritual truth. In this Abelard reads according to a typological and not an allegorical tradition. The unfulfilled type is the focus, however, not the fulfilled antitype.

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34 The current consensus is that Abelard’s planctus engage personal experience without being strictly autobiographical. Although it is nearly impossible to imagine that his own experience did not inform the selection of topics such as untimely truncated love, unfulfilled parenthood, and murderous opposition from jealous rivals, Abelard seems to have subordinated this personal identification to a rhetorical agenda of wider application. See Dronke, Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000-1150, 2nd ed, Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 1 (London: Committee for Medieval Studies, 1986), pp. 114-45, and Morris, p. 69. Juanita Feros Ruys, “Quae maternae immemor naturae: The Rhetorical Struggle over the Meaning of Motherhood in the Writings of Heloise and Abelard,” in Wheeler, pp. 323-39, asserts that Abelard’s planctus on the mourning Jacob expresses his own feelings of thwarted parenthood.

35 Wetherbee, Platonism and Poetry, p. 71.
He chooses to identify with and articulate the felt experience of the disconsolate self. Rather than pointing to a New Testament antitype or closure, his readings of Old Testament types as applicable to his current situation depict the lamentable experience of a ruptured triumphalist closure. In selecting moments of sacred history with which to identify, Abelard generally settles on those when things are going unexpectedly wrong. People are not getting what their virtue deserves. Promising developments, even provisional closures, have just turned ironically sour. The situations of Abelard and his Old Testament characters are therefore analogous to Augustine’s in the Confessions and De Civitate Dei, confronting the dissolution of metanarratives.

In particular, each story from which a planctus is drawn identifies a personal cost that is never adequately addressed or atoned for by its wider sacred history. Two of these planctus (Dinah’s lament over Shechem and Jacob’s over Benjamin) come relatively soon before the Israelites’ triumphant entry into Egypt under Joseph. Two (over Samson and Jephthah’s daughter) come from the chaotic book of Judges, just prior to the monarchy. Two (over Abner and Jonathan) come from David’s own life before he becomes Israel’s greatest king. Yet nothing good comes out of these events, directly. They are not redeemed by or assimilated into the causes and effects of providential history. Jacob’s grief is inapt: Benjamin is not dead. The deaths of Jephthah’s daughter, Abner, and Jonathan serve no wider purpose. The deaths of Shechem and Samson are triumphs of folly. It is true that a biblically literate audience would

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36 Sweeney, Logic, Theology, and Poetry, pp. 95-114, points out that Abelard carefully extracts these bleak narrative moments from their positive narrative contexts. She emphasizes that he is good at bleakness. A comparison with Augustine’s psalmist in DCD 10.25 is instructive. To Augustine, the Psalmist’s personal reconciliation to Hebrew history’s calamitous deferral and lack of closure serves as exemplary model for Christian behaviour in the same historical situation. Abelard’s Old Testament figures display no such reconciliation to their condition.
likely supply the generally positive narrative contexts these lyrical moments ignore. The bitter human experience recorded in the laments is thus simultaneously ironised (by its enclosing narrative) and validated as a poetic topic.

In the context of his own narrative _Historia_ and not a singular lyric moment, Abelard must read himself through similitudes and not a one-to-one typological correspondence. He cannot recapitulate one lone figure because his self is devastatingly unique in its compromised identity. The identity he had he no longer knows: irrefutable master, uninhibited lover. Accusations of heresy put a stop to the one, castration to the other. His opponents mocked him as a specifically linguistic enigma, grammatically (“imperfectus Petrus”) and rhetorically (“homo sibi dissimilis est”).

Catherine Brown sees the _Historia_ as Abelard’s attempted answer to the _quaestio_ posed by his own irreconcilable subject positions: “monk, teacher, man, … not-monk, not-teacher, not-man.”

The most important aspect of his experience, then, is a profound unlikeness between himself and the rest of the world. The _Historia_ relates the intense loneliness of a man used to energetic interaction with friends and colleagues. Envy and castration have rendered those connections impossible to consummate. Consolation must therefore identify who he is like, not who he is unlike. He is unlike anyone he knows; that is the source of his calamity.

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37 Thus Spence, p. 14: self cannot exist when trying to fit a mold (scriptural or otherwise), only when recognizing difference from it. That self exists in the recognition of difference from previous models. I concur that that is at least one of the ways one of the kinds of self comes into cognizance. Spence does not, however, address the resources prior models can give a self in its exploration of difference from them.

38 Roscelin and Bernard of Clairvaux, respectively, quoted in Brown, pp. 78, 65.

39 Brown, p. 65. She thinks the reconciliation fails and that his opposing identities never meet each other (63-90). Spence, p. 76, argues the precise opposite: that he tries to maintain dialectical oppositions within himself but cannot.
Nevertheless, it is the nature of similitudes to approach interpretive closure cumulatively through approximation. Although allusion is less accurate than image, likeness, or type, a series of inadequate comparisons achieves greater representational accuracy through sheer quantitative momentum. Neither Abelard’s identity nor God’s is possible to depict directly, although for different reasons. In his Trinitarian thought Abelard recommends describing the indescribable with a wide range of similitudes. If representation always ultimately fails, a rhetorician can still use a great many partial failures to build a vision less partial and less a failure. Abelard’s allusive practice in the Historia therefore corresponds to his wider use of similitudes.

More importantly, in the Historia he turns the primary weakness of a similitude—the irreducible ontological gap between the two entities compared—into the primary strength of a consolatory proportion. Abelard’s body and career are maimed. He will always be less than he was and less than Christ and the church fathers who preceded him. Yet his consolatory strategy depends upon precisely this gap. They are greater than he yet still suffered. What he suffers is not, then, unique to himself, but the common manifestation of a narrative pattern that includes all the greatest disciples of Christ and, indeed, all human history. He does not finally understand why he must suffer, but he finds a proportion assuring him that he must suffer.

Abelard’s bifocal reading of personal and sacred history resembles Augustine’s model in its general outline and its emphasis upon gaps in knowledge. Once, as a young man, Abelard was naïve and foolish in the ways that the young world was. He then passed through a climactic experience of encounter with the divine, analogous to the Christic and apostolic era. Now he spends his time and text deciphering that climactic experience and exploring its implications for his current, difficult circumstances.

40 Dronke, Fabula, pp. 66-67.
As a logician, however, Abelard is more interested than Augustine in measuring the precise distances between and within the personal and sacred narratives. Through allusions he measures the ontological distance between himself and forebears from Ajax to Origen, with widely varying results. He measures the temporal distance between himself and his past career and consolation. He measures the spatial distance between himself and the Paraclete abbey. Most of all, through figural reading he denies the importance of ontological and temporal distances that isolate his suffering. Wrapped tightly in this web of measurements of his distance from the authoritative, Abelard can finally, approximately, secure his location and consolation.

**The Premature Closures of a Logical Career**

During the initial stages of their autobiographies, both Augustine and Abelard use a variety of types or allusions drawn from history. But whereas Augustine portrayed his youth as a restless search for closure, Abelard portrays his rise to fame and prominence as a premature attainment of closure. His insouciant equivalences to classical and biblical heroes and sages imply that, although he may not be a singular antitype summing all of history, he at least represents some of the best of history into his fortunate and adulating present. Furthermore, unlike Augustine’s types that set up and support his conversion, most of Abelard’s early allusions do not find echoes in the later portion of his work. Rather than pointing forward truly, they point backward presumptively. The genuine climaxes and closures of his narrative are radical breaks within his structure of allusion—breaks as sudden, violent, and unprepared for as his castration. Read according to several self-undermining allusions and against the calamities in his future, Abelard’s early satisfaction in his own *ingenium* dons a bitter irony.

In retrospect Abelard seems to see his logical career in its entirety, before and during his monasticism, as supplying false closure. Dialectic itself is a commitment to the interpretive
closure of sure knowledge through strategies like syllogisms. Abelard does not deny the sure knowledge his secular career created but reduces its importance. After his monastic conversion, he relocated the exercise of his talent from the secular arts “which hitherto I had pursued only in desire for wealth and fame” to educating the poor and becoming “a true philosopher not of the world but of God” (77). Now he would devote himself to dialectical theology, not merely to the art of dialectic. Yet the spectacular argumentative success (or so he says) of his theological *De unitate et Trinitate divina* leads not to fame and fortune but to a trial for heresy. Abelard is certainly not done with logic; it inflects both the *Historia* and his later theological works. But, sure knowledge or not, he has lost the confidence to be triumphant about its narratival effects. It leads not to authority and respect but to calamities, carnal or Christic.

In the first stage of his autobiographical sacred history, Abelard narrates his rise to fame by comparing himself to classical figures and an authoritative Christ. These comparisons are in terms of direct equivalence, befitting Abelard’s early ambition. His youthful prowess in debate recalls both classical accounts of the student Aristotle challenging Plato and Christian accounts of the Christ-child correcting teachers of the law. But Abelard explicitly compares himself with Grecian peripatetic philosophers (58). This usage may reflect his well-known nickname:

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41 “quatinus quod hucusque pecunie vel laudis cupiditate egeram….nec tam mundi quam Dei vere philosophus fierem” (19-20).

“Peripateticus Palatinus.” Here Abelard cites a common analogy that constructs his identity with terms giving him highest magisterial authority.

Twice he pairs a classical with a Christological comparison, again in highly self-complimentary terms. The pairings imply a formal parity between all three: himself, the classical figure, and Christ. This practice is like the dialectic of the Sic et non in that Abelard draws excerpts from two sources into something like a syllogism. Unlike the Sic et non, however, these are comparisons not contrasts, more like a Sic et sic. For example, at the point of his greatest philosophical triumph, he and his party drive his former teacher William of Champeaux into a monastic life through disputational prowess alone. Abelard is heady enough when recalling that success to claim: “I shall not go too far if I boldly say with Ajax that: ‘If you demand the issue of this fight, / I was not vanquished by my enemy’” (62). The introductory litotes and the mock-humility of the quotation from Ajax, placing the responsibility for the boast on the audience who requests an accurate report of the fight, convey the hubris of an epic hero peering through only a perfunctory veil. Directly after the quotation from Ajax, Abelard adds in the same boastful spirit, “Should I keep silence [taceam], the facts cry out [res ipsa clamat] and tell the outcome” (62). He alludes here to Jesus’ statement in Luke 19.40, “If these [disciples]

43 See Clanchy, “Documenting the Self,” p. 305, on its frequency and on Abelard’s deliberate establishment of the Palatine half of the name in the Historia.


45 “Ille vero Ajacis, ut temperantius loquar, audacter proferam: ‘Si queritis hujus / Fortuname pugne, non sum superatus ab illo’” (7). The quotation is from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, 13.89-90.

46 Abelard is the only medieval writer to quote this passage from Ovid, much less use it to describe himself.
shall hold [tacuerint] their peace, the stones will cry out [clamabunt].\[^{47}\] The contrasting verbs are Messianic. If Jesus’ disciples will not speak of Christ’s greatness, the witnessing stones would be obligated to fill the silence. The allusion draws an implicit comparison between Abelard’s personal authority and Christ’s own, while Abelard, Ajax, and Christ all have audiences or witnesses pressing for accounts of their marvelous prowess.\[^{48}\]

Similarly, Abelard compares his destruction of another pedagogue to destruction of both biblical fig and classical oak. In this case, the target of Abelard’s scorn is Anselm of Laon, “a tree in full leaf which could be seen from afar, but on closer and more careful inspection proved to be barren. I had come to this tree to gather fruit, but I found it was the fig tree which the Lord cursed” (62).\[^{49}\] According to Matt. 21.18-22, Christ approaches a leafy tree in hopes of something to eat, but upon finding it fruitless, withers the tree with a curse. Anselm was leafy, or apparently fecund, and Abelard discovered the barrenness of his rhetoric only upon close inspection. If anyone made Anselm’s reputation wither visibly, it was, of course, Abelard, who

\[^{47}\] All Latin biblical citations are taken from Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994); English translations from the Challoner edition of the Douay-Rheims Bible. Abelard’s statement reduces the involved parties from three—Christ, the disciples, and the stones—to two: Abelard himself and the facts. If Abelard were silent, from false humility, the facts would self-reflexively clamour about the end of themselves.

\[^{48}\] Robert W. Hanning, The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 22-34, sees Abelard’s claim to ingenium as the organizing principle of his conception of himself. His ingenium gave his life meaning: without its fecundity and expression, he was impotent; without the agon it generated between him and uncritical slaves to authority, his life was without narrative.

\[^{49}\] “arbor ejus tota in foliis aspicientibus a longe conspicua videbatur, sed propinquantibus et diligentius intuentibus infructuosa reperiebatur. Ad hanc itaque cum accessisset ut fructum inde colligerem, deprehendi illam esse ficulneam cui maledixit Dominus” (7).
goaded Anselm to jealousy and the malicious, publicly infamous act of forbidding Abelard to teach the Bible. Abelard immediately adds an allusion to Pompey, however: “or the ancient oak to which Lucan compares Pompey” (62). Pompey is a tall oak casting shadow on a field of wheat, but, as the context in the Pharsalia makes clear, the impressive-looking oak is ready to topple at the first breath of the East wind. This wind is Caesar, Pompey’s younger and fresher rival. Abelard omits a direct attribution of agency to himself, but the stories of the fig and the oak leave clear room for himself as catastrophic force similar to the Messiah or Caesar.

The equivalences between himself, a classical figure, and Christ have the secondary effect of reducing his pedagogical competition. Abelard’s true peers are the giants of the far past, not the dwarfs of the present. Although on the same continuum with Abelard, his putative contemporary scholarly peers, William and Anselm, are less than he. Insofar as the young Abelard might require consolation from the envy his brilliance and success generates, that consolation comes through a proportion with himself as the greater term.

This initial series of direct equivalences sets up Abelard the character’s overweening pride and lust: “Success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit’s resolution and easily destroys it through carnal temptations. I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone” (65). At best, then, Abelard’s uncritical equivalences of himself and greatness permit the temptation of hubris; at worst, they

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50 “seu illam veterem quercum cui Pompeium Lucanus comparat” (7).

51 Abelard quotes from Lucan, Pharsalia 1.135-36.

52 Vitz, pp. 13, 15.

53 “quoniam prosperitas stultos semper inflat et mundana tranquillitas vigorem enervat animi et per carnales illecebras facile resolvit, cum jam me solum in mundo superesse philosophum estimarem nec ullam ulterius inquietationem formidarem” (9).
are steps on a path to corruption and self-destruction. He has experienced no significant setback to his purposes or foil to his power of *ingenium*; nothing has forced him to undergo the sophisticating process of having been checked. While seducing Heloise, he neither depicts nor imagines a serious setback to his desires from Heloise or her uncle Fulbert, once those desires had settled on a target. Thus his early classical or Christian allusions can flatten into reinforcements of a confident ego seeing mere reflections of itself in heroes and sages.

Implicitly, as Joseph Pucci has argued, Abelard’s classical allusions actually contradict the confidence they exhibit. Ajax, Caesar, and a later allusion to Pompey all come from stories with bad ends. Unlike the narrative moments of the *planctus*, which isolate negative moments within a providential story, these allusions locate positive moments within tragedies. Thus Abelard casts a retrospective pall over his earlier self the allusive boaster, who associates himself confidently with classical individuals at the peak of fortunes that will later decline sharply.

The ensuing tragedy of castration in fact provides the *Historia’s* greatest distance between Abelard as narrator and character. Such an autobiographical distance from a prior self is Augustinian, between the pre-converted character and the converted narrator who interprets. The shift from nostalgic narratorial recollection (flecked with irony) to outright narratorial repugnance for his previous behavior occurs when Abelard begins to introduce his relationship with Heloise. He achieves this distance with two sharp contrasts.

The first is another bifocal allusion to classical and Christian traditions, but this time a marker of difference between himself and them: “Hitherto I had been entirely continent, but now

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54 Mews, *Abelard*, 60.

55 Pucci, pp. 185-92. Chance, p. 169, also discusses the inappositeness of Ajax.

56 Freccero, pp. 1-28; see also Nichols, p. 5.
the further I advanced in philosophy and theology, the further I fell behind the philosophers and holy Fathers in the impurity of my life” (65). Whereas every allusion to this point has been comparison, the narrator’s retrospect identifies the place where equivalence must cease and where a gap between his earlier self and his classical and Christian exemplars, caused by sin, begins. Similitudes are accidents, based on behavior; they can change. Through impurity Abelard has at last become less than his exemplars.

Next, for the first time in the Historia, a Christian allusion corrects a classical one, implying a new hierarchy: “Perverse Fortune flattered me, as the saying goes, and found an easy way to bring me toppling down from my pedestal, or rather, despite my overbearing pride and heedlessness of the grace granted me, God’s compassion claimed me humbled for himself” (66, italics added). The strong contrastive particle imo marks a shift not only in narrative events but in allusive sources. From this point forward Abelard scarcely utilizes a positive classical allusion (with one major exception, see p. 28 below), much less matches it with one of his increasingly numerous Christian allusions. Most of the subsequent classical allusions describe his relationship with Heloise (they are caught like Mars and Venus [69]) or come when he is ventriloquizing Heloise (71-74, 76). His classical phase ends in his relationship with Heloise. In effect Abelard is indicting as naïve both his earlier braggadocio as secular dialectician and his earlier rhetorical strategy of equivalence within the Historia. It was after all the narrator Abelard,

57 “[. . . ] qui antea vixeram continentissime. Et quo amplius in philosophia vel sacra lectione profeceram, amplius a philosophis et divinis immunditia vite recedebam” (9).
58 “ut dicitur, fortuna blandiens commodiorem nacta est occasionem, qua me facilius de sublimitatis hujus fastigio prosterneret, imo superbissimum nec accepte gratis memorem divina pietas humiliatum sibi vendicaret” (10).
59 Edwards, pp. 64-70, elucidates Abelard’s careful narrative structuring of the Heloise section to correspond to the stages of winning and losing a lover in Ovid’s Ars amatoria.
not the character, who constructed all the earlier comparisons. That merely recollective, boastfully enthusiastic narrator was synonymous enough with the protagonist to be considered unsophisticated, even innocent. A new, wiser, *humbler* narrator emerges when he considers his folly over Heloise.

To this new narrator and allusive technique, the innocence of equivalence is prelapsarian. Abelard’s life before lust was uncomplicated by lust, his fall into lust was an uncomplicatedly hard fall, and his exploration of lust, by means of Heloise, was a quest for further knowledge, be it good, evil, or neither: “Our desires left no stage of love-making untried, and if love could devise something new, we welcomed it. We entered on each joy the more eagerly for our previous inexperience, and were the less easily sated” (67-68).

When Abelard narrates the story of his incontinence to Fulbert, he describes it in the form of an ordinary spiritual temptation. Love had made him foolish, as love typically does: “I had done nothing unusual in the eyes of anyone who had known the power of love, and recalled how since the beginning of the human race women had brought the noblest men to ruin” (70).

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60 Etienne Gilson, *Heloise and Abelard,* trans. L. K. Shook (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951), pp. 10-36, explains that Abelard’s marriage would have harmed his academic or clerical career much less than it compromised his freedom to devote his life to philosophy, an ideal both he and Heloise claimed vigorously for himself. Marriage, although permitted to a cleric and a teacher, was regularized incontinence. Gilson diagnoses it, as such, in terms of the Fall: according to Abelard, “the marriage state very much resembled a fall from grace. […] There is no reason to suppose that he wanted to keep the marriage secret because it would have been illicit, but everything points toward that ‘loss of glory’ which he dreaded in himself” (12-13).

61 “Nullus a cupidis intermissus est gradus amoris, et si quid insolitum amor excogitare potuit, est additum; et quo minus ista fueramus experti gaudia, ardentius illis insistebamus, et minus in fastidium vertebantur” (11-12).

62 “nec ulli mirabile id videri asserens, quicumque vim amoris expertus fuisset, et qui quanta ruina summos quoque viros ab ipso statim humani generis exordio mulieres dejecerint memoria retineret” (13).
gendered account of the Fall, Abelard’s fault is the fault of all men: an original or at least everlasting propensity to sin, exploited by the tempter, love, via a woman as empty catalyst.\(^{63}\) It is a fault through which all lovers must pass from innocence to knowledge, like a gate, in accordance with a narrative model set at the beginning of Christian history by Adam and Eve.\(^{64}\)

The knowledge that effects the change or conversion is his experience of suffering, echoed from Christ’s. Not Christ’s teaching but his suffering marks the supersession of Christian over classical or prelapsarian. In this second stage of his autobiographical sacred history, Abelard alludes frequently to Christ during the accounts of his own suffering. On the surface such a bold comparison belies Abelard’s recent assertion of humility. It is even more startling because he has just undergone a fall. The most thorough collator of these allusions to Christ, Donald Frank, sees in them Abelard’s “sense of proud emulation of the career of the

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\(^{63}\) Perhaps only Abelard could make an analogy with the Fall self-justifying, but this analogy is squarely in the context of exonerating his behavior toward Fulk. “Compatiens” and “tanquam de” (Hicks, La vie, 13) imply that he is holding himself aloof from a devastating indictment of his behavior. If he has fallen, it is a fall common to all men, as original sin is, and therefore nothing to get excited about.

\(^{64}\) It is possible to see Abelard’s intentionalist ethics as a repudiation of certain semantic ranges of “original sin,” particularly because, in his Peter Abelard’s Ethics, ed. and trans. D. E. Luscombe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 54, 56, 62, he carefully distinguishes between sin and ignorance when his contemporaries were inclined to subcategorize ignorance under original sin (Luscombe, Introduction, Ethics, xxxv). Jerry Root, “Space to speke”: The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 35, argues: “With his focus on knowing consent, Abelard can dismiss the ‘deep shadow’ (Confessions VIII, ix) of Adam and the Fall that weighed so heavily on Augustine.” Abelard does however, in Ethics, extend the influence of Adam’s original sin to “posteritatem . . . totam” (p. 80) and attribute some kind of “originale peccatum” to little children (p. 56). For Abelard, the Fall is still the necessary historical basis for any discussion of sin, which remains intrinsic.
earthly Jesus.” The knowledge into which Abelard falls, however, is a revelation of particularity, contrast, distance from, not a simplistically universalized equivalence. With great rhetorical skill Abelard employs Christ’s unjust suffering for allusive and consolatory ends even as he drains the comparison of offense through several strategies of deference.66 As usual, Abelard is carefully maintaining the distance between the human and the divine.

Because the first allusions to Christ’s suffering occur in the castration account, their introduction is ironic, depicting Abelard as a perversely inverted Christ-figure. First, just as the Old Testament prophesies the suffering of Christ, Heloise prophesies the suffering of Abelard, and “in this, as the whole world knows, she showed herself a true prophet” (74).67 Instead of her prophecy predicting atonement for sin, it warns of just punishment for Abelard’s sin. Second, just as Peter with curses denied his affiliation with Christ, Heloise denied the true news of her marriage, and cursed the newsbearers instead (74). Finally, Christ’s human perfection allowed his death on the cross to serve as an effective sacrifice for sin, but Abelard explains how his own castration has rendered him unfit to participate in an Israelite community of worship, whether as a worshipper or even as an acceptable bodily sacrifice (76). The pain and punishment he experiences is deserved and therefore superfluous to Christ’s example; Christ suffered for the sins of the world, taking on what they deserved but he did not. Nevertheless, because the

65 Frank, p. 111. The article assembles allusions to Christ from both Abelard and Heloise throughout their correspondence.

66 Abelard’s Commentaria in epistulam Pauli ad Romanos describes Christ’s incarnation as in large part the provision of an exemplary divine shape for human behavior.

67 “nec in hoc ei, sicut universus agnovit mundus, prophecie defuit spiritus” (17)
castration supplied Abelard with a remedy “for my lechery by depriving me of those organs with which I practiced it” (65),68 the suffering proved unintentionally remedial and redemptive.

Abelard retains an attitude of deference in his Christological allusions also because he never asserts that he is like Christ. He merely implies that his sufferings are like Christ’s sufferings. There is no ontological equivalence between Abelard and Christ; they are alike only in their external circumstances, what is being done to them. The Christological allusions consist almost entirely of verbal Biblical echoes describing both Abelard’s sound rhetorical defense of himself before inquisitors and the innocent suffering which motivates that defense. Alberic tries to trick Abelard and demands that he produce sufficient external authority for his teaching, a type of challenge Christ himself underwent and overturned, like Abelard, by craftily undermining the authority of his accuser (Matt. 21.23-27; Mark 11.27-33; Luke 20.1-8). Abelard’s accusers echo Christ’s in their specific concerns that Abelard’s “arguments and sophistries could triumph over the whole world” (82) and that “the Christian faith would greatly benefit if an example were made of me and similar presumption in many others were forestalled” (82).69 Abelard’s trial even fulfills Old Testament prophecy: “He told me at once to take the book to the archbishop and my opponents, so that my accusers could judge me themselves and the words “Our enemies are judges’ be fulfilled in me” (79).70 As Christ’s accusers went through unsatisfactory witness after

68 “luxurie quidem his me privando quibus hanc exercebam” (9-10).

69 “argumentis vel sophismatibus universus obsistere mundus non posset” (24, cf. John 12.19) and “hoc perutile futurum fidei christiane, si exemplo mei multorum similis presumptio preveniretur” (24, cf. John 11.50).

70 “Ille autem statim michi precepit libellum ipsum archiepiscopo illusque emulis meis deffere, quatinus ipsi inde judicarent qui me super hoc accusabant: ut illud in me etiam completeretur: ‘Et inimici nostri sunt judices’” (22). The allusion is to Deut. 32.31. Examples of Christ’s passion fulfilling Old Testament prophecy include Matt. 26.54; Luke 21.22, 22.37, 24.44; John 13.18, 17.12; Acts 1.16.
unsatisfactory witness until they had to ram through a hasty verdict at the very last moment, so
multiple rereadings of Abelard’s book produced no evidence for his condemnation, forcing his
accusers to postpone their accusations until the last council meeting. During these waiting
periods, Christ and Abelard freely spoke in public, demonstrating that they had nothing to hide
even though they knew conspiracies were forming against them. Their innocent positions were
so strong that their accusers hesitated to confront them publicly at all. Abelard depicts his
contemporaries puzzling over this hesitation in the terms Christ’s crowds used for a similar
situation: “‘Here he is, speaking openly,’ and no one utters a word against him” (79). Delivering a cautionary speech at Abelard’s trial, Geoffrey, bishop of Chartres, directly quotes
Nicodemus on the legal troubles of Christ (John 7.51). The resemblances between the
intellectual skirmishes and trials in which Christ and Abelard star are exact in their detail.

Although these similarities between Christ’s circumstances and Abelard’s are obvious
and frequent, Abelard retains his deference by rarely naming Christ at all. The allusions are
mostly implicit in verbal biblical echoes. The educated reader must form the similitude; the text
refrains. When Abelard does directly raise the possibility of his own likeness to Christ, he
dismisses it in favor of an argument from proportion: “It was surely far harder to compete with
Christ, and yet Nicodemus asked for him to be given a hearing, as sanctioned by the law” (82).
Christ is the greater rhetorician and Abelard is the lesser. Here, in fact, equivalence to Christ

71 Abelard reads “‘Ecce nunc palam loquitur’, et nemo in eum aliquid dicit” (22), and the Vulgate “ecce palam
loquitur et nihil ei dicunt” (John 7.26). Hicks and Radice mark only the first half of the quotation as direct allusion,
but similarities between the second halves of these sentences are strong enough to call the rest of Abelard’s use
allusive as well.
72 “Multo difficilius erat cum ipso contendere Christo, ad quem tamen audiendum Nichodemus juxta legis
sanctionem invitatbat” (24).
would have done little good. That Christ is ontologically superior exacerbates the injustice done
to Abelard, since Christ the Word was more rhetorically dangerous but was given a legal voice,
whereas the less formidable Abelard was not. Abelard’s point is not that he is as good as Christ
but that his accusers are worse than Christ’s.

Thus, Abelard’s strategy of depicting his forcible and involuntary freedom from sin is
marked by absences, deferences, and contrasts. He has lost the bodily organs necessary to
commit the sin of lechery. Although he still draws his allusions from the most authoritative
precedents, he no longer has the audacity to compare himself directly to them. Cut clean of pride
and the world, he should be ready to become a better man, living a better life.

The Abelard who survives his trial for heresy has instead emerged from a climactic
spiritual conversion into a firestorm of ecclesiastical controversy that threatens never to die out.
Life for Abelard the monk is worse than before, even though he claims that his castration and its
attendant shame freed him from lust and pride in profane accomplishment. The enigma of his
narrative is clear: if Abelard is a better man, why is his life worse? Although Abelard never asks
this question in so many words, he seems perplexed, and most readers after him have asked the
question for him.73 His survival past the end of a linear narrative plunges him into a search for
consolation within the posthistory of his suffering. His narration of that posthistory covers less
time with more, and more urgent, text.

73 Unless, that is, they (perhaps rightly) refuse to take him at his word and assume that he is not a better man.
The Climactic Consolation of Presence

The true climax or center of the Historia is not Abelard’s castration or conversion to monastic life but his founding of and stay at the Paraclete abbey.\textsuperscript{74} Because Christ, like Abelard, brought a Paraclete, it triumphantly ends his second, Christological stage of sacred historical allusion. Once Abelard has introduced narratorial irony into the work, right before Heloise appears, the Paraclete episode is the only time throughout the rest of the Historia during which he expresses unalloyed satisfaction. Furthermore, the Paraclete is eponymously a site of consolation, the ostensible purpose of the work. Finally, the Paraclete represents Abelard’s ideal ecclesial community, sharply distinguished from most of the ecclesial practice he had experienced.\textsuperscript{75} In the Historia, consolation, accurate teaching, and narrative resolution have a site. Abelard’s favour from God and his favour with students, though not his masculinity, return to him there, resolving subplots of loss. His students “began to gather there from all parts” (88) until his rivals claimed that “all the world has gone after him” and that students “flock to the barren wilderness” (90).\textsuperscript{76} According to Abelard, even “envy . . . sought me out in my retreat” (90).\textsuperscript{77} All these characters converge upon a specific place.\textsuperscript{78} Had Abelard been able to stop the

\textsuperscript{74} For identifications of the Paraclete as this climax or center, see Wetherbee, “Literary Works,” p. 24; Otten, “The Bible and the Self,” p. 141.

\textsuperscript{75} According to McLaughlin, “Peter Abelard and the Dignity of Women: Twelfth Century ‘Feminism’ in Theory and Practice,” Pierre Abélard Pierre le Vénérable: Les Courants Philosophiques, Littéraires et Artistiques en Occident au Milieu du xii\textsuperscript{e} Siècle, Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique 546, ed. Cluny (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1975), pp. 315, 320-21, 331-32, the Historia defends his role as founder of the Paraclete and demonstrates how the site embodies the content of his spiritual idealism.

\textsuperscript{76} “ceperunt undique concurrere . . . . Ecce mundus totus post eum abiit. . . . ad solitudinis inopiam confluunt” (30-31).

\textsuperscript{77} “latentem invenit invidia” (31).
story at the Paraclete, it would have been a good place to stop. Except for the envious, everyone else seemed to want to come there, stop, and stay. The Paraclete retains this spatial and conceptual centrality for Abelard throughout the rest of the Historia. He continually identifies and laments the distance between it and himself or his surroundings. Its climactic consolation of presence, however, proved impossible to sustain, and Abelard is consequently removed into an Augustinian postclimactic space and time, without hope of resolution or consolatory demarcation.

The Paraclete is the summation of all Abelard’s previous allusions and his entire sacred story to this point. A final bifocal allusion to classical and sacred history appears here, making the Paraclete the true climax of that allusive strategy. Huddled in huts and eating rude food, Abelard’s students there are both like the early ascetic philosophers and the Hebrew sons of the prophets (led by Elisha) (89-90). Thus, at the Paraclete, even Abelard’s early philosophical allusions and ambitions are redeemed, sacralized, and given back without irony. More important, the arc of deferential Christological allusion within the climactic portions of the Historia comes to fruition in Abelard’s founding the Paraclete. Like Christ at the end of his earthly ministry, well after redemptive suffering, Abelard brings the Paraclete. But in Abelard’s case the Paraclete is a monastery that he founds and names for the Holy Spirit whom Christ had brought. The two Paracletes are not at all the same substance: one a person and the other a secondary, derivative place. Nevertheless, the resemblances are strong enough with reference to both narrative position (climactic after a period of suffering) and characteristic effects

According to Abelard, the Holy Spirit is a better sponsor of a shrine than any other member of the Trinity because its function is most appropriate to the spatial category of temple or shrine: the New Testament calls the body the “shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit” [“corpora vestra templum sunt Spiritus Sancti,” 33] (92, a quotation of I Cor 6.17). Nichols, p. 19, notes that in eleventh century thought theosis could occur in space and time to a site, not merely to a person.
(consolation and teaching) to make the association seem deliberate. The place is where the person does his work.

Commensurate with his earlier deferential allusions to Christ, Abelard’s account ascribes the climactic Christological meaning to this event retroactively, accidentally, even passively. He backs into founding the Paraclete. At first he dedicates it for the collective Holy Trinity, then he shifts ground and names it retrospectively for the very specific comfort he had been given at the site. Unlike Christ, Abelard names the Paraclete for the grace he received from God, not the grace he had actively given to his followers. Unlike Christ, Abelard did not deliberately invoke the Paraclete but came to recognize the place as manifesting the specific work of the Holy Spirit. Yet the fact remains: Abelard founded an abbey called the Paraclete on the banks of the Ardusson river. God may have been the final cause, but Abelard was the efficient cause. He found the site; he focussed the migration of ascetics; he chose the name. In this way, he is like Christ in founding the Paraclete, but less than Christ in that neither his intention nor agency accomplishes that founding.

In fact, the passage which announces the New Testament shift in emphasis from Christ to the Paraclete (John 14-17) is the most obvious occasion when the example of Christ forces Abelard to include the proportion of deference in his consolatory project. The passage is important to Abelard in the Historia; he quotes John 14.16 (the first occurrence of the word

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79 Mews, Abelard, p. 185, identifies “the theological tension that runs through the Historia calamitatum” as “that somebody who is driven by envy or greed can be an instrument of divine providence.” This tension does not merely appear with reference to Abelard’s enemies, but also to Abelard himself.

80 It may appear in Heloise’s writing as well. In describing the Paraclete as Abelard’s vineyard in her first letter, Heloise may not only be alluding to 1 Cor. 3, but also to the Christ of John 15, who, after introducing the concept of the Paraclete, elaborates a neat logical proportion: Christ : vine :: disciples : branches. The abbey itself would surely
“Paraclete” in the New Testament) to defend his oratory’s name (32), and John 15.20, 18, 19 as his concluding model for how the consolation of exemplary proportion works. Christians are consoled in their sufferings only when they realise that the world hated and persecuted even Christ, so persecution for his inferiors must be inevitable. On these doctrinal grounds, even the greatest human who ever lived experienced persecution by the misguided. Christians who are so much less should expect persecution so much more, not interpreting it as their personal failure.

Yet this Christ of John 14-17 to whom Abelard so overtly defers is a deferring, self-abnegating model. Christ defers to the Father, flatly (“The Father is greater than I” [John 14.28]), to the Paraclete by announcing that he must leave so that the Paraclete can come, (“If I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” [John 16.7]), and even to his followers (“he that believeth in me, the works that I do, he also shall do; and greater than these shall he do” [John 14.12]). As the founder of the Paraclete, Abelard is trapped by his divine exemplar into humility.81 Equivalence with Christ becomes necessarily a practice of deference.

Moreover, association with the presence of the Paraclete necessitates an equally significant absence. The Paraclete’s presence signifies the absence of Christ because Christ had to leave so that the Paraclete could come. So too, Abelard leaves the abbey, and eventually the nuns take it over, with Heloise to lead them. Abelard again does not present these actions as deliberately evoking Christ. He does not leave so that Heloise and her nuns can take his place,

have been well aware of passages mentioning the divine sponsor in whom their identity was grounded, particularly when appealing to Abelard as their own sponsor, father, and teacher.

81 Wouters, “The Meaning of Formal Structure in Peter Abelard’s Collationes,” pp. 108-11, sees one of the notoriously egoistic Abelard’s rather paradoxical characteristics as humility, demonstrated within his theological Collationes by his careful ontological distinction from Christ and by the epistemological irresolution of his open-ended dialogue. She briefly extends it also to include his narrative handling of the Paraclete in the Historia.
but because he fears that antagonistic ecclesiastical officials will kill him if he remains. His presence at the Paraclete actually renders it less safe, less a comfort for others. It can only properly fulfill its title after he is gone.

Abelard’s relationship with the inhabitants of the Paraclete must move from the potency of his oral presence to the deferred but more effective potency of his textual absence. According to Robert Edwards, “Abelard’s argumentative strategy in the Historia is to privilege a textualized life over spoken words (Abelard’s introductory methodological statement is ‘amplius exempla quam verba’) and to exploit the power of writerly absence over the immediacy of conversation and dialogue.”82 The Historia is the central event in a narrative movement from face-to-face conversation, through textualization, to consolation in absence. Its textuality is crucial because, more adequately than spoken words, it preserves a memory of presence for use in absence.

Similarly, in the New Testament, Christ’s deferral to the Paraclete eventually results in the textualization of his teaching and example in the Gospels. The Paraclete’s tenure occurs only after Christ, ground and augur of definitive meaning, has departed. The Paraclete administers Christ’s example; as those who remembered Christ’s presence died, increasingly the church claimed that the Paraclete’s pedagogical function was to produce scripture and to interpret the Christ of scriptural text in his absence. Thus the Paraclete enables performance of textualized meaning by those who continue in the apostolic tradition his inspiration has established.

Only by conversion to textuality, then, can Abelard remain a Christological model.83

Moreover, his personal absence frees him to donate the land of the Paraclete to Heloise and her

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82 Edwards, p. 60.

83 This shift from orality to textuality contradicts the suggestion by McLaughlin, “Abelard as Autobiographer,” p. 468, that Abelard wrote the Historia to rehabilitate his public reputation so that he could return to teaching, orally of course, in Parisian schools.
fellow nuns, exiled and scattered from their previous abbey. Although his account of their arrival and early stay is brief, Abelard emphasizes divine activity on their behalf. The nuns initially suffered financially, but “soon God, whom they served devoutly, in his mercy brought them comfort; he showed himself a true Paraclete to them too in making the local people sympathetic and kindly disposed towards them” (97). Certainly with Abelard’s approval, God’s favour narrows onto Heloise, establishing her as abbess (97). Abelard is no longer present at the Paraclete, but his physical absence enables holy women to succeed him, to administer his resources, and to achieve the aims Abelard believes that he shares with God. The Paraclete remains present in the world, producing consolatory effects, even if an estranged Abelard relates to it only from an exilic text.

**The Proportional Consolation of Absence**

Forced apart from his wife and spiritual sister Heloise, her nuns, his previous students, and the climactic comfort of the proximate Paraclete, Abelard must find a source of consolation specifically in his calamitous absence from it. He had fallen far from his previous height: “I used to weep as I thought of the wretched, useless life I led, as profitless to myself as to others. . . . I had proved ineffective in all my attempts and undertakings, so that now above all men I justly merited the reproach, ‘There is the man who started to build and could not finish’” (96). He is

84 “Divine misericordie respectus—cui devote serviebant—in brevi consolatus est et se eis quoque verum exhibuit Paraclitum, et circumadjacentes populos misericordes eis atque propitios effecit” (37).

85 “Considerabam et plangebam quam inutilem et miseram vitam ducerem, et quam infructuose tam michi quam aliis viverem . . . quam inefficax in omnibus inceptis atque conatibus meis redderer, ut jam michi de omnibus illud improperari rectissime deberet: “Hic homo cepit edificare, et non potuit con summare” (36). Rather than ventriloquizing the “improperia” liturgy from Good Friday rites in which Christ reproaches the Jews through the authority of his innocence, Abelard deserves reproaches.
the man who could not finish, the man without closure. When compared with his past self, his present self is lesser. So also his past situation pales in comparison to his present: “my former troubles were as nothing in retrospect” (96). The proportion between himself and his past initially renders him disconsolate. He is concerned by spatial as well as temporal distance; his post as abbot of St. Gildas de Rhuys is exile: “at the far ends of the earth where I could flee no further” (95) [“cum fugam michi ulterius terre postremitas non preberet,” 35]. He even fantasizes about leading a wan but unpersecuted existence among Moslems: “I thought of quitting the realm of Christendom and going over to the heathen, there to live a quiet Christian life amonstg the enemies of Christ at the cost of whatever tribute was asked” (94).

Astonishingly, there he would be “taking refuge with Christ among Christ’s enemies” (94) [“apud inimicos Christi ad Christum confugerem” (34)], experiencing the presence of Christ that he cannot find in Christian demesnes. His third and fourth stages of sacred historical allusion, however, use that absence in their consolatory program. The sources of his consolation are now twofold: the health of the Paraclete abbey, although he is absent, and historical antecedents absent but accessible through text. The consolatory mode is again proportion, and its activation is shared performance, a community of suffering that his authorship intends to extend to a future reader.

The establishment of the Paraclete moves the narrative into Abelard’s third stage of sacred historical allusion, in which he finally abandons deferential allusions to a singular Christ in favour of comparisons both deferent and equivalent between his experiences and those of a

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88 “priores molestias quasi jam nullas reputans” (36).
87 “Christianorum finibus excsis ad gentes transire disponerem, atque ibib quiete sub quacunque tributi pactione inter inimicos Christi christiane vivere” (34).
roster of long-dead church fathers. He is still wary of direct comparison with the twelve apostles. Yet other weighty names and figures like Origen and Jerome are available to be his equals. His dedication of the Paraclete caused “apostolos” (34) new and false to challenge his orthodoxy, a situation frequent in the New Testament epistles. He is driven west as Jerome was driven east (94). Monks inside his monastery harry him until he feels like the apostle Paul: “combats without, fears within” (2 Cor. 7.5). He has false friends, again like Jerome (98). He is a eunuch blameless toward women like the harem eunuchs of Persia in the book of Esther, like the Ethiopian eunuch converted by the apostle Philip, like Origen (98-99). Like St. Benedict, he is the victim of attempted poisoning by monks resisting a tightening of ascetic standards (102). Finally, in his conclusion, Abelard returns to Christ’s example, then moves to the apostle Paul and St. Jerome by means of a litany of quotations, establishing through their teachings that any Christian—Paul, Jerome, Abelard, or the unnamed friend—should expect persecution according to their master’s example and prophecy.

The fourth and final stage of Abelard’s story—the irruption of a despairing present tense, the update of sacred history to the present dismal day, the cursory nod to eschatology—

88 “Foris pugne, intus timores” (36).

89 “But now Satan has put so many obstacles in my path that I can find nowhere to rest or even to live; a fugitive and wanderer, I carry everywhere the curse of Cain” (102, italics added; “Nunc autem ita me Sathanas impedivit, ut ubi quiescere possim aut etiam viviere non inveniam, sed vagus et profugus, ad instar maledicti Cain ubique circumferar,” 41, italics added) This outburst interrupts a story about abuse from his subordinate monks. After three sentences in the present tense, he recalls his narrative purpose enough to finish the story of this particular escape, but after that word, “evasi” (43), Abelard escapes the past for good into a present no more congenial: “I am still in danger, and every day I imagine a sword hanging over my head, so that at meals I can scarcely breathe. [. . .] This is my experience all the time” (104, “In quo adhuc etiam laboro periculo, et cotidie quasi meee gladium imminentem suspicio, . . . Quod nunc . . . incessanter experior,“ 43).
occurs without drawing equivalences or proportions between himself and his ecclesial contemporaries. He and they are in separate categories altogether. The church and he are at war; he cannot assert his beliefs—benign as naming an oratory after the Holy Spirit, light-hearted as teasing the monks of St. Denis that St. Denis was not the convert of St Paul they thought he was—without some energetic church official taking inquisitorial and potentially lethal offense. According to Abelard’s own account, he defends authentic Christianity against the inverted world of a re-fallen Christendom. Although his conflicts within the church cause him far greater suffering and defeat than his former conflicts in secular pedagogy and logic, none of his ecclesial opponents is worthy of comparison with, much less deference from, him. His are the great Christian sufferings of his generation, most singularly worthy to comfort any friend or audience—a monastic comrade, Abelard himself, or even and eventually Heloise.

Instead, Abelard alludes to the Old Testament figure Cain at the beginning of his present-tense section: “I carry everywhere the curse of Cain” (102). The founder of the Paraclete is forced to wander like Cain after the first fall and murder. He is an innocent Cain, forced to act as if he were fallen, while fallen sinners masquerade as leaders of the redeemed. Malicious monastic opposition has reversed Abelard’s story, forced him backward in time, before Christ’s redemption, until he is in a situation akin to time’s beginning. Similarly, in his Old

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90 See Sweeney, “Self as Search,” pp. 323-25. She also describes in Logic, Theology, and Poetry, p. 65, the irresolution of this ending as a primary difference between Abelard's Historia and the model of Christian autobiography it would be expected to emulate: Augustine's Confessions. Whereas Augustine's narrative carries virtually no suspense, containing the restlessness of its protagonist within the acknowledgment of God’s good governance at beginning and end of the book, Abelard's restlessness is uncontained, negative, “a kind of flight from the false rather than a journey toward the true.”

91 “ad instar maledicti Cain ubique circumferar” (41).
Testament *planctus* Abelard locates his internal sense of self in the Old Testament because he does not perceive himself as living in the "redeemed time" a Christian should.\(^2\) Outside his Paraclete, Abelard walks an Old Testament, pre-Christian world.

But neither the lamenting Abelard nor his re-fallen opponents come off well in their implied contrast to the Paraclete, with Heloise at its head. Physical separation from the Paraclete abbey has placed Abelard in a kind of exile from direct consolation, an exile he bitterly rues (96). Without him it continues to be a favored site of God. Local people and the church hierarchy quickly alleviated the nuns’ initial financial difficulties (97). God directly consoled them when Abelard could not. In so doing he consoled Abelard concerning the situation of the Paraclete (96) while he withheld such comfort from Abelard’s immediate responsibility, the abbey of St. Gildas. Abelard is consoled that consolation exists, elsewhere, for someone else, not that he is in the presence of consolation. The Paraclete, not Abelard, gets God’s best attention. The behavior of its inhabitants is appropriately exemplary, according to Abelard. The sanctity of Heloise in particular and her nuns in general condemns the ardent impiety and rebellion of Abelard’s subsequent monastic charges. The Paraclete is the ideal against which Abelard’s other situations are found wanting. After writing the *Historia*, his further correspondence with Heloise and his liturgical provisions for the abbey demonstrate that he continued to orient his spiritual life and energies toward the site of his past consolation, impossibly absent from him because administered by the wife whose marriage and past he finds impossible to consummate.

Absent from the Paraclete, enlivening force of the church, Abelard’s location of his suffering self within a paradoxically Old Testament church milieu recalls his practice of lament in the *planctus*. For him a particularly Old Testament situation is when he does not know what is

coming but experiences present pain irreducible to the confines of a consoling metanarrative even should that consolation be later revealed. Absorption of suffering into an explanatory system of causality is too much to hope for. The only thing that can turn Abelard’s attention from his own suffering is the prospect of suffering by someone greater.

From his myriad allusions to prior sufferers Abelard takes comfort through two kinds of proportion: the proportion between the sufferer and himself (identity), and the proportion between what any sufferer deserves and what he receives (injustice). That of identity carries over from his earlier allusions to Christ. Christ was much greater than he, yet still suffered. Abelard certainly ought to expect no easier road. Such a proportional awareness holds true even for comparisons to historical figures. Abelard can relate the cruelty he experiences to that inflicted upon St. Athanasius, “if I may compare the flea with the lion, the ant with the elephant” (93). He may be a flea to Athanasius’s lion, but their sufferings are qualitatively the same. His being lesser can even result in greater injustice done to him, when accusers demand more of him than of Christ and the apostles and prophets (99-101). Proportion therefore draws Abelard into the formidable wake of Christian historical figures even as it permits him to criticize his enemies more harshly. Abelard is not the best person ever, but they may be the worst, wreaking persecution at an epic level upon a subject who simply does not merit it.

The gap between the sufferer’s identity and deserts also derives from Christ. To Abelard, Christ deserved suffering the least of any human. Christ’s proportion of injustice—what he deserved compared to what he received—is the greatest of all, because he was radically innocent. He could take comfort (although he did not) that at least he did not deserve what he was suffering. The comfort Christ abjured, Abelard gladly accepts for the calamities after his

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93 “ut de pulice ad leonem, de formica ad elefantem comparatio ducatur” (34).
castration. Castration he deserved, but the rest he did not. In this comfort through his enemies’ injustice he is similar not to Christ but to Jerome, who complained of his own innocence.

“When . . . I recalled the injustice of such a calumny against so great a man,” Abelard says, “I took no small comfort from it” (98), taking his cue from Jerome’s own protestations.

These are the proportions of Abelard’s present-tense frame in both introduction and conclusion, the proportions operative currently in the midst of his suffering. “In comparison with my trials you will see that your own are nothing, or only slight, and will find them easier to bear” (57), he offers first to his unnamed friend and fellow-sufferer, and at the last, “let [it] suffice to enable you . . . to think of your trouble as little or nothing in comparison with mine, and to bear it with more patience when you can see it in proportion. Take comfort from what the Lord told his followers about the followers of the Devil: ‘As they persecuted me they will persecute you’” (104). Ostensibly the reader is to compare his own suffering with Abelard’s and take comfort that Abelard’s proportion of injustice is greater than his own. But throughout the work Abelard reserves for himself comparison to Christ and the apostles. In the end, Abelard’s Historia is worth less as consolation than as an example of deferentially deriving consolation from someone greater. Why should readers defer to Abelard when they could defer to Christ instead, following Abelard’s example? After all, the greater the proportion of identity or injustice, the greater the possible peace.

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94 “Cum hanc . . . in tantum virum detractionis injuriam ad mentem reducerem, non modicam hinc consolationem carpebam” (38).

95 “in comparatione meaurum tuas aut nullas aut modicas temptationes recognoscas et tolerabilius feras” (3) and “sufficiat, ut . . . oppressionem tuam in comparatione meaurum aut nullam aut modicum esse judices, et tanto eam patientius feras quanto minorem consideras, illud semper in consolationem assumens quod membris suis de membris diaboli Dominus predixit: ‘Si me persecuti sunt, et vos persecuentur’” (43).
Abelard’s return to equivalence (he is the heir of Jerome; he sees himself as similar to many figures of the early church) discards the proportion of identity while retaining the proportion of injustice. None of these people fit what is happening to them. None fit their hostile, persecuting world. All are isolated. So is Abelard, divided by spatial or temporal gaps from everyone with whom he might identify. All these people are together with Abelard in their isolation.

If Abelard’s self is a typical twelfth-century self as described by Bynum, an individual finding himself in relation to a community, his isolation is profoundly destabilizing. Sweeney has contended that, since Abelard found no monastic community with whom he could identify, he had to make one at the Paraclete. In that unique community he became able to recognize himself. The attempt is of course partial, and at the time of the Historia, entirely unsatisfactory. He is nowhere near the Paraclete, feels as though he has betrayed it, and is prohibited from returning to help the community he founded.

Physically cut off from the Paraclete, he instead forges a community textually, through similitudes. Similitudes construct a loose kinship that spans space and time. Their inclusions are idiosyncratic and comprise a highly unlikely association—from Susanna to Jerome to Pompey to Cain—held together only by the audacity of Abelard’s rhetorical ingenium. But, using similitudes that demand less ontological similarity than allegory or even typology, Abelard can choose a community that would console him best. On the whole, the common characteristic that unites these figures of similitude is a fundamental and painful isolation from their current surroundings, rendering a current community impossible to them all.

In constructing this community Abelard extends a right that Christ’s proportionate consolation had given him. He is merely choosing his favorites from the long line of sufferers generated by sacred history. After all, Christ said, “‘As they persecuted me they will persecute you’” (104). Thus, as Christ experienced persecution while on earth, Christians would continue to experience it, saint after saint, martyr after martyr. Uniting all these early Christian models after the Paraclete has come, the experience of suffering flattens or makes equivalent all true Christians into retroactive types of Christ.

This suffering community depends upon the rhetorical improvisation that the Paraclete enables during this period of sacred history marked by absence. In his exegetical theory Abelard suggests that the event of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, introduces great diversity into the unsatisfactory systems of human language. According to Peter von Moos, the Holy Spirit’s linguistic role according to Abelard is to interpenetrate a “human construct of rules, monolithic in character, about the polish of speech” with “the protean, polysemic, imprecise, figurative, difficult language” of the Spirit.97 Abelard’s monastic conversion has turned him from logical philosopher of language to interpreter of biblical narrative, and he finds his linguistic model no longer in Genesis but in Acts, when Pentecost and not the Incarnation identifies God’s decisive entry into human language.98 Consequently Christians rightfully own abundantia sermonis, that is, “not only plurality of language but also the colourful spectrum of all styles and forms of


98 Ibid., p. 87. See Peter Abelard, “Letter XIII,” Peter Abelard: Letters IX-XIV, ed. Edmé Renno Smits (Gronigen: Bouma’s, 1983), pp. 275-76, on Pentecost enabling dialectic. Smits, p. 188, claims that Letter XIII exemplifies a development of Abelard’s thought concerning the source of a dialectician’s knowledge: “In his earlier writings the origin is ingenium; later it is a gift granted by the grace of God and finally a gift from the Holy Spirit.” On a continuum, knowledge moves from intrinsic to extrinsic, possessed to given.
speech.”

Abelard’s interpretive strategy when using biblical material in his own poetics is to reorganize and reinterpret it to expand the meaning or even to assign a meaning of his choice. Like Augustine’s, and like most medieval exegetes’, Abelard’s is a biblical “poetics of excess.” Lesser characters who follow Christ need not follow Christ’s narrative model closely, because they have Christ’s spirit, presently responsive, free from the strictures of one narrative model. The coming of the Paraclete can therefore fragment Abelard into the barrage of lesser models he needs, not just Christ and himself as lonely sufferers.

Having found the consolation of his absent textual community, constructed it through similitude, and delimited its internal relations through proportion, Abelard extends it by writing the text of the Historia to a troubled friend. The identity of the friend has itself long troubled scholars. No clues external to the work point to an identification that fits Abelard’s internal description. Some have suggested that Abelard means the work to console himself. Whatever the friend’s ontological status, his presence as epistolary addressee designates the text as rhetorical. Having exemplified the application of proportion and similitude to the material of

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99 Ibid., p. 87.
100 Jussilla, p. 196.
101 Brown, p. 28. See also Evans, Language and Logic, p. 164, on the discursive practice of biblical exegesis. Stock, Implications of Literacy, p. 375, describes Abelard’s semiotic understanding as necessarily narratival and Boethian but in terms highly reminiscent of Augustine’s account of understanding a psalm. Sweeney, “Rewriting the Narrative,” pp. 20-21, 25, argues the exact opposite: Abelard rejects the narrative form of understanding and demands immediate interpretive closure, getting disillusioned when it is not available. Sweeney’s analysis in this instance depends heavily upon the Sic et non. Abelard’s poetic practice and his exegesis of Romans (in which he wanders onto the paths of his own interests, not Paul’s) seem to be more orthodox than the Sic et non, although that may signify only that he more richly explores the dimensions of meaning’s poverty.

sacred history for consolatory purposes, Abelard appeals to someone else to follow his example and enlarge the community further. Inasmuch as, by distributing his manuscript, he intends an audience wider than himself, he intends persuading that audience into a similar mode of consolation. In a bustling community of the absent past but alone in the present, Abelard attempts to ensure through the community-building power of text that he will not be alone in the future.

Thus Abelard achieves his consolation via a remarkable synthesis of dialectic and rhetoric. His *ingenium*, working over a career spent in classical and Christian texts, turned up the matter for his allusions. His rhetorical strategy of similitude drew those allusions into a consolatory constellation around him. Finally, his careful attention to the appropriate proportions between himself and the other terms of his allusions lent a logical exactness to his rhetorical tour de force. In this rhetorical composition, dialectic defers to but enhances rhetoric. It gives precision to an otherwise amorphous mass of allusion, quantity to a consolation.

Exegesis is the final site of consolation. It is where Abelard, like Augustine, finds the broken or emptied narratives of history with which he can identify. He must reperform those structures in the narrative of his own self and invite others to follow his example just as he follows an authoritative metanarrative. Yet Abelard writes his history with dialectical rigour, all the gaps measured, constructing a narrative edifice sturdy enough to depend on for meaning.

He builds the *Historia calamitatum* out of material he can find within absence and isolation. Augustine is still living off early Christian plenitude. He believed in plenitude of meaning, in an active Spirit of God. Abelard believed that help clipped away, even from the devout. He introduces us to the medieval Augustinian sensibility. Not only is something wrong
within time, but something’s missing. Someone’s missing. Long Will will go find him, whoever he is. Chaucer’s Palamon will jump into the space he left.

This chapter has explicated Abelard’s proportional consolation within the Historia, meant to evoke comfort and personal peace within its reader, not dialogue from its reader, oral or textual. The Historia was intended to stand alone. Yet most subsequent readers have found it difficult to encounter the Historia in isolation from Heloise’s blistering replies that shadow Abelard’s claims in opaque irony. Troubled letters from Heloise were the worst news Abelard could possibly receive, denying the consolation he had carefully constructed for himself from the presence of the Paraclete. She presides over the Paraclete, where Abelard believes the presence of God abides, but feels no peace herself: “Of all wretched women I am the most wretched, and amongst the unhappy I am unhappiest” (129). Settled where he found consolation, she looks back to him for hers: “You are the sole cause of my sorrow, and you alone can grant me the grace of consolation” (113). Heloise rebels against the triumphalist narrative Abelard gives the Paraclete, and to some extent also against Abelard’s strategy of similitude. Her felt experience wrecks all models, and she is not inclined to cut and paste an identity from authorities. On the question of allusion, however, Abelard does not budge throughout the correspondence. His program of letters, hymns, planctus, and regulations for Heloise and the Paraclete draws on a wide variety of biblical antecedents. After Heloise’s demolition of the Paraclete as the last consolatory presence Abelard can imagine, he produces a variety of liturgical and legislative texts in an attempt to construct a brave new community. In those extensive and various texts, interpreting diverse moments and characters in sacred history for the purpose of present identity and action, is perhaps the full history of Abelard’s consolation in the absence of consolation.103

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103 Southern, p. 101, sees the correspondence as “the only possible end that is not despair” to the story.
Chapter Three: Three Figures of the Church: *Piers Plowman* and the Quest for Consolation

*Piers Plowman* is the paradigmatic Augustinian narrative of the late Middle Ages. Unlike Abelard, who uses sacred history to tell the story of a self, it combines the personal and ecclesial narratives of the *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei* into one.¹ James Simpson calls the narrative of *Piers Plowman* “person-shaped,” specifically the person of Will, the protagonist,² but Will’s shape follows, informs, and eventually merges with a broader church-shape—how the fair field full of folk in the prologue got to be those troubled folk in that field. Passus 16-18 illustrate in high Augustinian fashion how an individual Christian³ quest for truth must understand one’s own life figurally, alongside the terms of sacred history: Abraham, Moses, the

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³ The term “Christian” appears often in this chapter. My use of it here is primarily historical. The term was not an internally generated or readily accepted description of the church. The etiological account in Acts 11.26 claims that it was a nickname given by scornful pagans once the movement had left its Judean roots and expanded to Antioch. In short, the term signifies a distance from origin that reduces the church’s reputability, although the church eventually capitulated to its aptness. Its antonyms are “Old Testament Jewish” and to a lesser extent “apostolic,” inasmuch as the New Testament describes the apostles experiencing the presence of the person of Jesus. Thus “Christian” for our purposes means “a follower of Christ after Christ has come and gone,” or, in the lexicon of this dissertation, “an inhabitor of the posthistorical space in sacred history.”
Good Samaritan; faith, hope, love; prophecy, waiting, Incarnation.¹ The writing occasion for *Piers Plowman* is personally post-revelatory like the *Confessiones* and culturally post-apocalyptic like *De Civitate Dei*. Augustine in the *Confessiones* hears voices, reads texts meant specially for him, and with his mother scales visionary heights before recording them all in his autobiography; Long Will dreams dreams and afterward writes them down or (infrequently) acts them out. Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* forestalls the negative closure to Christian history that both pagans and Christians saw in the fall of Rome; Long Will writes in the aftermath of a plague so devastating that many believed it God’s wrath on a grievously sinning Christendom at the end of the world.⁵ Throughout *Piers Plowman* familiar Augustinian components exist in solution: the combination of recursive typological echo and linear biblical narrative, the problematic verbal epistemology of both text and interpretation, deeply compromised institutions that nevertheless guarantee morality and ethics, definition of the will through its relations to charity and salvific action.

The poem is particularly Augustinian in the consolation demanded by its famously unresolved ending. The poem’s various pilgrimages have long since come to fruition: Piers has

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settled down to plow his field of the church, Will has understood the Incarnation kyndely, Christ has returned from his pilgrimage to earth having known and saved humanity from the inside out. Yet the poem ends with Conscience determining to search after a Piers who had been found before. This disorienting renewal of pilgrimage affirms that the found can be lost again, that ardently sought-after answers can be unsatisfactory once achieved.

Commentary on the ending and the retrospective pall it places over the entire poem has collapsed into a binary common in medieval criticism. *Piers Plowman* is either (despite its ending) a precise instantiation of eternal truths or a structure of meaning so cracked and flawed that it ends in epistemological despair—at least bewilderment and frustration. Along with its final relapse from closure, the instability of the poem’s personifications, genres, and even vocabulary has proven amenable to poststructuralist readings. They aver that the multiplicity of the poem’s discourses reflects an equally multiple and chaotic reality and sets propositional

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6 The “kynde knowyng” (1.138) of which Will is famously in quest seems to be affective and intuitive as opposed to cognitive and what we would call rational. Holy Church locates it “in þyn herte” (1.143). See Carruthers, *Search*, pp. 107-47, and James Simpson, “From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman,*** Medium Ævum 55 (1986), pp. 1-23.


8 Carruthers, *Search*, pp. 147-73.

belief in a losing battle against the poem’s languages. As in Abelard’s semiotics, *Piers Plowman* gives no reason to be confident in language’s capacity to convey the true. That *Piers Plowman* stages the justification of irreducibly formless experience or reality against authoritative social, textual, or lexical claims has become a rare critical consensus. Even those who see *Piers Plowman* as an Augustinian narrative of interpretive growth—from reason to affective knowledge or figural “kynde knowyng”—have trouble fitting the final irresolution onto a linear narrative that to them ends sharply and satisfactorily in the revelation of Passus 18.

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The ending does, however, achieve formal closure as the interpretive echo of the poem’s opening two visions: a field of folk, a diligent plowman, a fortification in which Truth or the righteous reside, widespread corruption of court and church, themes of penance and pardon. It is certainly disheartening to return to the same dismal situation after an intervening narrative of pilgrimage linear enough to achieve Christ harrowing Hell. The return may imply that the intervening narrative is not linear but recursive, closing in cruel disappointment. Or it may inform the scenes of the early passus with Will’s movement from reason to affective knowledge and with the structure of sacred history that takes over Passus 16-20. The poem returns to the beginning but with greater resources for its interpretation. The current desperate state of Langland’s world should come as no surprise in Passus 20. He announces it in the prologue, after all, a prologue that haunts, or should haunt, all subsequent passus. The rest of the poem defines itself against Langland’s initial assessment of Christendom. It constitutes a successful search for knowledge denied Will at the beginning about how to deal with the beginning.

The poem uses the Augustinian alignment of personal and sacred history (Passus 16-20) to fulfill the Augustinian epistemological mandate. It interprets provisionally through the continuous revision of understanding—in this case, the beginning revised as the end. Formally, Langland’s innovation is a circular narrative structure with Augustinian sacred history the final

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13 If the narrative contains a surprise at all, it is that Christ’s triumph over the forces of evil in Passus 18 was so complete, in spite of what we have known about Christian society since the beginning of the poem. The potency of sacred history as a contemporary solution evidently was a novelty to Langland also. Sacred history is virtually absent from the A-text; Langland’s discovery of it evidently helped to motivate his revision of A to B.
movement to close the circle.\textsuperscript{14} The latter part of Passus 19 and all of Passus 20 resolve this triumphant Augustinian narrative into its familiar posthistory and in so doing locate the \textit{beginning} of the poem as that very \textit{post}history, an understanding only the linear history of Passus 16-18 can enable.

Three figures of the church measure the difference between the poem’s beginning and end. Holy Church in Passus 1 is a conventionally authoritative guide, like Boethius’s Lady Philosophy.\textsuperscript{15} Will asks her questions and she answers, giving the precise meaning of what he has just seen in the prologue. That meaning describes the concerns and themes of the entire poem in miniature.\textsuperscript{16} Both she and Will want to identify appropriate responses to the prologue’s calamity. Because human sinfulness is that calamity, they need a love that results in consolation: ‘\textit{Date & dabitur vobis}, for I deele yow alle.’ / [Th]at is \textit{he lok of loue [pat] leteth out my grace} / To conforten \textit{he carefull e acombred wiþ synne}’ (1.201-03).\textsuperscript{17} But by Passus 19 and 20 Holy

\textsuperscript{14} Carruthers, “Time,” pp. 184-85, links \textit{Piers Plowman} to an Augustinian sacred history that does not resolve and correctly affirms that narrative meaning in such a structure resides in the middle. J. A. Burrow, \textit{Langland’s Fictions} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), ch. 1, similarly argues that the poem is a circular structure whose center (Piers) is absent from its beginning and end. This chapter will argue that the consolatory \textit{purpose} for such a structure resides at the end of the narrative, its quandary demanding interpretation of a meaningful past and consolation in a meaning-deprived present.


Church’s authoritative role has bifurcated. Unity retains her structural function of authority, absent the motion of charity; Piers runs off with the revelatory Grace that animates her.

The charitable content of comfort and moral instruction scarcely changes throughout the poem, but the mode of understanding that comfort changes from the propositions of Holy Church to the place of Unity and person of Piers through which narrative operates. Despite her authority and accurate declarations, Holy Church does not give Will what he needs: sufficient accounts of why comfort in the persons of Grace and Piers is absent and how one might escape entrapment by sin and receive it. Only Passus 19 and 20 provide the story of how comfort got away and identify a figural way to get it back.

**Revelatory Holy Church**

Holy Church in Passus 1 interprets the prologue for Will, to all appearances adequately. When Will asks her about the two towers that bracket the fair folk in the field, she identifies them as the tower of Truth and the castle of care. When Will begs her to tell him how to save his soul and how to know salvation kyndely, she directs him to Truth, then Love, both synonymous with the incarnate Christ. To the medieval Christian all this is uncontroversial, and, indeed, the poem mounts it no challenge. Holy Church is a figure of great authority and wields that authority in asserted, unargued propositions. Her speech claims closure: a complete rendering of a complete, self-consistent account of truth.\(^\text{18}\) Holy Church is to Will in *Piers Plowman* much as

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\(^{18}\) Ruth M. Ames, *The Fulfillment of the Scriptures: Abraham, Moses, and Piers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1979), p. 79, claims that, if all we had of *Piers Plowman* ended at Passus 1, we would think it a
Lady Philosophy is to Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*: an “infallible interlocutor” informing an “erring but corrigible dreamer” what he needs to know.\(^ {19} \)

Yet Will moves on, in Passus 2 to request knowledge of the false and in subsequent passus to substitute for Holy Church other epistemological guides of varying authority and effectiveness. Propositional consolation in the light of a disastrous present is for Will something to move beyond. While Will believes what Holy Church has said, she has not satisfied his understanding. She fails rhetorically; what she says is true within the system of the poem, but her exercise of irrefragable authority is not appropriate to that truth or to the Will who is listening.\(^ {20} \) Her Boethian position, one who fixes interpretation and finalizes propositions, is at odds with the Augustinian content of the truth she proposes—charitable, narratival, in process.

Unlike even Lady Philosophy, Holy Church tries through her presence to fix interpretation for a man without a history to fix. This face-to-face dialogue is the most direct encounter with Truth Will receives. Elsewhere, even when Will interacts with some direct source of truth like the Tree of Charity or the events in sacred history, he must interrogate fellow interpreters to find meaning—Piers in Passus 16, a herald in Passus 18. Here at the beginning he

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\(^ {19} \) Bloomfield, p. 20, and Britton J. Harwood, *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 27, respectively. These are phrases comparing Holy Church and Will to their Boethian counterparts.

\(^ {20} \) Work on Holy Church’s rhetorical failure often sees her and Will as inhabiting separate linguistic registers. Carruthers, *Search*, pp. 5-6, identifies the registers as *allegoria* and *littera*, respectively, while Gillian Rudd, *Managing Language in Piers Plowman*, Piers Plowman Studies IX (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 12-14, 199, calls them deductive and affective, or redeemed and human.
has Holy Church, come straight from Truth, all to himself and his questions, a luxury that the poem will never again afford him.  

The problems such revelatory presence gives to a man well-intentioned but without a history of waiting are signaled best in the delicate irony of Holy Church’s first words to Will: “Sone, slepestow?” (1.5) Will is a dream visionary; dream, and its necessary concomitant sleep, are essential to his pursuit of knowledge. Yet in the voice of Holy Church this question accuses gently. It is the question Jesus put to Simon Peter in the garden of Gethsemane: “Simon, sleepest thou? Couldst thou not watch one hour?” (“Simon dormis non potuisti una hora vigilare,” Mark 14.37; cf more broadly Mark 14.32-42, Matt 26.36-46, Luke 22.40-46). Jesus is waiting in the garden for his accusers to seize, condemn, and kill him, the means by which he would suffer and save the world. He has asked his disciples to watch and pray with him while he waits, but they do not understand the importance of the evening and fall asleep instead. He wakes and chides them twice; the third time they wake to his capture. Sleeping in this Gospel

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21 Biblical allusions to the Incarnation surround her coming, cues from sacred history pointing to the divine sufficiency of presence in her words. She comes down from the tower of Truth (1.4), not Christ herself but retracing his descent and blazing a trail for the later descent of the pardon (7.1-8). Will’s fear at the sight of her face “þeigh she fair weere” (1.10) recalls the fearful responses of Mary at the Annunciation (Luke 1.29-30) and the shepherds on Christmas night (Luke 2.9), as well as the fear evoked by many other biblical theophanies and angelic appearances. Holy fear is the proper, biblically sanctioned response to direct divine revelation.

22 That Holy Church identifies Will as her son implies a familiarity that he has clearly forgotten, as his ignorance of her identity later reveals (1.75-78). He is in fact a son or member of the church. In this way he is similar to the Boethian dreamer who has an identity he has forgotten (Consolation 1.6).

23 Bowers, p. 140, reads Will’s habitual sleeping as at least in some cases negative, an expression of the vice of acedia. While this sleep that leads to dream visions is obviously productive, not unequivocally negative, the allusive context of the gospel story does imply that sleep can be a way to elide the necessary process of waiting.
story marks both an incapacity to wait and an ignorance of the weight of the present moment. The disciples’ understanding had not been made ready through waiting.

Will is similarly unprepared for the truth Holy Church offers. The scene of ecclesiastical satire she expounds he at first wildly miscategorizes as “a ferly, of Fairye me þoghte” (prol. 6). He thinks of this as a conventional dream vision, in which an Arthurian adventure or a parliament of fowls would not seem out of place. Not having looked for a sacred vision, he has trouble recognizing it when it came. Once he realizes its proper genre, he eagerly enters its conventions, inquiring after its allegorical significance (1.11, 43-45, 58-60), but soon his questions begin to seem foolish to Holy Church, as if he should already have known the answers. He asks her name although much earlier in his life he had sworn allegiance to her and learned his faith from her (1.75-78). He asks how he could know the truth of what she was saying by “kynde knowynge” in his “cors” (1.138-39), when the Latin he should have learned as a young man would have told him that kynde knowynge happens in his heart, a spiritual organ (1.140-42). He has forgotten what he should have known and neglected how he should have learned. He has no functional history, of waiting or of the desire it produces. The revelation and its recipient are woefully mismatched because Will is beginning the poem that becomes his personal history, not ending it after arduous thirst and struggle.

Holy Church, in her wisdom, soon recognizes Will’s need for a guide greater than she and an epistemological process which she only initiates. A few lines after exasperatedly calling him a “doted daffe” (140), she tells him: “who kan teche þee bettre, / Loke þow suffre hym to seye and siþen lere it after. / [For þus witnesseþ his word; werche þow þerafter]” (1.145-47). She concludes her speech on a similar note: “Now haue I told þee what truþe is—þat no tresor is better, / I may no lenger lenge; now loke þee oure lord” (1.208-09). Will’s compromised
epistemological capacity demands even more direct encounter with divinity: Christ himself. Holy Church has nimbly adjusted her own role, altered by Will as dullard audience. She self-consciously functions as a beginning of Will’s education, not an end.

Holy Church, then, is only initially a Boethian purveyor of propositions full of meaning. She is obviously not dealing with a philosopher; abstract consolation, however accurate and precise, would require a Will remade like Boethius, having forgotten what he once knew but at least feeling the urgency of what he had forgotten. Building the proper form of that desire takes time and process; this too she tells Will in confident propositions. But on that path she can only go so far before leaving him, sleeping off (2.52) an encounter for which she in all her rectitude had not been ready.

At first she does describe a world full of plenitude, busy with both good and evil. Truth is in the tower; Wrong is in the other tower. Sins obtain from a life crowded with temptations: wine and women (1.32), the fiend and the flesh (1.40), Wrong the enemy of humankind active throughout the ages (1.63-70). Measure is her counsel (1.35), an appropriate response to plenty.

Because Will is a zone of absence, however, the concept of absence infiltrates and comes to trouble her instruction. Will has lost memories of their past meetings. So she tells him the story of Lucifer and the other angels falling from fellowship with God to air, earth, and hell, where they remain, much reduced from their previous state and sealed in their lack. Will admits that he cannot understand her because he lacks a crucial epistemological faculty: “‘Yet haue I no kynde knowyng, . . . ye mote kenne me bettre / By what craft in my cors it coms, and where’”

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Will has a cors, a body, matter—formless and directionless on its own.\(^{25}\) It is empty and needs orientation by a particular kind of knowledge. Holy Church’s response introduces the concept of desiring absence into the very Godhead—“heuen myghte nat holden it, [so heuy it semed], / Til it hadde of þe erþe [y]eten [hitselue]” (1.153-54)—in terms Nede will revisit approvingly in 20.40-50.\(^{26}\) What gave God his orientation downward to eat his fill of earth was love, self-definition by a holy and appropriate desire.

Holy Church reduces Christian morals to binaries of stasis and narrative: presence and absence, having and not-having, chastity and charity, faith and deeds. Then she opts for charity: the side of motion, narrative, performance, and perceived need. Chastity, the physical presence of virtue, “wiþouten charite worþ cheyned in helle; / It is as lewed as a lampe þat no light is Inne” (1.188-89). The virtue of chastity is a presence meant to be accompanied, even inhabited, by another virtue. Without love, chastity is empty, defined by the function it cannot fulfill. It confers no more merit or value “than Malkyn of hire maydenhede þat no man desireþ” (1.184), meaninglessly inviolate by love. Similarly, a fixed and static faith without the performance of deeds is dead (1.186-87).

Perhaps in reaction to older reproaches that allegory insists upon its own singular, complete, and static interpretation of the literal,\(^{27}\) recent scholarship has focused on the gap

\(^{25}\) The C-text replaces the bodily emphasis of “cors” with a more general “menynges” (C.1.138).


between desire and fulfillment implicit in the allegory of *Piers Plowman*. The engine that runs Will’s narrative is his pursuit of a knowledge that he knows he lacks, and this pursuit is typical of any allegorical narrative. Once the protagonist reaches the fulfillment of understanding, the story ends. In this model of allegory, Holy Church’s speech in Passus 1 presents itself as the fulfillment of the prologue scene through allegorical meaning, but because its meaning is somehow insufficient and does not fulfill, the story cannot end.

This gap between desire and fulfillment, allegorical scene and meaning, corresponds in *Piers Plowman* to the Augustinian narrative gap between sufficient climactic revelation and interpretative performance. *Piers Plowman* gives the revelatory vision as well as the entirety of its allegorical meaning at the beginning. For Will the authoritative revelation includes authoritative interpretation. Put together, revelation and interpretation manufacture desire and create a desiring posthistory. Later Will comes to know that he desires not comprehension of the true but rather its mode of performance, the means by which he can join it: how to Dowel, Dobet, Dobest. \(^2^9\)

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\(^2^9\) Rare among *Piers Plowman* critics, Wittig, *Langland*, pp. 31-32, insists that Langland primarily wants to move his audience to do good deeds. For Wittig it is better to characterize Langland’s aims as ethical, not epistemological, if a choice must be made between them.
Paradoxically Holy Church maintains the sufficiency of her revelation while mapping out the need for narrative in order to realize her truth in action. She crucially moves from strict propositions to narrative when she introduces the concept of love in Augustinian terms. Holy Church can talk about truth all she wants and remain a philosopher, but when she equates truth, love, and the incarnate God, her thought necessarily engages the processes of time. Truth is no longer in the tower but has come to earth in love. She seems surprised that Will does not know about the affective, kynde knowing that love brings according to the model of the Incarnation. Clearly, to understand her abstract and universal propositions Will needs to know the way time works and the way God works in time.

Augustine describes the effect of the Holy Spirit upon a Christian as a movement propelled by the weight of love, tending a body toward its proper place in a cosmic hierarchy of levels:

Our stabilization is our peace, so love tumbles us toward it, your Spirit’s favoring will drawing our lowliness up from the portals of death. . . . A physical object ends by its weight to find its natural level. It does not tend, necessarily, downward but toward whatever its natural level is. . . . Their weight [that of various physical objects] keeps them in motion till they find their level. Out of their proper place, they are unstable. In their proper place, they are stabilized. The weight moving me is love. By your gift we are kindled and borne upward, we are set afire and we go.  

\[(Conf. 13.10)^{30}\]

\(^{30}\) “requies nostra locus noster. amor illuc attollit nos et spiritus tuus bonus exaltat humilitatem nostram de portis mortis. . . . corpus pondere suo nititur ad locum suum. pondus non ad ima tantum est, sed ad locum suum. ponderibus suis aguntur, loca sua petunt. minus ordinata inquieta sunt: ordinantur et quiescunt. pondus meum amor meus[; eo feror, quocumque feror]. dono tuo accendimur et sursum ferimur; inardescimus et imus.”
DDC 3.10 further specifies that charity is the motion of the soul toward God, cupidity the motion of the soul away from him. The Holy Spirit’s function, charity, and the goal of the Christian life are all thus roughly equivalent, timebound, and narratival. Augustine’s imagery of flame is Pentecostal, locating these events in the era of the empowering Holy Spirit after Christ and after conversion. The soul seeks stabilization, peace, and stasis, but Augustine has not found it by the time of writing. He is still tumbling, moving from the weight of love; he is going. Charity is a desire that unsettles by granting the desirer an impetus for movement.

In a precise inversion of Augustine’s spatial imagery, Langland through Holy Church provides a divine archetype for this narrative of charitable motion. In so doing he solves the problem that haunts Augustine: why do God and humans honor time and narrative when true value resides in the eternal? Langland answers that time is not only where we desire and move toward God but also where God desires and moves toward us:


For heuen myghte nat holden it, [so heuy it semed],

Til it hadde of þe er[pe] [y]eten [hitselue].

31 Augustine links rhetorical persuasion via the passions with this description of charity as affective movement. Rhetoric, when legitimately used, engages charity. For this Augustinian affective emphasis as an influence on kynde knowynge in Piers Plowman, see Margaret E. Goldsmith, The Figure of Piers Plowman: The Image on the Coin, Piers Plowman Studies II (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), p. 17; Simpson, “From Reason to Affective Knowledge”; and Kasten, pp.196-98. Zeeman, pp. 30-31, helpfully couches the discussion in terms of gaps: affect measures the gap between the soul and its object of desire.

32 Andrew Galloway, C Prologue-Passus 4; B Prologue-Passus 4; A Prologue-Passus 4, vol. 1 of The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 207, associates these passages from Augustine and Langland but does not explicate the links between them.
And whan it hadde of þis fold flessh and blood taken
Was neuere leef vpon lynde lighter þerafter,
And portatif and persaunt as þe point of a nedle
That myghte noon Armure it lette ne none heighe walles. (1.152-58)33

Whereas Augustine tends gravitational force toward an eternal locus, love moving
humans up in defiance of earthly conventions, Langland retains the centrifugal pull of earth.
Earth is the site of the divine narrative. Rather than people being so needy that they move up
toward God, God is so interested that he must come down. Augustine sought peace and
plenitude as ends to narrative. They are for Langland the beginning. Peace was unstable and
dissatisfied in heaven, an unimaginable concept within Augustine’s rigid Neoplatonic cosmic
hierarchy.34 Having so much necessarily meant being heavy with so much to give. For
Augustine, charity is acquisitive, striving to reach and remain; for Langland it is genuine
resignation and relinquishment for the sake of the other. Divine self-sufficiency is not enough;
Christ must descend and ingest the other that is bodily reality on earth. And if in Augustine’s
imagery the soul rises because of the divine element within—the image of God, the indwelling
Holy Spirit, even the divinity eaten in the sacrament—in Langland’s revision God sinks toward
earth in order to eat a sacramental meal that keeps him down by putting flesh on him. God does
not return back up to Heaven to complete a nicely closed cycle; he comes down to move outward

33 This daring poetic description of the Incarnation does not appear in the A-text. It evidently derives from that stage
of the poem’s composition in which Langland is revising the A-text in line with his B-text emphasis on sacred
history, its energy the excitement of intellectual and poetic discovery.

34 Harwood, pp. 14-15, says that Holy Church here “refers to, even if she does not honour as such, a hunger for
sensible experience.” Holy Church’s wary acknowledgment seems to me similar to Augustine’s own fascination
with the sensory but determination to use it for the spiritual.
on earth in radical freedom.\footnote{Langland is also carefully reworking imagery of a sexual act. We could translate this to say: paradoxically, the expression of peace’s tumescence becomes not satisfaction but the ultimate ability to penetrate.} By eating his fill of earth Christ became light, unencumbered, with a range of motion entirely unbounded. Will’s exhaustive tour of the world, history, and his own being in \textit{Piers Plowman}, while not unbounded, is comparably free-ranging. Langland’s account of Christ’s charitable descent contextualizes and validates Augustine’s rather self-centered account of the human charitable ascent. It makes God seem more loving, affective.

Thus Holy Church accurately foresees and launches the narrative movement of the poem, not from lack to plenitude but from plenitude to lack, following the example of Christ who chose not to be satisfied with self-sufficiency, even when divine. What Christ chooses, Holy Church recommends and Will instinctively pursues. Holy Church in all her fullness must leave Will not in a vision of Christ but under Christ’s protection wherever his journey leads him—“I may no lenger lenge; now loke þee oure lord” (1.209).

Holy Church’s speech sufficiently capitulates the entire poem \textit{in nuce}, including its final figural narrative in Passus 16-20.\footnote{Carruthers, \textit{Search}, is the standard work on Augustinian figuralism in \textit{Piers Plowman}. Elizabeth Salter, “Medieval Poetry and the Figural View of Reality,” \textit{Proceedings of the British Academy} 54 (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 73-92, is an early overview of figuralism in medieval poetry, including \textit{Piers Plowman}. See Barney, \textit{Allegories of History, Allegories of Love} (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), pp. 30-34 for a compendious theorization of typological practice (his titular allegory of history) and pp. 82-104 for the application of that theory, as modeled in Augustine’s \textit{Confessiones}, to \textit{Piers Plowman}. Barney claims that “in the Middle Ages typology was both the theological response to the meaning of history and the chief literary response to the need for form” (86). Elizabeth D. Kirk, \textit{The Dream Thought of Piers Plowman} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 10-14, brilliantly describes the phenomena of figural narrative without naming it as such. The juxtaposition of}
certainty of her allegorical definitions, first the cursory sketch of Wrong’s works through history (1.65-68), then the fuller account of Lucifer’s fall into the temporal region (1.111-29), and finally Christ’s fall as an echo, fulfillment, and redemption of Lucifer’s. Each is a figural repetition. Wrong leads Adam, Eve, Cain, and Judas astray. All who do wrong will have their ultimate end merged with the fiery fate of Lucifer (1.128-29). Christ comes to serve humankind as “ensample” of might, meekness, and mercy that we ought to repeat (1.172-73). Although time is at first for Holy Church a zone in which evil works and falls from a static plane of truth, the incarnation entirely recuperates the temporal. This gradual movement from propositional truth to truth embodied figurally in history anticipates the Tree of Charity’s fall from allegorical icon into history at 16.79, and Will’s physical attendance on key events and characters of sacred history soon after. 

It is conventional wisdom to see the dilated narrative of Piers Plowman as a process necessary for Will to understand a question or even an answer that had been present to him since individual and sacred narrative “enacts, as no other work of art does, the attempt of human nature both to think and to embody a pattern adequate to the universe” (14).

37 Daniel Maher Murtaugh, Piers Plowman and the Image of God (Gainesville: The University Presses of Florida, 1978), pp. 8-10, notes Holy Church’s association of moral knowledge with redemptive history. If truth’s only authentic expression in good works follows the pattern of the incarnation, then truth has a “double aspect . . . as the goal and the impetus toward the goal” (10).

38 Wittig, Langland, pp. 122, 128, sees Passus 16 as Will’s entry into a common story of sacred history, joining the momentum of all humanity struggling toward salvation. William Elford Rogers, Interpretation in Piers Plowman (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), pp. 253-55, argues that at the Tree of Charity and its aftermath Will has finally surrendered himself to the Gospel metanarrative, letting it master him rather than the other way round. That is what reading charitably means: being caught up in the movement of the text.
the beginning.\textsuperscript{39} It is less common to identify as one of that dilation’s major origins (however mediated the descent) the interpretive narratives of Augustine, moving past revelatory heights to narrative cycles that interrogate the textualized content of that revelation.\textsuperscript{40} It is rarer still to see in that initial authoritative interpretation by Holy Church the seed of its own supersession: an

\textsuperscript{39} David Aers, Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory (London: Edward Arnold, 1975), pp. 63-65, describes Langland’s allegory as a “disclosure model” which uses the poetic process as its search for truth. Also, in Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. 1-24, 62, 146, he argues that Langland’s portrayal of the Christian post-conversion life as a process full of resistances derives from Augustine’s belief that conversion is a process never quite closed on earth. Elizabeth D. Kirk, “Langland’s Narrative Christology,” Art and Context in Late Medieval English Narrative: Studies in Honor of Robert Worth Frank, Jr., ed. Robert R. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), p.31, notes that the dreamer defends poetry writing as a heuristic process. Harwood, p. 4, and Carruthers, Search, p. 25, agree that Langland the author (not the narrator) wrote Piers Plowman in order to discover truth for himself, not primarily to teach truth at which he had already arrived. Rudd, pp. 223-30, properly emphasizes the creative potential of plurality and polyvalence explored through interpretations and revisions in Piers Plowman, but goes too far, I think, in asserting that the processes of questioning and revision become the true subject of the poem, not any supposed referent outside its language. Simpson, Introduction, p. 217, is more appropriately cautious: “The manner of the search for charity becomes as much the subject of the poem as charity itself.” All reflective pilgrims will interest themselves in the dynamics of the search; that does not imply that they must lose interest in the goal, however distant.

\textsuperscript{40} Carruthers, “Time,” pp. 176-77, 181, verges on this insight by giving an account of Christian time that locates its meaning in the center, with Christ’s incarnation, and its figural repetition of that meaning in the Christian era as a nonauthoritative and flexible way to write autobiography and historiography in the vein of Augustine. This article is an important reconsideration of her pessimism in Search about epistemology tied to sacred history. Wittig, “Piers Plowman B,” and Simpson, “From Reason to Affective Knowledge” and “Desire and the Scriptural Text,” describe as Augustinian Will’s epistemological evolution from reason to kynde knowynge. These thinkers see it primarily as a linear progression, however.
acknowledgment that Will has the revelation he needs but will also need time and story to learn how to put it into practice.

Holy Church’s Christology, pneumatology, and epistemology are fully characteristic of the Spirit-inspired church in the posthistorical Christian era of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*. She paradoxically gives an authoritative and closed structure of truth that demands a further process of understanding through the implementation of a divine charitable model. She abjures the premature closure of rational understanding, instead calling for future performance. Her deference to the incarnate Christ as greater guide, redirection of attention from her to him, and careful explication of his life and teachings is the function of the Holy Spirit in Christian theology broadly and in this poem in particular (Passus 19). She holds together the eternal and the temporal aspects of Christian faith, the visible intransigence of its institutions and the freedom of its individual performances of charity. Her one being and speech comprises the crux that Will uses the rest of the poem to disassemble, categorize, and understand in her absence.41

**The Content of Comfort**

The purpose of the moral prescriptions in Holy Church’s speech is singular, announced prominently near the end: “*Date & dabitur vobis, for I deele yow alle.*’ / [Th]at is þe lok of loue [þat] letþ out my grace / To conforten þe carefulle acombred wiþ synne” (1.201-03). Love releases divine grace to comfort humans suffering under the oppressions of care and sin. The lock imagery of 1.202 links the consolatory function of grace to a specific event: Christ’s

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41 John Alford, “The Role of the Quotations in *Piers Plowman*,” *Speculum* 52 (1977), pp. 80-99, memorably argues that Langland extrapolates almost his entire narrative structure from the embedded Latin scriptural citations, explanatory or illustrative gloss to their text. Langland’s imagination seems to operate on the principle of the gloss: an interpretive revision and expansion of central scenes and themes. Quilligan, p. 61, declares all of *Piers Plowman* a gloss on this threshold scene of Will’s encounter with Holy Church.
bursting the gates of Hell and releasing its inhabitants, the climactic event in the salvation history of *Piers Plowman*. Comfort is what is free to happen after the harrowing of Hell. According to Christian theology, the Holy Spirit or *Spiritus paraclitus* (19.202, 207) distributes consolation particularly during the Christian era (e.g., John 14-16); in *Piers Plowman*, that Spirit is “confortour of creatures” (16.190) and the Father uses his flame to “solacen hem þat mowe [noght] se, þat sitten in derknesse” (17.237). “Confort,” and to a lesser extent “solas,” are the poem’s terms for Christian consolation. Grace comforting the sinner and care-burdened in Passus 1 foreshadows the equivalence of grace and the consoling Holy Spirit much later (19.207-10). Following the Incarnation’s revelatory example of love and using its authority, the Holy Spirit or Grace produces and infuses comfort, the mission and hallmark of the church. Comfort is, therefore, the vocation of a particular institution (Holy Church) in a particular era of sacred history (the Church era suspended between incarnation and apocalypse).

The semantic range of “confort” or “solas” in *Piers Plowman* includes little absolute rest, closure, or arrival. Those comforted most often are those encumbered by sin or poverty. The comfort of repentance does not end sinners’ struggle with sin but draws them into a penitential lifestyle.42 The comfort of Christ does not end poverty but may even keep the poor poor for their own good. Comfort impels sinners into a more direct struggle with sin and the poor into exploiting the spiritual resources of their painful predicament. It is not release. Unlike Christ at the harrowing of Hell, it does not come to let sufferers out of their suffering. Holy Church reverses the image: “loue . . . leteþ out my grace,” not “þe carefulle acombred wiþ synne” (1.202-03). Love releases grace to work freely, not the careworn sinner from cares. Comfort is

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42 On this lifestyle as a narrative model different from punctiliar conversion, see Lawton, pp.19-20.
rather a gift, now possible in the Christian era, to enable survival and even wellbeing during an indefinite period of endurance.

Comfort for sin is empowerment by grace to continue in the process of repentance. It can come to the sinner, the contrite, or the fully penitent. Christ’s suffering solaces sinners by offering them the prospect of penance (5.497-98). The name of Christ solaces sinners by saving them (19.22). A woman caught in adultery found comfort when Christ indicted her accusers as well. By refusing to judge her sin as greater than that of her betters, Christ had refused to write her off; she could find mercy (12.76-91). But the gift of repentance can console even those more mature, not so steeped in sin. Discovering that contrition takes care of sins even before confession comforts many a contrite clerk who must wait for shrift and Lent to render his repentance official (12.174-82). Most telling, the pardon Piers receives comforts the people who are working along with him in the field (7.152). The field is a saeculum or interim time and place; those who work there have already joined with Piers in labor sanctioned and rewarded by God. When Piers receives and reads the contents of the pardon, that climactic document simply tells him to keep doing well (7.113, 116), which he already is. The comfort of the pardon is of ultimate fruition and reward. Now it gets Piers out of nothing, rather into work.43

Similarly comfort for the poor may alleviate but does not essentially alter their status. Most of the time the poor receive comfort not easily quantified as a reduction of their poverty.44

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43 Robert Adams, “Langland’s Theology,” A Companion to Piers Plowman, ed. John A. Alford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 103-04, sees the disappointed surprise that Piers’s arduous pardon brings to readers as a trap to make us see that we want its grace to come cheaply, without commitment to personal reform: “Langland will have none of this empty triumphalism” (104). See also Wittig, Langland, p. 29.

44 Hunger does tell Piers to comfort the poor with his “catel,” possessions, as Christ’s heavenly law instructs (6.220-21). This kind of generosity may injure Piers’s own prospects, however. The rich, like Piers, Patience later tells to
A barrister who pleads for the poor “spendeþ his speche” in their behalf, what he has to give (7.47). He may turn down payment or lessen their oppression through legal means, but they have received from him words not things. Usually the poor receive Christ as their comfort, even less fiscally appealing. Trajan declares that within the bitter shell of poverty “crist is a kernell to conforte þe soule” (11.266), a fact that excuses the poor to endure their status patiently. When Patience asks Christ to comfort the poor, the form of consolation he thinks Christ can offer is almost irrelevantly spiritual: repentance (14.174-81). Patience eventually argues that poverty itself is a comfort because of its spiritual benefits. It functions like contrition, developing spiritual health by an ascetic rigor that resembles penitence (14.282-86).

Patience best summarizes the paradoxical relationship between poverty and comfort with his claim that poverty is “a collateral confort, cristes owene yifte” (14.297). Christ is comfort within poverty, but he has given poverty in order to comfort, as if the state itself is its own relief. Moreover, poverty is an adjunct, collateral comfort. It is not comfortable, but alongside the circumstances intense enough to demand consolation—alongside itself—it smuggles a reassuring amount of spiritual growth. There are two poverties: the one we suffer and its partner, the one that comforts us.

A microcosmic and a macrocosmic usage—an individual life and sacred history—locate ministrations of comfort within set periods of waiting. Good minstrels can bring comfort to a dying man if he made a habit of listening to them enthusiastically throughout his life (13.449-53). Their playing “solaceþ þe soule” (13.452) as it awaits its proper end of “welhope” among the give and give so that in the end Christ will comfort their efficacious pity with double richness in return (14.145-48). Christ does not immediately refill the lack left by giving. Patience ties comfort directly to the satisfaction of a renewed prosperity, but pushes that prosperity far into the eschatological future.
saints. The pleasure of this comfort draws upon the dying man’s store of listening built up over
time and spends that treasury until it is no longer necessary. The comfort of minstrel music is
oriented toward the past until the soul arrives at a decisive future. Later, Will meets Faith, or
Abraham, in whose bosom souls in Hell await Christ’s coming. In filling that role, he is
Christ’s “heraud here and in helle / And conforted many a careful þat after his comynge
waite[n]” (16.247-48). The promises on which Abraham’s faith relies are prefigurations and
down payments of the salvation Christ would bring. The shape of Abraham’s faithful identity,
like all Old Testament figures, points forward to Christ, a herald as definitely as if it spoke.
Those in the Old Testament who die in sin and end in hell can receive comfort through an Old
Testament figure who foreshadows a rescue absent but to come. Awaiting death and a wellhope
round the corner, sin-burdened and dead but waiting for rescue, individuals and a community of
saints occupy themselves in the interim with comfort.

Comfort in Piers Plowman has two antonyms that close off narrative. The first is false
comfort: the illicit closure of complete relief. Passus 2–4 on Mede and the court pervert the
meanings of words, including “comfort.” In them, bribes comfort the litigious False “from
care” entirely (2.151); Mede will wed Fals, no problem. As for Mede, the justice gathering to
attend her at the court “conforte[d] hire kyndely by clergies leue, / And seiden, ‘mourne noght,
Mede, ne make þow no sorwe” (3.15-16). With their help she could marry whomever she
wished; she did not have to worry. Clerks came “to conforten hire þe same / And beden hire be
blithe” (3.26-27) because they were at her service. These comforts are relief, release. Mede can
be blithe and make merry with the court. Her problem is in the hands of comforters so efficient

45 Luke 16.19-31 identifies Abraham’s bosom as the place where dead righteous souls gather in sight of Hell.
46 Carruthers, Search, pp. 50-52; Simpson, Introduction, pp. 38-54.
that it is as if it were already solved. False Comfort does not establish her in the middle of a story but fast forwards her to the end. Accepting this kind of comfort declines to engage the problems that require it.

The second is wanhope, the premature interpretive closure that damns. Medieval wanhope places despairing sinners outside the reach of God’s grace. Their story ends; condemnation has justly settled their sinful lives. Wanhope is in itself a sin because a lie; no one is outside the reach of God’s grace. Yet that lie authenticates itself into truth. Considering themselves damned means that sinners will not engage the proffered grace of God and so will end in damnation after all. Wanhope wakens Gluttony “wiþ no wil to amende / for he leueþ be lost, þis is [his] laste ende” (2.100-01). Gluttony could conceivably amend—he is not lost—but wanhope has cost him his will to do so. Repentance warns Sloth of similar peril: wanhope will betray him unless he remembers that God’s goodness exceeds any guilt, and invokes that grace (5.444-47).

Comfort operates in the interim condition of the church, variously characterized as sinful, poor, and waiting. The alternative responses to this condition simply decline to engage it. False closure pretends the problems away, perhaps by buying protection from them for one individual. Wanhope pretends away the hope of a redemptive solution. The gap inherent in Holy Church’s propositional truth that must be implemented narratively, thus incompletely, is the interim during which comfort must minister, and will correspond to the gap in Passus 19 and 20 between hollow Unity and the vital but absent Piers.
Interpretive Unity

As a barn, Unity physically reifies the church, as visible and sharply bounded as Augustine’s opponents, the Donatists, would have wished. Grace and Piers build it in Passus 19, after Christ’s Passion and the Holy Spirit’s distribution of gifts. The church has well begun. Unity institutionalizes a maturing movement in order to protect its accomplishments. A barn stores harvest; Unity stores harvest from the field Piers plows: seeds of virtue in the soil of human souls harrowed by biblical and patristic writings. The harvest therefore grows from personal, ethical, and interpretive material. It takes personal and ethical form—people like Will and concepts like Conscience—but it owes that distinctive form to the operation of authoritative Christian texts upon personal wills and ethical systems. Unity harvests interpretation, not only of people but of the poem to this point. It contains what results when Grace and Piers get hold of the revelation Will has already been given.

Unity signifies the precise interpretive closure that Augustine’s ecclesiology resists. Grace builds the barn Unity in response to Piers’s concern that fruit and weeds grow up together in the field (19.312-18). Once the doctors and the virtues have finished with the crop, it will be mixed no longer, now fit to store. In contrast, Augustine refuses to judge people as holy or unholy; the visible Church enfolds them all, wheat and tares. The invisible truth about them, he says, God must judge.


Augustine, e.g., Sermon 73A.
Although the poem identifies Unity as Holy Church (19.328, 380), Unity functions for the Christian church only as the visible body for the invisible soul: a place to ground her, the place to find her if she can be found. It is not an allegorical personification but a place in which such persons live. That the last two passus reduce the church to a structure, dependent and lifeless on its own, permits a gap to open within the church’s identity. Will can now conceptualize the church as formally present yet essentially absent, a mystical body no ecclesiastical institution can ever fully express.

Fit home for divine life but without life on its own, the structure of Unity is the primary “figure” of the church within the sacred history section that closes *Piers Plowman*. It follows the climactic event of that section: Christ’s harrowing of Hell. Old Testament themes and characters of Passus 16-17 lead up to the Passion in Passus 18. Once the victoriously crucified Christ has released souls from Hell at the end of Passus 18, Will wakes and hurries to Mass to see and worship its figure of Christ outside his dream. Personal and sacred history have merged at that figure.

Passus 19 and 20 take place in the interim between Will’s intentions (on the basis of what he now knows) and their fulfillment. His visceral, “kynde” response to his vision of Christ closes Passus 18 in a formally satisfying way, culminating the linear trajectories of sacred history and of his own quest for affective knowledge. Two events immediately defer that satisfaction, however. First, before Will leaves for mass, he writes down what he has just seen. The simple response of attending mass, verifying personally in its bread and wine the divine presence that he has seen in history, does not do his vision justice.\(^{49}\) He must memorialize it. Words come before action, the future revisitation and interpretation more important than present worship. Second, he

\(^{49}\) See Quilligan, pp. 285-90, on the mass as presence that allegory seeks.
cannot make it through the mass without falling asleep to dream a supplementary vision. He never gets to the Eucharist; the vision of 19 takes place during the mass while he is sleeping.\textsuperscript{50} The participation that Passus 18 envisions for Will does not occur within the poem. The subsequent passus occupy a posthistorical space in both sacred and personal history: between revelatory incarnation and its fruition in apocalypse, and between Will’s own epiphany and his physical ratification of it at the mass. His dream and waking reality never quite meet; the last two passus play in the gap between them.

Within this gap of sacred history, Passus 19 and 20 render the past divine victory presently useful through interpretation for a defeated Christendom.\textsuperscript{51} Piers harrows the Holy Scripture with Old and New Testament harrows drawn by four church fathers: Augustine,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Barney, \textit{C Passūs 20-22; B Passūs 18-20}, vol. 5 of \textit{The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), pp. 105, 107, locates Will’s falling asleep at the precise occasion of the mass offertory and notes how the rest of the mass, including consecration of the elements, appears in altered form within Will’s unbroken dream. Will does not participate in those events, however; nor is their connection with events in the waking world at all clear.
  
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Carruthers, \textit{Search}, pp. 147-73, argues that the triumph of Passus 18 contains the seeds of its own failure in Passus 19 and 20 by demonstrating that truth is only communicable within divine, not human, language, and so impossible to realize on earth. As Wittig, \textit{Langland}, pp. 31-32, points out, this kind of argument is marred by an assumption that \textit{Piers Plowman} aims at understanding through the processes of cognition and not performative interpretation. Passus 18 is, and is meant to be taken as, a successful communication from heaven to earth. Passus 19 and 20 explain the problems surrounding its availability and practice but do not erode its authority and effectiveness. See Aers, \textit{Piers Plowman}, p. 105, Simpson, \textit{Introduction}, p. 184, and Kasten, p. 199. Ames, p. 188, claims that a theological harmony persists over the last two passus despite a moral discord; Raabe, p. 5, detaches form from content, saying that the evident anxiety within \textit{Piers Plowman} stems from its allegorical poetics and not from any perceived threat to its informing ideas.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Ambrose, Gregory, and Jerome.\footnote{It is difficult to discern why Holy Scripture needs to be harrowed by its entire self, the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps the category of “Holy Scripture” should be wider than the canon, including patristic writers, for instance, but that would create conceptual difficulties because patristic writers are drawing the harrow. Certainly the division of Scripture into “Old” and “New” testaments was a Christian innovation; perhaps the church fathers are simply applying interpretive rules based on this concept. At the least it seems clear that Scripture engages and interprets Scripture in this scene.}

Then Grace gives Piers the four evangelists, presumably along with their books, to draw the plow. The scene depicts the early Christian proliferation of interpretation, applied particularly to the Hebrew Scriptures (through Christ who separates Old from New Testaments and becomes the principle governing Christian interpretation of both). A steady advance in interpretive text from the gospel writers to the patristic writers then bears organic fruit when Piers sows seeds of virtue in the human soul. Written interpretation of the past clears space and prepares soil in order to produce its harvest: the performative fruit of virtue.\footnote{Rogers, p. 68, argues that the poem may even conflate the soils of Scripture and soul in order to identify the textuality of the soul; it ought to be interpreted and known using standard hermeneutical rules. This may be true; I would merely suggest that the progression from Scriptural text to soul is meaningful as well.}

As sharp an ending as it seems, Passus 18 written and read in the late 1300s points forward, a type seeking its repetition in individuals and societies of a Christian era.\footnote{Quilligan, p. 104. Kirk, “Narrative Christology,” pp. 22-35, examines how and why even the climactic events of Passus 18 occur within witness accounts to Will, already interpreted or glossed. Kirk argues that the poem presents the Incarnation to be interpreted like Scripture, through “the cumulative juxtaposition of fragmentary insights, part of an ongoing discourse” that constitutes kynde knowynge (34-35).} And
Conscience’s call for Piers Plowman at the end of the poem points backward to the resources a nascent Christianity received through Christ, Grace, and Piers but failed to retain.\textsuperscript{55}

Passus 19 and 20 specify the implications of Passus 18 by reinterpreting the initial satiric description of Christian life in England in the light of its knowledge, closing the B-text’s circular narrative structure.\textsuperscript{56} The situation at beginning and end of the poem is essentially the same: neither the lay practitioners nor the clergy live up to the various social, spiritual, or political standards their religion espouses. But placing that scene at the end of a sacred historical narrative forces the mode of description to change. A realistic estates satire in the early passus (traders and minstrels, beggars and palmers, shrews and kings) becomes a cosmic psychomachia.\textsuperscript{57} The narrative complications that surround Lady Mede occur within ethically ambiguous courtly and ecclesiastical hierarchies; at the last, venality and flattery reappear as pawns in a battle between independent and distinct armies of good and evil. These final battle lines cut invisibly through the human heart as well as through time and can only be revealed by the kynde knowing of the heart through the spiritual interpretation of history. Reducing one’s purview to the present and visible requires the elimination of resources necessary to know these invisible truths.


\textsuperscript{56} For a detailed comparison, including bibliography, see Barney, C Passūs 20-22, pp. 101-02.

This completed circular structure has the satisfactions and frustrations endemic to figural narrative. It is interpretation by means of figural repetition. The perfect Christ in Piers’ armor now defines what had before been isolated figures, events, and virtues of the early scenes. Holy Church is not merely direct from heaven but a product of historical processes, administering Christ’s historical revelation. Piers’s followers no longer gather haphazardly in a field but store themselves in the barn of Unity as interpretive fruit of Christ’s textualized example. Goodness from characters like Piers derives from Christ, empowered by his exemplary love and need and mediated through his representatives. These repetitions of Christ guarantee meaning through narrative structure. Whether they are direct (Piers), indirect (Conscience, Will), or even perverse (Antichrist), the chronological or conceptual distance between them and their historical prototype provides a definite, measurable gap. We now know more about phenomena contemporary to Will, the poem suggests, because we have a temporal system of measurement that can evaluate them.

Yet, although figural repetition fixes meaning, it cannot provide eschatological fulfillment: the only ending that can satisfy the narrative expectations of the Christian era. In

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58 Although Rogers does not mention typology or figuralism, he does see Piers Plowman as a narrative that continually reinterprets and revises itself. Its recursiveness forces readers to reflect upon and never to be satisfied with their own hermeneutics (27).


60 According to Barney, Allegories, p. 177, typological allegories measure distance from revelation.

the logic of eschatology, the figural closure to the Christian era must repeat the perfect fulfillment and closure of the Old Testament era in the advent and person of Christ. Christ must come again to fulfill his own example; no other ending is possible. Discovering the possibility of such redemptive closure within sacred history, as Passus 18 reveals, only heightens the frustration when repetition of that perfect fulfillment does not appear imminent.\textsuperscript{62} By the end of the poem, we better understand the prologue’s state of things but feel even worse about it.

Unity provides no apocalyptic divine reappearance but only strengthens those who live off its interpretive stores in the face of absence.\textsuperscript{63} From the beginning of the church age in Passus 19, everyone understands it as a time of absence. Grace has come now that Christ has gone (19.191-206), but Grace’s tenure is temporary. He announces his transience in his initial speech: “er I go I wol gyue yow tresor / And wepne to fighte wiþ whan Antecrist yow assaileþ” (19.225-26). The narrator clarifies that these treasures and weapons are for “ech man a grace to gide wiþ hymseluen” (19.227) in the absence of the figure Grace. These diminished individual graces—chiefly occupational, such as priest, law student, farmer, or soldier—are both repetitions of and substitutes for the actions and empowering presence of Grace himself. Antichrist is a toward lack of closure, carefully following its sacred historical model after the formal example of Augustine.

Deborah L. Madsen, \textit{Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), p. 39, argues that Christian figuralism is motivated by “the desire for revelation . . . displaced into interpretation,” as if the storyteller must imagine in the past a revelation that does not exist in the present.

\textsuperscript{62} Barney, \textit{Allegories}, p. 98.

\textsuperscript{63} Harwood, p. 132, argues that Unity is an institution intended to carry on certain functions “in the absence of belief.” While this adequately describes the defensive Unity of Passus 20, it does not account for the optimistic motivation of Unity’s construction. We had better get this barn built, Piers tells Grace, because the harvest is coming and we will need a place to put it (19.317-20). They built Unity in faith, not fear. It was built to carry on certain functions in the absences not of belief but of Grace and Piers.
similarly diminished figure of the divine. Predicted from the beginning, he repeats Christ and Piers in their absence: appearing in human form, uprooting Piers’s crop and sowing his own, behaving like a god (20.52-57). The absence of Christ and Christ’s direct representatives leaves room for both positive and negative repetitions of their presence. Not a contingency plan, Unity is the necessary accommodation to foreseen divine absence, administering the fruits of previous divine presence and resisting the encroachment of alternative modes of repetition upon that residual power.

Like Abelard, Langland defines his current personal and social condition by the absences of Christ and, surprisingly, the Holy Spirit. This double absence represents a thoroughgoing historiographical pessimism that does not reflect the majority position of medieval theology. To most, the Holy Spirit remained continuously present in the life of the church, that presence invoked in the mass and celebrated on Whitsunday. Langland emphasizes absence even more than Abelard, writing whole cycles of it: Christ leaves in favor of Grace and Piers, Grace also designates Piers as his successor. All of this seems to be following a divine plan of succession until Piers unexpectedly leaves with Grace. No one follows them, and no one is left to represent them. Conscience ineffectively picks up the slack until he bolts at the end.

Neither Abelard nor Langland believes that the Holy Spirit has left them entirely, however, merely that a gap lies between him and them. For Abelard the Holy Spirit resides at one particular place, the Paraclete abbey, from which Abelard himself grows progressively distant. For Langland, Unity designates a particular location from which Grace and Piers grow

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64 Carruthers, Search, p. 163, sees Antichrist as a perversion of the figural mode of understanding so successful that it irrevocably corrupts that mode. But the figure of Antichrist had been predicted by the mode’s practitioners, notably Grace.
progressively distant, roaming “as wide as þe world is” to tend its fields of belief (19.332-34).

Abelard’s consolation inheres in precise measurement of the gap itself; Langland’s in a determined quest to collapse the gap. Abelard decries his own movement away from the Paraclete, believing it penalty for his sin and folly. Langland, with his far greater emphasis on the business of charity, lauds the peripatetic pilgrim life. The fortification of a single position renders the church dangerously immobile. Keeping up with the divine presence in the world means moving with it wherever it might go.

Because Grace and Piers never actually leave “þe [lond] of bileue, þe lawe of holy chirche” (19.334) behind, the text requires a double definition of Holy Church: the central castle Unity (where they are absent) and the larger demesne in which they roam. These spatial locations resemble but reverse the tower of Truth and the field full of folk in the Prologue.

Kynde knowledge of the Incarnation permits Christians not only to enter a centralized home of Truth—here, Unity—but to witness its construction and participate in its fortification (19.360-80). The Truth Piers and his comrades had in Passus 5 determined to seek in pilgrimage has left, but they have found and even helped to make a tower, like his, from material relics of his visitation. Unity is not the tower of Truth, but a temporal figure of it in Truth’s absence.

While the life of the church now inhabits a singular spatial location like a tower, the locus of

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66 Christ’s blood is its mortar; Christ’s suffering its walls; the textualization of Christ’s presence in Holy Writ its roof, the finishing touch (19.321-328).
divine activity has now spread outward, without bounds, into an unbounded field of people and
belief that Piers is to till and harvest.

A reversal of narrative directions accompanies this reversal of spatial identities. A
pilgrim Christian like Will can now successfully approach the citadel of Unity, inward toward a
center, demonstrating that through Christ’s Incarnation a kind of truth has definitively arrived on
earth. Truth himself however now has moved outward and downward, away from a central
tower and into the hurly-burly of earthly life. That outward descent is the trajectory Christ’s
incarnation would have taken to get to earth. First Truth sends a pardon, then comes himself in
Christ’s body (Piers’s arms), then in the persons of his representatives Grace and Piers traverses
the entire world. It is as if a given Christian and Truth pass each other in mid-pilgrimage to each
other’s starting points.

At the end of the poem a series of various and hostile assaults on Unity have entirely
usurped Christian initiative and momentum. Sinful forces bristle with action. Lechery fires
arrows. Covetise suborns the law. Friars beyond number preach community of goods under the
influence of Envy. Frere Flatere, guised as a doctor, slips past the gates and porter to infiltrate
Unity. Pride and even a paradoxically pugnacious Sleuth storm its gates at the last.

Christianity within Unity is lax, inactive, having lost its quest or pilgrimage dynamic. It
has come to a dead stop. Conscience ardently wishes: “wolde crist of his grace / That
Covetise were cristene þat is so kene [to fighte]” (20.140-41). When the plague ravages his own
people, Conscience can only plead with Kynde “to cesse and suffre, and see wher þei wolde /

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67 Rudd, p. xiii, sees in these passus a warning that when movement toward perfection stops, bad things happen
precisely because perfection on earth is impossible, and the human mandate is to keep trying to draw closer, collapse
the gap.
Leue pride pruely and be parfite cristene” (20.107-08). Impetus from divine grace absent, this essentially passive strategy backfires when an aggressive Fortune sends flattery, lechery, and promises of long life among the recovering survivors. The best fighter on Conscience’s side is Elde, who manages to fend off Wanhope and send Life to deny his mortality in Revelry. But, in a surprise move, Elde beats the teeth, hair, and virility from the observing and innocent Will (20.183-98). However successful, he is no reliable ally. Conscience’s final determination to seek Piers is the first time in the last two passus that a Christian figure conceives of imitating a divine movement outward, away from a centralized repository of truth.

Will physically arrives at the gates of Unity in 20.213. He seems to have found the closure on truth that characterizes philosophical narrative from Plato through Boethius and onward, which even Augustine did not fully escape. He also, however, joins a disreputable host trying to enter those gates by storm or guile: Antichrist, giants, Frere Flater, and more. The text does not condemn Will for his intention. He comes to Unity at Kynde’s advice, through the sanctioned routes of contrition and confession. Unity is a good place to be. Good allegorical persons inhabit it. It is valuable enough to incite would-be conquerors and hardy enough to beat them off. Yet only he and evil are trying to get in, and by the end evil has succeeded, poisoning the bastion of truth from the inside out. The philosophical, telos-driven, acquisitive route to truth has a sanctioned path but evil company and a compromised destination.

Against these right and wrong attempts to attain Unity as the end of a narrative, and against the eventually futile defense of Unity as a safe place to house meanings and victories already won, the protagonists Grace and Piers can only offer the wide-ranging and repetitious motion of charity. Will never quite joins Unity. He is hung up between these opposing narratives of penetration or dispersal, closure or openness, knowledge or charity: pilgrimage as
shaped by an end or a beginning. He must either stop at Unity or go to find Piers. But looking
for Piers is not equivalent to looking for an ending. Finding him would not be apocalyptic any
more than finding Christ was the first time. It would be finding the ceaseless narrative of charity
that Piers and Grace have departed in order to perform.

Consolatory Piers

As we have seen, comfort is what the posthistorical, postredemptive church requires to
endure its own pain and lack of closure. Piers is what the end of the poem understands that it
requires. Piers is comfort. Christ’s presence brought comfort, and his absence brought Grace or
Spiritus Paraclitus, the spirit of comfort. Piers is heir to both those persons and to the energy of
love that operates through them to found and sustain the church. Thus Piers comes to represent
that which constitutes the life of the church. As its vital force, he is a synecdoche of the
church.68 The church in the last two passus has already received its comfort—in Christ, Spiritus
Paraclitus, Piers, all now absent. Comfort for those within the ecclesial structure of Unity is
therefore past, withdrawn, available through remembering the person Piers.

In his peculiar combination of tangible effects but essential absence Piers Plowman
comes to resemble the Christ who gives form to Augustine’s City of God.69 Augustine knew
enough about the City of God to shape a narrative from its temporal manifestations, yet its
precise constituency remained evasive. It had a temporal shape but not a spatial shape within
time. It was visible in no fixed identity (not-Jerusalem, not-Constantinople, certainly not-Rome)

68 For Piers as identical with or figure of Holy Church or Christ’s body, see Davlin, “Petrus, id est, Christus: Piers
the Plowman as ‘The Whole Christ, ’” Chaucer Review (1972), pp. 280-92, and Margaret Jennings, “Piers Plowman
and Holy Church,” Viator 9 (1978), pp. 367-74. Davlin relies helpfully on the Augustinian doctrine of the church as
the whole body of Christ.

69 Thus he also resembles the invisible City of God itself, because Christ gives form to it.
but in the motion toward God that, wherever encountered, identifies love. It once had a location: the man Jesus Christ. In him its identity remains, but because he has returned to heaven, no other earthly location will do.

The City of God is so difficult to describe and narrate because it consists of foreshadowings of and backward glances toward one person, Christ, who is at most times in most senses of the word absent. What remains of him on earth is his charismatic power drawing people into participation in his body, whether physically through ingesting the Eucharist or morally through the exercise of charity. So, too, Piers is active in his poem but most often absent, available through tidings. Occasionally he surfaces directly into the poem with the shock of something like revelation. He is not Christ but is intimately involved with Christ’s work on earth as both Christ’s teacher in the arts of healing and salvation (16.103-11) and heir of Christ’s power (19.183-90). Just as the human race has lost direct contact with their City-defining Christ, Conscience and Will once could see Piers but can now only remember him, long for him, and from what they know of him interpret what it means to be his barn (19.357), share his pardon (19.390), wield his love (20.77). Just as the church by Christ, they define themselves by an absent Piers.

Piers is what humans look like when they figurally resemble the invisible God, a reliable image of divine perfection within time and human understanding. The paradox of Piers’s identity is that he both figures the good and changes over time. Thus critics have evolved two classes of definition for him. He is uncorrupted human perfection, often attributed to divine image or activity as cause. Or he is divine accommodation to the changeability (thus

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Bloomfield, p. 107, calls him “the way and goal of Christian perfection,” an eschatological figure. To Robert Worth Frank, Jr., Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation: An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, Yale
inadequacy) of human nature and language, God’s ever-mutating effort to teach a variety of dull pupils. Mary Carruthers gathers both of these broad definitions into the concept of \textit{figura}.

Piers is both a literal fourteenth-century plowman and an allegorical figure of eternal truth and charity. Crucially the poem provides direct encounters with him, first plowing in his field, then tending the Tree of Charity, and finally tending the field of the world with tools lent by Christ. Only through key punctiliar encounters with what he ought to know can Will fully understand what it is he is usually missing.

Passus 19 locates the context and means of Christian consolation in the Christ whom Piers resembles. Conscience explains what “postredemptive society” must be like if Christ’s example is to govern Christian behavior figurally:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
“Ac þe cause þat he comþ þus wiþ cros of his passion
Is to wissen vs þerwiþ, þat whan we ben tempted,
\end{center}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}

\footnote{Aers, Piers, p. 79, says that Piers “appears and acts toward all men as the saving agent appropriate to their own perception,” an appearance and activity that must vary as the particular members of his audience vary. Rogers, pp. 29, 175, characterizes Piers as the space between God and failed interpretations of God. His character marks both the human epistemological futility and a reality beyond it. See also Alford, “The Design of the Poem,” \textit{A Companion}, p. 55.}

\footnote{Carruthers, \textit{Search}, pp. 73-80, 131, 169-71. Her Piers is one of a number of possible figures of charity in the poem who becomes the best and clearest. Through the exercise of his will he is able to improve his figural representation.}

\footnote{Ibid., p. 153.}
Therwith to fighte and [f]enden vs fro fallynge in[to] synne,
And se bi his sorwe þat whoso loueþ ioye
To penaunce and to pouerte he moste puten hymseluen,
And muche wo in þis world willen and suffren.” (19.63-68)

Christ offers two resources for those who identify themselves with Conscience: his cross and his sorrow. His cross represents his victory, his sorrow the cost of that victory. Christians should use the victorious cross to defeat temptation and sin but understand that they must imitate Christ’s sorrow in order to reach his victory. Conscience sets the goal, “ioye,” but the individual Christian figurally repeats the example of Christ in the interim before that joy. Should someone love joy, ere they reach it they should expect penance, poverty, and woe “in this world.” They must “puten hymseluen to,” “willen,” and “suffren” that fate—actively choose, desire, and passively endure it—because it repeats the fate of Christ their archetype. These are the parameters the example of Christ leaves for Christian history and behavior. Evidently the victorious but absent Christ leaves his imitators partially in the power of the world. This negative and indefinitely prolonged circumstance requires consolation.

Christ supplies two kinds of consolation that reprieve but do not end. First, while he lived on earth he “confortede carefull” (19.128) with his compassionate miracles. These were genuine releases from suffering, but temporary, because everyone healed eventually died from some other malady. Second, his consolatory power continues into Will’s present because “synfulle aren solaced and saued by þat name” of Jesus (19.22). This salvation through the power of the named but absent Jesus is clear but again takes ambiguous and incomplete form in
penitence and arduous good works. These loving actions continue the poem’s consistent equation of love with merely palliative consolation.

Christ himself suffered past his victory. His figure at the head of Passus 19 enters the church victorious but still bloody and suffering. Robert Adams explains that Will after the triumphant Harrowing of Hell expects a more appropriately glorious appearance than this weakened Christ. A typological association with King David, a persecuted wanderer during the seven-year gap between his anointing and coronation, reveals that Christ the king of earth inhabits an interim between legal title and fully realized executive control. Christian time tempers Christ’s victory: “If Langland’s theology is a theology of glory, the last two passus show it to be a theology of glory postponed.” This weakened Christ is the authoritative figure available for Christian imitation and historical expectation.

The cues have come increasingly thick and fast: Christian time is a posthistorical era, defined by a climactic Messianic victory but reduced to repeating its penultimate cost in consolatory expectation that its triumph will apocalyptically come round again. No one should be surprised at the chaos of Christendom and the absence of direct divine action in Passus 20. It is the natural end of both circular and linear narrative structures. The poem in its entirety poses Passus 20 as a situation requiring consolation.

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74 Aers, *Salvation*, insists that Langland, emulating Augustine, sees salvation as a process that is never complete on earth. 19.22 does not distinguish whether solace or salvation is punctiliar or continuous. This concept of salvation as a process is provocatively analogous to the current critical consensus that knowledge and interpretation in the poem only come through process.

Will arrives at Passus 20 having fully realized his current need and that of his church. Once sacred history has in Passus 19 caught up to his present,

\[
\text{Thanne as I wente by þe wey, whan I was thus awaked,} \\
\text{Heuy chered I yede and elenge in herte.} \\
\text{I ne wiste wher to ete ne at what place,} \\
\text{And it neghed neigh þe noon and wiþ nede I mette. (20.1-4)}
\]

His curious and expectant heart has wearied under the heaviness of the marvels he has seen. His wanderings have by noon made him hungry. The cost of his quest narrative is a renewed need with little expectation of fulfillment. The valences of these physical details are both literal and figurative. Will needs to eat food, but a thematic trail within the poem has associated eating with the Eucharistic presence of Christ and its biblical textualization. Will longs for that presence in his waking world but does not know where to find it, not in the friars, not at the mass, not in his Christian society. It is noon, the time to eat, but noon in a context of medieval sacred history signifies the approach of an apocalyptic opponent: Antichrist. History having shaped Will and quickened his need, he is ready to recognize the consolatory charity Holy Church had recommended at the beginning. He now has the necessary past.

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76 “Elenge” here may echo the prologue, which warns, “‘Ther the cat is a kitoun, the court is ful elenge’” (190). The condition of feeling “elenge” is natural to subjects who are waiting for a governor to grow into or take his rightful power—an interim between something happening and its results being felt.

77 See the banquet scene of Passus 13, also 14.48-51, 15.180, 17.99-100, 19.383-90.

78 See Adams, “Nature of Need in Piers Plowman XX,” Traditio 34 (1978), pp. 298-300, and “Some Versions,” p. 206, and Fowler, p. 287. Chapter 5 will discuss this model of sacred history, based on Psalm 91.5-6, in greater detail. Augustine invents it; Thomas More puts it to extensive use.
Consolation resides in Piers. Now that Christ is absent, Piers becomes the focal point of his divine redemptive and consolatory power.\(^7^9\) Despite a peculiar lapse in letting Frere Flaterere past the gates, Conscience on the whole does not waver in his conviction that Piers Plowman (or Grace, for whom Piers stands in) would be the answer to Unity’s problems: its defense against external assaults, its internal sin-sickness. All they need to thwart hypocrisy is “Piers þe Plowman þat haþ power ouer alle” (20.320). For Conscience, identification with Piers constitutes the community within Unity. Under threat he hurries his denizens into “Piers berne þe Plowman” (19.357). Those who eat of God’s bread have paid what they owe to “Piers pardon þe Plowman” (19.390). Conscience invites Kynde to come protect the threatened Unity “for Piers loue þe Plowman” (20.77). This litany of possessives demonstrates how Piers can remain so influential even while absent: he still owns and is owed. His power is only nominal, but nominal: the power of his name to establish a claim.

Passus 20 systematically rejects certain kinds of consolation. All involve closure upon health or youth: a resistance to mortality. The first commandeers comfort to keep one person free from the ubiquitous event of plague. A lustful lord calls a knight named Confort to bear his banner in the fight against plague. The lord adds in a panicked battle-cry, “ech lif kepe his owene!” (20.92) Although Confort is an allegorical figure, the lord claims him explicitly without provision for others, as if Confort were a single person who could only carry a single lord’s banner. The banner-bearing Confort comes to represent the desperate individualism that a plague evokes, the care-lessness of the care-full. Confort may be good of itself, but in the control of such acquisitive selfishness it dons an ugly mien.

\(^7^9\) Aers, Piers, pp. 93-94, 128.
A later instance equates false comfort with denial or distraction. When Life sees that he cannot defeat Elde, he escapes from Elde into Revel, “the compaignye of confort men cleped it som tyme” (20.182). Revel simulates comfort through its richness and mirth, distracting Life from Elde who determinedly approaches. Revel is a way to lie to oneself about the inevitability of death, to pretend oneself motionless, immune from the passage of time.

Eventually false comfort comes to vacate true healing with its premature and cheap panacea. The sickness of sin infects and weakens the defensive forces of Unity. The malingerers found Shrift’s prescriptions too strident and asked for a readier cure. Conscience invites Frere Flaterere to comfort the ailing Contrition (20.356-57), and the friar apparently succeeds, but at the expense of true healing and Contrition’s own identity: “Contricion hadde clene foryeten to crye and to wepe / . . . For confort of his confessour Contricion he lafte, / That is þe souerayn[e] salue for alle [synnes of kynde]” (20.369, 371-72). Not only has an allegorical person lost his informing virtue and become an empty cipher, but the primary mode of healing has disdained its own adequate internal resources and subverted itself by appealing to a substandard alternative.

In contrast to these premature closures of false consolation, Conscience determines at the end of the poem to begin a quest for Piers. In doing so, he becomes the pilgrim figure that winds through sacred history (Faith, Hope, the Good Samaritan, Christ) and the poem’s own contemporary concerns. He is in fact a step behind Will, who has been looking for what he now can realize is Piers. More importantly, he is two steps behind Piers the pilgrim on a search for truth, who was himself a step behind Christ who came down from heaven for knowledge of the

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80 Similar licentious comforts occur in C.11.176 and C.12.3, thanks to the dubious comforters Concupiscencia Carnis and Couetyse-of-yes.
ones he loved.\textsuperscript{81} By becoming a pilgrim Conscience becomes a figure of Piers, himself the figure of Christ in human nature, and thus begins to find both Piers and Christ.

The quest for Piers does not promise the closures of apocalypse or even death. Certainly the success of forces like Antichrist and the plague imply that Will lives in a time of judgment, when Christians fail so decisively that only catastrophic divine intervention can rectify the world. Conscience’s vision of ecclesiastical unity through fraternal reform (20.245-72) resembles the apocalypticism of Joachim of Fiore: the Christian age of the Son would at some point give way to an apocalyptic age governed by the Holy Spirit and led on earth by monks and hermits.\textsuperscript{82} Yet the apocalyptic threats do not force the battle between good and evil to a crisis. Antichrist is curiously penultimate, absent in the latter stages of Passus 20. The plague has come and gone; the sickness of hypocrisy supplants it. And Piers has never stood for stasis. He always works, plows, tends, helps to grow; what he tends always comes under threat even when it has received his best labor and attention. Looking for him is looking not for an abrupt divine judgment but for the hard work of tenuous reform. \textit{Piers Plowman} may be apocalyptic, but it is not eschatological. It uses apocalyptic figures to signify the work of drastic recuperation.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} See Howard H. Schless, “Fourteenth Century \textit{Imitatio} and \textit{Piers Plowman},” \textit{Intellectuals and Writers in Fourteenth-Century Europe}, Tübingen Beiträge zur Anglistik 7, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tübingen; Cambridge: Narr; Brewer, 1986), p. 175, on this sequence of pilgrims (reader, Will, Piers, Christ—he does not include Conscience) each a step behind the other, which he explains not as typology but as medieval \textit{imitatio}.


The poem ends in the waking world, where the dream must find completion. Will wakes with the call for pilgrimage ringing in his ears. Readers wake from the book with the call for pilgrimage ringing in our ears. Will has already set himself and his audience an example for response by determining to hie his family to mass after the climactic Harrowing of Hell. A simultaneity of dream and waking worlds at the cruxes of the dream sequence is the closure the poem seeks. Thus Will, and by extension the reader who has followed his epistemological journey, must join Conscience on pilgrimage for the poem to be complete.

Closure is therefore figural performance. This performance has little enough to go on: the example of Christ, mediated through the gifts of Grace, nurtured by Piers, defended by Conscience. At each stage something is lost: the empowering presence of Christ himself, a singular Grace fractured into a myriad of reduced and individual graces, a clear and authoritative guide. After nearly twenty passus Will still must ask Kynde, now that he knows all this, Christian stories never develop past their middle, but keep repeating it, over and over. Here the narrative canons of Biblicism resemble those of irreducible realism, a conceptual world to which Langland seems equally to belong.

84 Thus the poem includes the reader within its process of meaning-making. See Madsen, p. 88, and Quilligan, p. 227.

85 It is not for this argument important whether this performance is primarily individual (Will, a particular reader) or social (ecclesiastical reform of friars, reform of abusive political hierarchies), though others have found the distinction fruitful. Simpson, “Grace Abounding: Evangelical Centralization and the End of Piers Plowman,” *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 14 (2000), p. 66, argues that the poem’s end undermines the distinction between individual and social because Will represents the church cleaving together in one common, unified, faculty of volition. In Augustinian figural narrative, the distinction between microcosm and macrocosm, while persistent, carries a different emphasis because microcosm and macrocosm define themselves in relation to each other. The church is the Body of a singular Person; each member of the church is a body within that Body. Speaking of one is speaking of both, even though both are not the same.
“Counseille me, kynde, . . . what craft is best to lerne?” (20.207) Kynde responds with a
definite but vague command: “Lerne to loue, . . . and leef alle opere” (20.208). Assemble from
this poem and lifetime examples of how to love, piece them together and interpret them, then
perform the resulting picture (which will look like Piers).

For Kynde, Will’s affective and figural faculty of understanding, is Will’s only access to
the comfort who is Piers. In a poem devoted to the pursuit of kynde knowing, a figure of Kynde
advises Will as his only guide at the last. Will has found, and lost, Christ, Grace, Piers, and
Unity. By these defaults Kynde becomes an unofficial, ad hoc, provisional guide to both
Conscience and Will. He advises Will to seek Unity. He is to sustain Conscience until
Conscience finds Piers.

Kynde gives genuine access to Piers. Will has learned how to know kyndely; that part of
the story is over. His triumphs within the poem have been moments of clear participatory
understanding. By entering events of sacred history with his heart and passions, that which is
historical, or absent, comes alive into his re-performance. Kynde knowing is the figural re-
presentation of the past, something like a living memory. Now that Will has learned how to
know kyndely, and known divine persons and solutions kyndely, he can ask Kynde what to do
now, and Kynde will tell him. Kynde tells him to love. That is what Holy Church told him to do
at the beginning, and what Piers repeatedly does.

In the absence of Christ, Grace, and Piers, Will does not have to know, cognitively or
completely, in order to know Piers kyndely. But Will has to be him (through figural
representation) in order to know him, and he has to perform, and love, and be searching, in order
to be him. When what he knows to be comfort is absent, Will has for comfort the mode of
knowing he has learned.
Piers Plowman provides a richly disconcerting Augustinian view of late fourteenth century ecclesiastical society and its place (or void) in sacred history. The view is richly Augustinian in part because it pulls together so many Augustinian themes of knowing, reading, loving, city-building, and consoling. Langland has left few spaces in the form to probe for an ambitious author who might follow him. Subsequent authors must and will take Augustinian form away from Langland’s Augustinian synthesis in two directions. Chaucer will take the form out of Christendom entirely to see whether its consolation sinks or swims in Grecian antiquity. More will clap a calamitous end onto its ecclesiastical frustration and see whether consolation is possible then.
Chapter Four: Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale: Consolations at War

The Knight’s Tale is a series of failed narratival and philosophical closures that ends in a diminuendo of consolation. It invests its narrative momentum in a plot sequence that avoids open warfare between Athens and Thebes by sublimating Theban desire and violence into an orderly tournament whose winner is to marry the Amazonian princess Emelye. Arcite wins the tournament but dies in a mysterious equestrian accident ordered by Saturn and carried out by a fury. Set some years later, the tale’s ending satisfies everyone still alive—Palamon marries Emelye, and this Theban-Amazon alliance under the aegis of King Theseus secures peace in the realm of Athens—but does so without accounting for the main energy of the plot. Arcite’s catastrophic death haunts the final happiness, inassimilable to its quiet domesticity. The burden it places on the marriage between Palamon and Emelye is the Augustinian burden of consolation after a past revelatory resolution so total that its uncomprehending survivors live out their posthistory in its shadow. The tale’s full form encompasses a linear narrative of Athenian political triumphalism that presses for closure, a recursive Theban typology that systematically derails Athenian resolution, and finally an Augustinian posthistory ironically enabled by the blind recursiveness of Thebes and the self-interested machinations of pagan divinity.

The Augustinian ending contextualizes and displaces the Boethian philosophy (culminated in Theseus’s First Mover speech) that most critics understand to be the tale’s primary means of consolation. The tale offers a consolation of narrative rather than philosophy. Theseus’s speech urges the lovers, in high Boethian style, to transcend Arcite’s death in view of the eternal. Yet Chaucer refuses eternal matter outside Theseus’s speech; specifically, in adapting his main source, Boccaccio’s Teseida, he omits Arcite’s ascension through the heavenly
spheres after death, scorning earth as he goes. The climax and end of the *Knight's Tale* remain earthly catastrophe and consolation, respectively.

In fact, Chaucer shifts Augustinian narrative form from monastic autobiography (Abelard) and ecclesiastical satire (Langland) to a secular context, very nearly an irreconcilable contradiction. He examines consolatory models for the endangered ideals of chivalry, perhaps the most deliberately secular ideology of the Middle Ages. By setting the chivalrous tale in pagan times, he claims for it the approximate secular space that chivalry itself claimed: an account of reality commensurate with but not identical to medieval religious orthodoxy. Neither the Knight’s chivalry nor his pagan matter is transgressive, only tangential to Christian historiography. A medieval audience would not take the pagan gods seriously as rivals to the Christian God, for instance. Nevertheless, the ability to imagine a secular space within a Christian ideological framework owes much to the politics and historiography of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*. Augustine reduces earthly cities and governments such as Rome either to iterations of the intrinsically evil Earthly City (14.28-15.2, 4-8; 18) or to secular entities in which Christians can participate but should not hope (19.5-17). Secularity for the Middle Ages originates in etymology and conceptual form from the patristic *saeculum*, whose meaningfulness Lee Patterson accuses Augustine of vacating and R. A. Markus commends him for clearing so that Christians could participate in a society more diverse than a monolithic Christian culture.¹

The shapeless time of posthistory is the *saeculum*, into which revelatory meaning must be imported from outside. In keeping with Augustine’s account of the earthly polis, the tale proves Chaucer’s chivalric secularity empty of satisfactory consolation on its own.

If Abelard’s *Historia* is an integrated narrative of sacred history and Langland’s *Piers Plowman* a quest for sacred narrative form, Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* is a clash between sacred and secular narratives. Invading a secular political space frees Augustinian narrative to challenge directly its secular rivals for the consolatory field: medieval political triumphalism and the Boethian philosophical quest. Both are linear and Athenian. Most of the tale exposes the inadequacy of each when matched against an implacable Theban recursiveness, the motive for but foe of consolation. The duel of narrative forms between linear Athens and recursive Thebes constitutes the tale and successfully thwarts its closure at every stage. Charles Muscatine influentially described the *Knight’s Tale* as a conflict between forces of order and disorder, its perpetual tension perpetually ordered by a narrative structure of Gothic juxtaposition. Subsequent critics have complicated Muscatine’s claim until the general consensus presently is that the tale opposes Athens (representing the powers of reason, art, and/or philosophy to order the political sphere) to Thebes (representing the chaotic tendencies of passion and desire). In narrative terms, however, the conflict is not between order and disorder but between two opposed orders. The order of Athens is that of closure, ending the narrative by

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2 When Chaucer chooses to freight his pagan romance with philosophical concerns, he uses predominantly Boethian vocabulary. Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* uses predominantly Neoplatonic terminology and concepts in its turn, constructing a consolation at home in a pagan or a Christian setting.

enforcing happiness and virtue as defined by Athenian interests. From the Athenian point of view (which most critics have taken, following the Knight), Thebes is disorderly because it opposes Athenian order. In the tale, however, Thebes resists closure in ways predictable by its violent history, particularly its long record of fraternal strife.\textsuperscript{4} It functions not as chaotic disorder but as recursive order. No one seriously doubts what will happen if Theseus leaves Arcite and Palamon to themselves, fighting in the grove. They will destroy themselves; that is what Thebans typically do.

Initially Theban repetition is purely destructive, a cycle of fated doom inherited from Statius’\textit{\textit{\textquoteleft\textquoteleft Thebaid,}} the ultimate source of all medieval Theban narratives. Such is figural repetition outside the stabilities of Christian history. But when Arcite’s death breaks the Theban pattern in which he participates, it converts the previous tale from a Statian doomed repetition to a figural narrative, and Palamon’s subsequent performance of the place Arcite has won in the hearts of Athens and Emelye extends the tale into an Augustinian backlit posthistory. Augustine uses an exegetical system of figures to identify a recursive Christian church interpreting and performing the past climax of revelation through Christ. Chaucer uses figural narrative

\textsuperscript{4} Statius begins the \textit{Thebaid} with “fraternas acies” (1.1), or “fraternal strife.” The concept is central to medieval readings and retellings of Theban history. Chaucer’s revisions of the \textit{Teseida} heighten tension and fraternal strife where Boccaccio minimized it; see, e.g., David Anderson, “Theban Genealogy in the Knight’s Tale,” \textit{Chaucer Review} 21 (1987), p. 315; Robert R. Edwards, \textit{Chaucer and Boccaccio: Antiquity and Modernity} (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 32-43; Dominique Battles, \textit{The Medieval Tradition of Thebes: History and Narrative in the OF} Roman de Thèbes, \textit{Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Lydgate}, Studies in Medieval History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 85-111. For example, Battles, pp. 103, notes “the very different outcomes of the scene in the parallel prison scenes in the \textit{Teseida} and the \textit{Knight’s Tale}: where Boccaccio uses the prison cell to lay the groundwork for reconciliation between the Theban cousins, Chaucer uses it to foster further conflict in the Theban style.”
technique to identify both the repetitious history in which the Thebans are trapped and the
salvific opportunity to repeat the example of a Theban who manages to avoid the repetition
through what seems like a fated accident. Once the climactic break with history has occurred
(Christ’s, Arcite’s), necessarily figural humanity can move from repeating a deeply flawed past
to repeating the figure who causes that climactic break. Because figural characters can perform
within and against the background of their pattern, figural narrative is distinct from mere
repetition. Figures have room, though limited, in which to behave as agents and exercise their
will. In terms of figure’s linear dimension, typology, an antitype most often repeats the pattern
of its previous type or types with a significant difference. That significant difference (in this
tale, Arcite’s death) makes an otherwise repetitious series of types linear and is the reason one
would tell a typological narrative in the first place.

The figural relations Chaucer explores are between the fratricidal patterns of Theban
history (which he would have regarded as historical), the fraternal strife between Arcite and
Palamon (which he would have regarded as fictitious), the self-destructive senescence of his
own fourteenth-century chivalric society. Chaucer needed to find consolatory models for

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5 Anderson, Before the Knight’s Tale: Imitation of Classical Epic in Boccaccio’s Teseida, Middle Ages Series
(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 166-74, identifies this aspect of difference as key to
medieval typology and explains its implications for Arcite’s death in the Teseida. See Hayden White, “Auerbach’s
Literary History: Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism,” Literary History and the Challenge of Philology:
The Legacy of Erich Auerbach, ed. Seth Lerer, Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture (Stanford: Stanford University

6 On this narrative as a fictional repetition of historical patterns, see Anderson, Before the Knight's Tale, p. 69.

on the senescence Chaucer and Gower saw in their world, and how it could be resisted by institutions. The medieval
diagnosis of the Christian world as senescent derives from Augustinian parallels between micro-and macrocosmic
chivalry because its beleaguered state in his day required consolation. Several critics have shown how the Knight’s historical situation undermines the ostensible chivalric idealism of the tale. Robert Hanning qualifies a knightly tendency toward idealism with the gritty reality of medieval mercenary warfare.\(^8\) Marshall Leicester explores how the Knight manages to uphold chivalric institutions and express his disenchantment with them simultaneously.\(^9\) This line of investigation culminates in Lee Patterson’s *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, which argues that the tale’s oscillation between representation and *occupatio* represents the chivalric self trying to come to terms with its own lack of self-consciousness. Chivalry’s public self-history. After the high maturity of the world when Christ lived in it, the world is doddering or dwindling toward its apocalyptic end in death. According to V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 101-23, it was an age of self-diagnosed degeneracy, the only age in history not worth dramatizing in cycle plays. But it was the age in which cycle plays were *performed*, past and future time brought into the present to reflect and shape it. James M. Dean, *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature*, Medieval Academy of Books 101 (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1997), surveys the topic in Jean de Meun, Dante, and Middle English literature, and provides a catalog of tropes. John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), links the medieval belief in the world’s senectitude with the problematic referentiality of its language. On the medieval influence of Augustine’s microcosmic and macrocosmic parallels, as well as of other competing schemes in his and other writings, see J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man’s Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).


construction eschewed critical reflection; thus it could not see that its omnivorous economic and political demands destroyed the very support structure on which it was based. The *Knight’s Tale* supplies that traumatized and long-belated critical reflection in a knightly voice.¹⁰ Battles on every front—political (the tumultuous reign of Richard II, the Peasants’ Revolt), religious (the Great Schism, Lollardy), economic (the rise of the mercantile class and a moneyed economy, the brutal cost of constant war, the aftereffects of the Black Death)—were undermining the English institutions of the late 1300s, and the knightly enforcers of culture were on the wary defensive. Forces greater and broader than any one person or institution were at work, forces that felt as inexorable and uncontrollable as the tug of the stars, or a fury rising underneath a horse’s hoof.

With its sacred hand tied behind its back, Augustinian narrative enters the lists after its narrative rivals have fought each other to a standstill at Arcite’s death. The Theban impulse diverts Athenian linearity; the Athenian drive arrests Theban recursivity. Instead, with the Athens-Thebes conflict as its mechanism, the tale’s resolution carries its structure underneath the auspices of a third and Augustinian pattern: stasis reperforming the meaning of a past climax. The narrative that Chaucer carefully constructs out of oppositions and figural comparisons and repetitions not only refuses to subsume Arcite’s death under philosophical explanation, as Theseus’ First Mover speech had done, but takes it seriously enough to make it the tale’s decisive event. By dying outside the Theban pattern of fratricide and being enfolded into

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¹⁰ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 165-230. Each of these critics reads the tale as dramatizing the consciousness of the Knight, at least to some extent. I hold with Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, Unwin Critical Library (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 116-17, that, of all the tales, this one (previously written and lightly revised) is the least likely to dramatise the consciousness of its purported speaker. Nevertheless, the points these scholars make about the troubled chivalric consciousness (or lack thereof) in general remain valid.
Athenian society through his funeral, Arcite clears the way for his cousin Palamon to take his place. Quite accidentally he provides a new way to be Theban, available for imitation and repetition in its turn. The figural narrative is organized forward and backward around Arcite’s death, the deepest expression of illegibility and meaninglessness the tale has to offer. Nevertheless, with the death at its center it has a logic—not Saturnine, Thesean, Theban, Boethian, or fated, but providential—that carries Palamon backward to where he had wanted to go.

**Athenian Linearity**

Throughout most of the *Knight’s Tale*, a simple linearity is the mode of consolation, and Athens is its site. Athens offers two successive linear consolations: the medieval political triumphalism of conquest, then, when that founders on Theban resistance, a Boethian philosophical quest. Not coincidentally, these were common consolatory options for political figures in Chaucer’s day. A favorite political consolation was inherited from Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Sure political destiny for himself and his descendants compels the warrior-hero, like Aeneas, past any challenge, whether physical or ethical. Monarchs and chroniclers in France and England scrambled to trace their etiology back to a Trojan descendant carrying Italy’s manifest destiny further west. The secular political narrative that began on the banks of the Aegean many centuries ago could culminate in an aspiring medieval ruler; such was the hope, at any rate. It did not work out well. As Patterson has shown, late-medieval Arthurian tragedies like the *Alliterative Morte* reflect widespread political disillusionment. And when that pragmatic consolation of force faltered, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, the consolatory paradigm for the medieval period, was available to ground the frustrated in an insensible eternal truth.

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The Boethian form provides an opportunity to salvage a consolatory linearity thwarted at the initial stage of political force and conquest. Initially triumphalist, the Athenian narrative becomes a Boethian philosophical journey from disillusionment to consolatory knowledge, beginning with Theseus’s successful conquest of the Amazons and ending with his unsuccessful attempt to manage the strife between Arcite and Palamon and, instead, his resigned determination “to maken vertu of necessitee.”

Through the systematic failure of his machinations, Theseus comes to realize his essential inability to control events by imposing his will and desire. Thus chastened, he is ready to take his rightful place in the providential universe. This place he apprehends in the First Mover speech that ends his evolution from simple warlord to rational, virtuous ruler.

 Though obviously drawing heavily from the *Consolation of Philosophy*, this speech fails as consolation because it fails to fit the narrative form of which it is keystone. Specifically, its reasoning, however valid in the abstract, simply does not cohere with Arcite’s suffering and death that it claims to elucidate. If the *Knight’s Tale* is meant to reflect late-medieval chivalric experience, including its high incidence of recursiveness or apparent randomness, then Boethian philosophy inadequately completes the existential data.

Throughout the tale, Theseus tries to force ordering closure on resisting material, acting in the confidence gained from previous conquests. He is used to halting other narratives and converting them to Athens; thus his roles early in the tale introduce and reinforce his prowess in

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13 Patterson, *Chaucer*, pp. 200-01, does not provide an extensively formalist reading of the tale but does note that Athens attempts to use its linear model of narrative to redeem or save Thebes from its own self-replication.
containing narrative-generating rebellion and oppression. The tale opens after he has successfully domesticated the Amazons, bringing their queen to bed and their culture to heel. He restored patriarchal order to the reversed gender dynamics of Amazonia, conquering but then enfolding them into the Athenian political hegemony by making their queen his wife and Emelye his political prisoner. Then, on his mission of pity to Thebes, he authoritatively ends the cycle of violence that Creon had continued even after Oedipus’s warring sons, Eteocles and Polynices, were dead. Creon demonstrates the futility of this perpetuation by venting his violence even upon his enemies’ dead bodies, refusing their burial and preferring that dogs eat them (942-47). If death and total defeat could not end that bitter war, no end is imaginable; the impulse toward violence must be expressed whether or not it can locate an appropriate or just object. Theseus’s army kills Creon and brutally sacks Thebes. They know how to exert enough violence to bring a conflict to an end, but enough leniency to draw survivors into Athenian political structure. From outside the situation, Theseus and his men supply an ending that apparently sticks, an impossible task for Creon or any other Theban caught in the repetitions of violence.

Even the narrator feels that the sack of Thebes has brought that episode to a satisfactory resolution on the Athenian model.14 Theseus has “wonne Thebes” (1002) effectively enough to make his honor perpetual. He rides home “crowned as a conqueror; / And ther he lyveth in joye and in honour / Terme of his lyf” (1027-29), while the Thebans Palamon and Arcite suffer and sulk in prison “for everemoore” (1032), adequately caged by Athens. The narrator’s word choice here would not be out of place at the end of a (much shorter) tale. But the tale moves forward. As a forecast for Palamon, Arcite, and Thebes this pronouncement of resolution is premature and

14 Statius’s *Thebaid* ends here, although with a welter of pyres and groans and tears and grim stories, the particular species of closure that is destruction by a conqueror.
patently false. Even in a poem full of *occupatio* that describes what it claims not to describe, constantly breaking the promises of its words, a prophecy of perpetually victorious Theseus and contained Thebes is a surprising narratorial gaffe.

Although the narrator is hereafter more cautious, Theseus the overconfident ruler continues to prophesy closure prematurely. In his role as judge Theseus declaratively sentences Arcite and Palamon to death—"Ye shal be deed, by mighty Mars the rede!" (1747)—before reversing his judgment on a rising tide of female tears. He concludes a preliminary sketch for his alternative plan, the tournament, by informing the two Thebans: “This is youre ende and youre conclusioun” (1869). When Palamon is captured in the tournament a year later, Theseus ratifies that end with the cry: “Hoo! namoore, for it is doon!” (2656) Obviously, although Palamon is captured, the tournament and its aftermath do not go according to plan. Despite Theseus’s best efforts to stop the tale’s Theban impetus after the tournament, it is *not* done, and will not be done before Saturn, Mars, Venus, the Fury, aventure, and the inimical forces inherent in Thebes have their way with Arcite and Athens in an extraordinary cycle of aporia triumphing over premature plot resolution. Theseus seems to believe throughout most of the tale that part of a ruler’s duty is to legislate and execute the shutting down of disequilibrium that maintains narrative momentum. He is so eager to achieve stasis that he sees it before he reaches it and claims it too quickly.

When these forced and preemptive consolatory closures break down, the Athenian narrative centered on Theseus evolves toward a Boethian model. Although he has no

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15 Both terms can mean either objective or termination. I take Theseus to be identifying the tournament as the objective of Arcite and Palamon’s erotic desire—they must pass through war to get to love—and the formal termination to Theban strife that threatens him. It proves to be, of course and ironically, the end of Arcite in death.
authoritative guide like Lady Philosophy, Theseus is capable of learning from events themselves.\textsuperscript{16} For a conqueror he is unusually agile in supplementing force with reason. When his force falters or his pity kindles, he changes his plans after internal deliberation.\textsuperscript{17} He refuses to let his previous promises bind him to folly but can always produce a new and better plan. When the grieving Theban widows address him he is at first mistakenly offended but corrects himself in mid-speech and finally asks after the information he needed (905-11). When he interrupts Arcite and Palamon fighting in the grove, he rescinds his sentence of death after women cajole him, his anger gives way to pity, and he reflects upon his own youth in the service of love. When the tournament day arrives and Theseus considers the cost in aristocratic blood of his original plan, “He wol his firste purpose modifye” (2542) by limiting the weapons to long sword and mace.\textsuperscript{18} Eventually Arcite’s death renders meaningless the results of Theseus’s tournament, his greatest effort to contain the forces of Thebes. Theseus is at first inconsolable by any but his father, but soon shakes off that incapacity and produces the First Mover speech, a summary of what his accumulated failures and frustrations have taught him. Its philosophical weight and rhetorical eloquence attempt to arrest Theban suffering where his legislative prowess

\textsuperscript{16} See Merle Fifield, “The Knight’s Tale: Incident, Idea, Incorporation,” \textit{Chaucer Review} 3 (1968), p. 98, on Theseus learning from his failure to control the tournament. He learns from Egeus also, but much expands and improves Egeus’s cursory notes toward consolation.

\textsuperscript{17} Peter Elbow, \textit{Oppositions in Chaucer} (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), pp. 82-87. He notes that Theseus’s changes of mind always move in the direction of mercy.

\textsuperscript{18} The elements of self-correction and internal reflection are absent from the corresponding passages in the \textit{Teseida}. Theseus’s attitude toward the weeping widows alters entirely in reaction to their story (2.26-36); he does change his mind about freeing Arcite and Palamon, but without the aid of an internal monologue (5.91-98); and the rule changes on the day of the tournament are additions or clarifications of previous arrangements, not reversals (7.131-32).
had failed. It is the speech of a ruler resigned to certain aspects of powerlessness, but only because he has a vision of an order greater than he himself could ever impose.

As a systematic response to Theseus’s frustration at earlier events, the First Mover speech seems to supply the narrative of the *Knight’s Tale* with whatever consoling closure it possesses.\(^{19}\) Muscatine describes it as the central assertion of order in the poem from Theseus, the normative figure of order.\(^{20}\) Arcite died, but “al this thyng moot deye” (3034). Because of this, and because Arcite’s death at the pinnacle of earthly glory (having won a tournament and a prize wife) was comparatively a good death, those who loved Arcite should not let his death end their own lives. His fame consoles in some measure for his personal absence and ensures that what remains of him, memory, will treat him justly. And the desires of those who loved Arcite survive.\(^{21}\) Theseus can make virtue of the necessity of Arcite’s death by marrying the bereaved Emelye to the bereaved Palamon and making “of sorwes two / O parfit joye” (3071-72). In this way the natural end of death serves the purposes of those who remain. Not coincidentally, it also

\(^{19}\) Patterson, *Chaucer*, p. 202, calls it “an explanation of how closure is possible within the historical world.” This is an odd thing to say with reference to a Boethian speech, although the oddity is from Theseus and not Patterson. The consolation Boethius offers is precisely not that of a closed system of worldly causality. In Boethian metaphysics, closure is possible within the historical world only by appealing to meaning and function outside it in the eternal Divine.


\(^{21}\) Theseus seems to posit desires of Palamon and Emelye for each other (3062-66), although he later acknowledges that Emelye will require more persuading to the marriage than Palamon. Her desires are latent if present at all, and Theseus appeals instead to her pity as more reliable motivation.
makes subservient allies of the Theban warriors Arcite and Palamon had threatened to wield against Athens.22

The first part of Theseus’s speech emphasizes the inevitable closure death brings to all the earth—there is “nat eterne” (3015), but “al this thyng hath ende” (3026), and “al goth that ilke weye” (3034), which is to say that “al this thyng moot deye” (3035). The second part of the speech, however, denies the application of that knowledge to the forthcoming marriage that partakes of transcendence. Regarded properly, at the site of Arcite’s death “wher moost sorwe is herinne, / Ther wol we first amenden and bigynne” (3073-74). The ordering power of humanity cannot refuse inevitable death, but it can mend death, avoid the negative consequences of death that seem as natural as death itself but are not so—or do not have to be in an Athenian state ruled by a Boethian philosopher-king. The state of “O parfit joye” thus begun will be “lastynge everemo” (3072), transcending the closure Theseus has just promised as inevitable to all things earthly. Palamon and Emelye “endeth” in this ecstatic, frictionless stasis owed to one perfect harmonious joy (3107). The story closes on stasis of an eternal kind; it ends not because Palamon and Emelye end or die but because they have arrived at a place from which there is no departure. The precise philosophical consolation the poem offers, then, with Theseus as its voice, is that people should not seek to resist the natural closures of worldly frustration and death. Instead they should tap the force of love that would permit them to amend and transcend corruptible and dying earthly things and to participate with all their corruptible might in that which is eternal, which death cannot shut down.

22 Cf. Robert Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, p. 32: a war with Thebes “remains a distinct, if muted, threat until the very end of the poem.”
Such a consolation is Neoplatonic and owes much to Boethius 2m.8 and 4m.6. In particular, its notions of the divine “Prince and . . . Movere” (2994) guaranteeing cosmic order by originating the cosmos, of the fair chain of love binding nature together, of natural elements bounded in space and time and cycling through series of death and birth, are all recognizably Boethian concepts. Teseo’s corresponding speech in the Teseida merely cites the inevitability of death and birth, the closed cycles of nature showing explicit traces neither of Boethius nor monotheism.23 Now that Theseus has been chastened into understanding the recalcitrant facts that reveal his powerlessness, his Boethian finale retrospectively makes the Athenian narrative of the tale a Boethian movement from prosperity through frustration to enlightenment.

Although Theseus’s speech provides Boethian consolatory content that would ordinarily culminate a philosophical quest, in this case it does not adequately explain Arcite’s past death (its problem), nor does it justify Palamon and Emelye’s future marriage (its solution).24 Those

23 Chaucer moves much of this material from Boccaccio into Egeus’s consolatory speech to Theseus (2835-52), which supplies the natural facts Theseus can amplify into a much more sophisticated philosophical performance. Egeus is inspiration and enabler to Theseus’s much superior expansion, a ground off which he can lift.

24 The speech is Boethian at beginning and end of its philosophical portion (2987-3016, 3035-40). The intervening material, mostly from the Teseida, seems to many to be incompatible with its bracketing Boethian claims. See Pearsall, pp. 124-5, and Jill Mann, “Chance and Destiny in Troilus and Criseyde and the Knight’s Tale,” The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer, 2nd ed., ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 93-111, for two of the more judicious accounts of the speech’s self-contradictions. The speech may fail internally as argument in addition to its external failure as narrative resolution. Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition, p. 183, describes its movement as “logical and orderly,” but reduces the non-Boethian lines 3017-34 to a passing mention (184).
two particular events are not assimilable to a Boethian cosmos. This Boethian climax is therefore alien to the structure it claims to resolve: a failed consolatory narrative.\textsuperscript{25}

Theseus’s First Mover speech satisfactorily resolves his own Athenian linear narrative, but it fails to resolve the death of the Theban, Arcite. The particulars of that death do not corroborate the generalities of the speech. The notion that death is a integral part of nature’s cycle, the fair chain of love, can least comfort those mourning a death obviously unnatural, from a fluke equine stumble. It is manifestly an interruption, not the continuation of a narrative arc. Likewise, Theseus’s suggestion that Arcite’s death is merciful because at the height of his glory is usually reserved in chivalric rhetoric for a knight who dies gloriously in battle, not irrelevantly while catching the eye of his lady. Certainly, as Theseus points out, Arcite will never reach a doddering old age, but he will also never reach a satisfying and fructifying marriage and fatherhood, equally significant in the cosmic order Theseus offers for consolation.

Even should this death have been natural, the consolatory power of the speech, particularly to modern tastes, founders on the irreducibility and gratuitousness of Arcite’s pain. The speech only addresses the fact of death at the moment of glory and victory; it does not address the suffering prior to the death, even though Chaucer adds a vivid, technical amplification of that suffering where it was lacking in Boccaccio.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} See Pearsall, ibid., on the nearly impossible demands on the speech by its structural context, and Elizabeth Salter, \textit{Fourteenth-Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 171-72, for those demands contrasted to the lower philosophical stakes in the \textit{Teseida}.

\textsuperscript{26} Boccaccio only mentions that the saddle crushed Arcite’s chest, causing great pain (IX.8, 13) and that he had “internal fractures, both lengthwise and transversely” that were obviously fatal (X.13). The equivalent place in Boccaccio’s narrative, when Arcite realizes his own approaching death and makes arrangements for Emelye and Palamon, mentions only that “all his strength was ebbing and that he would die without fail,” growing “worse each
Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore
Encreeseth at his herte moore and moore.
The clothered blood, for any lechecraft,
Corrupteth, and is in his bouk ylaft,
That neither veyne-blood, ne ventusynge,
Ne drynke of herbes may ben his helpynge.
The vertu expulsif, or animal,
Fro thilke vertu cleped natural
Ne may the venym voyden ne expelle.
The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle,
And every lacerte in his brest adoun
Is shent with venym and corrupcioun.
Hym gayneth neither, for to gete his lif,
Vomyt upward, ne dounward laxatif.  (2743-56)

This passage describes a particularly Saturnine death based upon the domination of the
body’s retentive faculty, but in a level of detail accentuating the gruesome physicality of Arcite’s
suffering.\(^\text{27}\) On the strength of this deliberate addition by Chaucer, many recent critics have
argued that the abstractions of Theseus’s speech cannot assimilate the pathos of Arcite’s death,

\[\text{day}^\text{"(X.16). Translations from the Teseida are taken from The Book of Theseus, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy, New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974.}\]

\[\text{27 For the physical details of the death as Saturnine, see Salter, Fourteenth-Century English Poetry, pp. 169-70; and Edward C. Schweitzer, “Fate and Freedom in The Knight’s Tale,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 3 (1981), pp. 23-30, who enlists its obvious link with Saturn for the purposes of moral allegory, not pathos.}\]
so strikingly disproportionate to any wrong he may have done. The strong current critical tendency to see Theseus as a political pragmatist offering puerile, ill-fitting consolations in which he does not believe is related to our humanist instinct that he could not have been serious when he meant his speech to answer Arcite’s pain. In light of that pain he could only motivate his people to look toward possible future action while eluding the unanswerable evidence in his memory of a random and unjust world of suffering. Theseus has spent most of the tale trying to contain the irrational violence of Thebes. Irrational violence is what he fears. His fears have come true despite all his precautions against them.

Following the First Mover speech as awkwardly as Arcite’s death precedes it, the future event of marriage Theseus tries to motivate and justify is not a Boethian end. Like most Neoplatonists, Boethius grounds the beginning and end of time and meaning in the eternal divine. Anything on earth gains its true identity from the transcendent and is incomplete in and of itself. Marriage, a good participant in the chain of love, is good exactly and only because it is a participant in that metaphysical chain (2m.8). But the Knight’s Tale treats earthly felicity as an end in itself. The earthly felicity of that marriage in the Teseida coheres with the closed system

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29 On this tale’s evasion of Boethian anti-materialism and prioritization of the eternal, see Anne Payne, p. 223, Elbow, pp. 133-34, and Schweitzer, p. 44.
of nature Teseo offered as consolatory explanation. It is natural that Arcite die sometime; it is natural that a wedding should follow after a discreet interval. Earthly ends require earthly beginnings, after all. Chaucer’s addition of a Boethian perspective to Teseo’s speech removes this correspondence between earthly consolation and resolution. In fact, if Theseus approximates the sagacious status of Lady Philosophy by the end of the tale, Palamon the imprisoned Boethius, and Emelye the object of desire from which the prisoner is barred, the tale’s denouement is equivalent to Lady Philosophy unlocking the door and letting Boethius walk out of his cell a free man. This total realization of earthly desire is foreign to the Boethian emphasis on satisfaction within time coming only in the acknowledgment of eternity. Palamon and Emelye have reached a place on earth at which no transcendent consolation is needed, a Boethian impossibility.

The Athenian narrative within the Knight’s Tale, exemplified in Theseus its ruler, invokes the form of a Boethian linear, epiphanous narrative but does not fulfil that model. Theseus intends to make virtue of necessity but only successfully makes virtue: the Knight’s Tale ends happily. The narrative structure his speech provides does not adequately establish the causal necessity of either Arcite’s tortured death or Palamon’s marriage to Emelye. Theseus did the right thing by causing Palamon and Emelye to marry but does not fully understand why it is the right thing or how it has come to be so. This is consonant with Chaucer’s wider practice of using Boethian allusions to signify the gravity of philosophical issues his work explores while ignoring or evading Boethius’s finely tuned solutions. Satisfactory resolutions to these problems in a Chaucerian consolation, if possible, lie elsewhere.

Theban Typology

Ubiquitous moral disaster characterizes the Augustinian saeculum. In the De Civitate Dei, the City of Man is locked into its systems of cupidity and fratricide after the model of Cain and Abel. The Augustinian view of human history is that it is repetitive, typological repetition separating from destructive or meaningless repetition only at decisive revelatory climax (Christ’s first coming) or apocalypse (his second). To Augustine, Jesus Christ freed time from recursivity but could do so only because in his life and death he fulfilled certain typological patterns of expectation (DCD 15-17, 18.27-37). Only when Christ came did those patterns acquire decisive meaning. Without and before him they would have seemed like futile repetition.

which Chaucer ignores the complexities of Boethius’s cosmos in order to blame a Neoplatonic God directly for the plight of his pagan creatures. Burlin, p. 80; Joerg O. Fichte, Chaucer’s ‘Art Poetical’: A Study in Chaucerian Poetics, Studies & Texts in English 1 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1980), p. 111; and Miller, pp. 30-31; agree that when Chaucer handles philosophical material, he cares less about the ideas themselves and more about how they appear in and shape existential experience—how the abstract is made concrete and literal. Fichte, pp. 88, 111, and F. Anne Payne, Chaucer and Menippean Satire (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), pp. 232-58, link Chaucer’s preference for lived metaphysics with his penchant for anti-teleological closure.

The history of the City of Man occupies Book 18.

When he argued against cyclical models of history, two of Augustine’s three proofs that history is linear—Christ’s incarnation (18.54) and the redemption of any given soul (12.14)—depend upon revelation in Christ. The other, creation (11.4), would not convince the cyclical pagan thinkers who believed that the world was eternal. From an early Christian point of view, even the Old Testament sacrificial system was fruitlessly recursive without the power of the Christ to which it pointed. The entire book of Hebrews is emphatic on this point; e.g., 10.11-12, 14: “And every priest indeed standeth daily ministering, and often offering the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this man offering one sacrifice for sins, for ever sitteth on the right hand of God. . . . For by one oblation he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” Biblical citations are from The Douay-Rheims Version.
Theban narrative is the cyclical equivalent of Augustinian secular historiography. Stories about Thebes—from the indiscriminate Cadmian killers grown from dragon’s teeth, down to the patricidal Oedipus, his fratricidal sons, and Creon—most often involve the killing of close kin. This fact was obvious enough to make Thebes an emblem of malevolent recursivity to most medieval writers and readers. Chaucer keeps his Theban narrative closely aligned with its pagan origins in Statius, unlike Dante, who converts Statius to a secret Christianity (Purgatorio 22.55-93). The recognition that Theban repetition is endemic had already occurred in Statius’s Thebaid when Tydeus sarcastically describes Eteocles’ rebellion: “This is brotherly love, this mighty faith! Nor do I wonder at the crimes of your race. Thus was the first author of your blood, thus the impure wedlock of your fathers” (2.129). Eteocles’ bad behavior could have been predicted. Even at the end of the Thebaid, violence is in full focus; the Theban

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33 See Anderson, Before the Knight’s Tale, pp. 214-17, 173, 190. Battles, p. 63, characterizes the Augustinian historiographical model relevant to Thebes as “history as destructive repetition.”

34 John Lydgate, John Lydgate: The Siege of Thebes, ed. Robert R. Edwards (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), gives the history of Thebes up through Eteocles and Polynices explicitly in response to the Knight’s Tale. Lydgate claims that his tale is the first told on the way back from Canterbury.


women turn away from Theseus toward their dead.\textsuperscript{37} Thus the Thebes story inherits a narrative model of doomed repetition from its primary classical source. The \textit{Knight’s Tale} and Augustine share a narratological diagnosis. Destructive repetition is what requires consolation. From this perspective, the consolatory emphasis of Boccaccio, Egeus, and Theseus on natural cycles sounds like irony.

Like Augustine, Abelard, and Langland before him, Chaucer uses figural representation to explore the relations between microcosmic and macrocosmic narratives. Unlike them, he does not use biblical or Christian history as his macrocosmic anchor narrative. Instead, his pagan setting permits him to imagine a Theban metanarrative that augurs recursive chaos and violence, not prefigures a forthcoming salvation. Rather than means of hope or consolation, figural repetitions are themselves the trap.\textsuperscript{38}

Secular narrative structure in the Middle Ages owes much to typological interpretation, as several important studies have acknowledged. Warren Ginsberg’s notion of literary typology, derived from the New Testament through Augustine, suggests that solutions for the major hermeneutical problem of early Christianity—how the Old Testament foreshadowed a dissimilar New—may have evolved and secularized into more general literary application. Ginsberg sees the main feature of Augustinian typological structure as parataxis: typology permits an author to


\textsuperscript{38} If Muscatine establishes the critical position that the \textit{Knight’s Tale} is an eventual triumph of order containing disorder, Aers, pp. 174-95, occupies the opposite critical pole, contending that disorder is irreducible by order in the tale, and that the theodicy attempted by Theseus fails feebly. Like Muscatine, however, Aers does not locate the forces of disorder primarily in Thebes, but in what he calls “individual identity or the particulars of misery” (p. 183).
construct a relation between two characters or events through allusion without specifying the characteristics of that relation. Type and antitype can be as dissimilar as King David and Gottfried’s Tristan; such a historical relation does not require the synonymy of allegory. And this penchant for paratactic structure survived even into the later Middle Ages when links to specifically Biblical material were no longer necessary but characters were still constructed through echoes internal and external to the work. David Anderson has argued that Boccaccio structured his Teseida to re-present the narrative of the Thebaid, rendering Statius’s political patterns a metaphor for the Teseida’s actions of love. This strategy is at least partly in the tradition of typological interpretation. Chaucer imitates this Boccaccian fictional imitation of historical pattern in his own Knight’s Tale.

Although historians of subjectivity are bitterly divided on its status in Chaucerian fictions, some (like Patterson) granting Chaucer a major role in the late medieval (re)invention of the human individual, the habits of earlier medieval culture located subjectivity in relation—to loose stereotypes of social personhood but also, figurally, to historical precedents. And subjectivity


40 Anderson, Before the Knight’s Tale. For one narrative as metaphor of another see pp. 60, 81; for Chaucerian imitation see pp. 192-224. The typological aspects of the Teseida are its repetition of events with a difference and its reading of the Thebaid as “real historical events in the context of universal history” (p. 173). Unlike Ginsberg, Anderson does not identify simple repetition and analogue as typological, but instead as epic structures read through and composed by means of the rhetorical tradition of imitatio. Only when such repetition involves historical event is it typological.

41 For the concept of “social person” as a more flexible tool of understanding and analysis than the rigid classifications of estates literature and commentary, see Elizabeth Fowler, Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).
in relation to a broader history is the imperative of the Augustinian historiographical tradition. Medieval individuals had no appetite for the past as past; they retold it to fit the needs of the present, to find themselves as well as what they should do. Unlike comparatively self-determining Chaucerian characters such as the Pardoner or Wife of Bath, the Thebans Arcite and Palamon seem reducible to their relations to larger structures—one part astrological determinism, a smattering of allegorical representation left over from Boccaccio, and one part Theban heritage. Of the negative moral implications of Theban history they seem unconscious. A historical, typological consciousness—awareness of themselves not merely as creatures of present desire but as figures with a proclivity toward familial violence—would have alerted them to their true danger. They need an outside perspective because they are constructed of outside material.

Whereas in the *Teseida* love drives thoughts of Thebes from their minds (3.36), the Arcite and Palamon of the *Knight’s Tale* ground their purposes and actions in Thebes as the rightful source of their identity. Both are painfully aware that they are the last of the Theban lineage. Myopically Palamon cannot even keep his first sight of Emelye clear of his personal

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43 Palamon does admit that “our lynage . . . is so lowe ybrought by tirannye” (1111); he does not specify whether he is referring to Theban, divine, or Thesean tyranny. Although Arcite does not link love to his Theban heritage, Robert Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, p. 36, contends that Arcite in the tower already understands desire’s power to disrupt the human conventions of positive law.

44 See Miller, p. 103, on their internally consistent, rational, but wrongheaded self-assessment, requiring an outside perspective they never gain.

45 Muscatine, *Chaucer*, pp. 175-90, reads Arcite and Palamon as principles of order, allied with Theseus against Saturn who is “disorder, nothing more nor less” (190). Not surprisingly, he virtually ignores that the two lovers are Theban, mentioning the fact only on the first and last pages of his *Knight’s Tale* discussion.
and political ambitions as a Theban (1104-11). He can kill two birds with one stone; his love can help perpetuate the lineage of his city. When Arcite rehearses Theban history to justify his grievance at the gods, he omits its most obvious attribute of cyclical strife, calls his heritage “the blood roial of Cadme and Amphioun” and “stok roial,” and sees only that the gods are trying to destroy a perfectly good lineage for no apparent reason, as if the Thebans bore no fault in the matter (1542-71). Palamon also blames the gods’ hostility toward Thebes for his misfortunes (1328-31). If Arcite and Palamon see any narrative pattern in Theban history, it is repetition of recent divine injustice toward a hapless city.

The narrative follows suit, although more often focalizing Thebes as a negative influence on character and event. With a series of little, coy digs it keeps the violent and recursive Theban identity from settling into the background of the love topic. Two allusions to the knights’ unnamed parentage (1016-19, 3084) recall their immediate, disagreeable genealogy which the knights themselves never mention: Oedipus their grandfather, Eteocles and Polynices their uncles. Arcite’s expurgated account of Theban history invites an educated audience to supply what he left out: Cadmus, the griefs of Amphion, but most notably Oedipus and his sons. In order to reify Thebes into a continuing material influence on the knights, Chaucer unlike Boccaccio keeps it standing after its destruction by Theseus. Palamon even complains about the past devastation of Thebes’ “waste walles wyde” (1331), but after seven years in Athens those walls stand enough to make Thebes a site of exile (1355), army recruitment (1283-90,

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46 Leicester, p. 9.

47 Nevertheless, Palamon can still use Theban resources to accomplish his erotic goals. Theban “nercotikes and opie” (1472) spring him from prison; he is headed for Thebes to raise an army when he meets Arcite in the grove.


49 See Battles, pp. 87, 109-11.
1482-84), and even potential prosperity (1791-93) for its royal heirs. During the conflict in part four, as the story quickens toward its end, the narrative and Theseus suddenly begin to call them “Thebane knyghtes” (2514, 2526), “Thebans” (2570), “Thebanes two” (2623), and “Arcite of Thebes” (2658). The marriage, although pitched by Theseus as a consolatory event, was originally conceived by the Athenians as a way to gain “fully of Thebans obeisaunce” (2974), a pointed reminder of the Theban Question in the middle of the erotic denouement. Imprisoned by Athens and loving an Amazon, both Arcite and Palamon see themselves as remaining Theban, and Athens and the narrator agree.

Unmistakably Theban, they also unmistakably participate through figural repetition in the fraternal strife that characterizes Theban history. Irruption of Thebes into Athens takes the form of fraternal strife during the first scene in which the Thebans act as agents: when Palamon, then Arcite, loves Emelye. The priority of Palamon is Chaucer’s innovation: in the Teseida Arcite saw and loved Emelye first (3.11-17). Although safely ensconced in Athenian space, apparently unconscious of this particular tendency from their background, and in the throes of a passion medieval romances often portrayed as ennobling, they squabble with each other in a typically Theban manner. Because Palamon saw and loved her first, he immediately sees Arcite’s love for Emelye as “fals” (1130), an offense against his prior loyalty to Palamon as cousin and sworn brother. The love Arcite describes and claims—circumventor and destroyer of positive, manmade law (1164-68)—is particularly Theban in its flouting of bonds as close as the fraternal. Enough family feeling remains for them to help each other with their armor in the grove “as

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50 Never once during the tournament in Teseida 8 does Boccaccio mention Thebes or call Arcita or Palamon Thebans.

51 Leicester, pp. 358-59.
frendly as he were his owene brother” (1652), but soon they were back to fighting. Arming one’s opponent ironically evokes fraternal feeling; in the Theban lexicon, “brother” is synonymous with “adversary.”

The engine of this figural repetition is the same engine that runs the recursiveness of the Augustinian City of Man: cupidinous love. Theban love is cupidinous within the pagan standards of the tale, not necessarily in comparison to Christian charity. It is a disproportionate desire for an overvalued object. The motivation of disproportionate love within Theban narrative is as old as Statius (Thebaid 1.53), although in the Thebaid it is love for an overvalued city.\(^5^2\) Arcite deflates Palamon’s love from the beginning: Emelye is no goddess but a mere mortal. Yet Arcite groundlessly claims total liberty for his own love from any external obligation, including the value of its object. Love of Emelye is not only a doom (according to the lovers themselves) and a folly (according to an avuncular and nostalgic Theseus), but a positive good, as the ending of the Knight’s Tale indicates.\(^5^3\) Thebans ruin erotic love (or fraternal love, or love of city—any particular love they have in mind) by abstracting it out of a network of other loves and claiming it as radically singular. To follow any given love they must actively despise, even hate, all other claims on their capacity for affection and desire.\(^5^4\)

\(^{52}\) Anderson, Before the Knight’s Tale, pp. 204-07. See also Haller on the substitution of erotic for political epic motivation.

\(^{53}\) Peggy A. Knapp, Chaucerian Aesthetics, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 103, points out that the tale never actually condemns love for Emelye.

\(^{54}\) Augustine demands a similarly reduced allegiance of Christians, only for the things of God: “Two cities, then, have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self” (DCD 14.28) (“fecerunt itaque ciuitates duas amores duo, terrenam
The Theban tragedy is that such discord between loves appears inevitable. Cadmian soldiers had to kill each other to remain true to their own violent natures. Laius could not love his life and his infant son at the same time. Oedipus cannot reconcile his filial and erotic loves of Jocasta to each other, himself, or his children and city. Eteocles and Polynices cannot share Thebes with each other. Arcite cannot conceive of loving Emily without alienating Palamon. Palamon, on the other hand, began to love Emelye without alienating Arcite; should there be hope for Theban love, it would be for his.

Conditioned by their histories to expect repetitive and perpetual frustration, the Thebans supply their own version of premature closure, their premature despair corresponding in function to Athenian proclamations of premature victory. They demand neither theodicy nor consolation but take every opportunity to resign themselves to their fate. In his first speech as lover Arcite guarantees that neither he nor Palamon will consummate their desire:

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\text{Thou and I be damned to prisoun}\\
\text{Perpetuelly; us gayneth no raunsoun.}\\
\text{We stryve as dide the houndes for the boon;}\\
\text{They foughte al day, and yet hir part was noon. . . .}\\
\text{Love, if thee list, for I love and ay shal;}\\
\text{And soothly, leeve brother, this is al.} \quad (1175-78, 1183-84)
\]

Though wrong about perpetual imprisonment, Arcite was right enough that fraternal strife would gain neither of them Emelye. Helplessly they continued to struggle—“Greet was the strif and

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scilicet amor sui usque ad contemptum dei, caelestem uero amor dei usque ad contemptum sui”). See also *DDC* 1.3-5.
long bitwix hem tweye” (1187)—but they were self-aware enough to know that it was futile.\textsuperscript{55} Familial strife did not get Thebans much; it tended, in fact, to destroy both the opposing members of the family and the thing desired. Frustrated desire, not hope of fruition, was “al.”

The thoroughgoing pessimism at the end of part I is also a quite premature resignation. Upon release from prison, Arcite immediately despairs: “Syn that I may nat seen you, Emelye, / I nam but deed; ther nys no remedye” (1273-74). For his part Palamon assumes: “Arcita, cosyn myn, / Of al oure strif, God woot, the fruyt is thyn” (1281-82), because a free Arcite can return to Thebes and mobilize an army. Each is by now conditioned to assume the worst—not merely that the worst is coming, but that the worst has already arrived. The story is closed, and only the irrefragability of frustrated desire keeps them committed to their despairing role. The narrator seems to concur with the knights’ assessment. Palamon “perpetually is dampned to prisoun” (1342), and Arcite “exiled upon his heed / For everemo, as out of that contree, / Ne nevere mo ne shal his lady see” (1344-46). He even draws part I to a close with a demande d’amour—“Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?” (1348)—as if the tale was over and all that remained was supplementary comment on the answer to the question.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} This immediate and adversarial pessimism differs from the onset of love in the Teseida, during which the two youths actually comfort each other and experience the pangs of love’s woe together (3.26-46).

\textsuperscript{56} There are two kinds of closure possible to the fated Theban: despair and death. Patterson, Chaucer, p. 229, sees Palamon’s plea for Theseus to kill him and Arcite both (1715-22) as a longing for the closure of death to put an end to his despairing, empty existence within the Theban cycle of chivalric violence. Certainly death as a physical fact of closure would be preferable to existing in a continual emotional closure of perpetual despair. But Palamon seeks death only here, when it is virtually certain even without his cooperation, and he seeks death for Arcite also. It seems to me that, acclimated to Theban pessimism, he is simply trying to make the best of a death he sees as certain.
Arcite’s death draws even the confident, linear Athens into the Theban feeling of helplessness at a cyclic doom. Throughout Theseus’s ordering enterprise the Athenian people eagerly track its progress. They see even his modification of his own tournament rules as events in a positive trajectory: “God save swich a lord, that is so good / He wilneth no destruccion of blood!” (2563-64) For this lord, changes of heart make for a better plan. It was simply unimaginable that such a lord and such a plan could end in tragedy. So they refuse to believe Arcite’s reversion to Theban suffering:

Men seyde eek that Arcite shal nat dye;
He shal been heeled of his maladye.
And of another thyng they weren as fayn,
That of hem alle was ther noon yslayn. (2704-07)

While Arcite suffers on the night after the tournament, Theseus makes the rounds of the revelers, assuring them not that Arcite will stay alive (apparently a given) but that his fall is only an “aventure” (2722) that did not jeopardize the honor of his victory. These are the assumptions and actions of men who wrote the story of the day in their imaginations before it had ever begun. Any deviation from the planned course of events is less real than the plan itself. To this point in the tale, Athens’s track record is perfect. It had vanquished the Amazons and already destroyed Thebes; it could hardly fail in this mop-up operation.

Yet when Arcite, undeniably, dies, and the word slips out to spread around the town, the people weep with record passion not for Arcite the tournament conqueror or Arcite the putative husband of Emelye, but “for deeth of this Theban” (2829), nameless except for his city. That he was Theban is all the information necessary to justify their disproportionate sorrow. For the first time Athens understands from the inside what it is like to be Thebes, to have no escape from
tragedy no matter how just the passion or how well-intentioned and efficient the plan. It appalls them. Theseus is almost inconsolable. Egeus immediately tries to enfold this rapid descent from the height of honor into a cyclical metanarrative not Theban but natural: the world’s “joye after wo, and wo after gladnesse” (2841), the cycles of Fortune’s wheel implied. This alignment with a larger, cyclical narrative structure is meant to “hem reconforte” (2852), saving the appearances of both progress and regress. Theseus will later take the further step of attributing this cycle of joy and woe to a First Mover, a crucial stage for Boethian consolation in the face of Fate. But such a step only becomes necessary when, against their will, the Athenians must acknowledge a cyclic aspect to existence within time.

This feeling of helplessness at the mercy of cyclical patterns within history is what, according to Patterson and Leicester, prompts the telling of the Knight’s Tale as the simultaneous and mutually deconstructive self-revelation and self-consolation of chivalric ideology. The confidence of chivalric Athens has eroded. This construction of the tale’s link between pagan history and the contemporary medieval setting is certainly not allegorical but, in its repetition, figural. It senses an innate metonymic relationship between past figures and events and present circumstance, not necessarily the triumphalist sequence implied by type and antitype.57 Chaucer

fictionalizes not only the *elements* of Statius’s narrative he would have seen as historical but the *relations* between those past and his present realities. He fictionalizes a way of reading the past in service of the present by reading the present into the patterns of the past.  

Chaucer is not unique in incorporating past Theban material to serve ends within the time of historiographical authorship. That Statius both provides parallel narrative tracks for individuals and history and extracts the experiencing individual from history proves decisively useful for Dante, enabling him to read Statius as Christian and to develop an individualistic poetry. Boccaccio’s dedicatory epistle suggests an allegorical relation between the love story of the *Teseida* and his own history with Fiammetta. Medieval commentators read the *Thebaid* as Statius’s allegory of his political situation—the strife between Domitian and Titus—veiled in the characters of Eteocles and Polynices. Theban material was open to such pragmatic figural retelling.

Chaucer is, however, unusual in the inexactitude of this reference. As Anderson has argued, the resemblances he constructs are at a structural more than a personal level, abstract not specific, typological not allegorical. We do not look within the court of Edward III or Richard

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59 Wetherbee, pp. 112-14, 138-41, 145. He sees a similar individualizing influence on Chaucer’s *Troilus*.

60 Battles, p. 8.

61 Anderson, *Before the Knight’s Tale*, p. 219.
II for direct analogues to Arcite, Palamon, Theseus, or Emelye. Instead, we are to note how Theban cycles typically undermine Athenian linearity until Athens is forced to build the bold front of a pseudo-Boethian consolation upon almost nonexistent foundations. Then, through the death of Arcite as the precise event a Boethian consolation cannot explain, we can recognize the consolatory counterproposal taking shape all this time.

**Augustinian Afterthought**

Mark Miller posits Augustine and Boethius as twin influences on Chaucer in how to address the self estranged from itself, a necessary human condition that forces plots with nostalgic structures, trying to return the self to a past Eden of personal harmony and singularity. Augustine and Boethius seem to arrive at the same consolatory answer: a completion of a cycle, a return by the self to past transcendence. They even arrive at the consolation by the same path: a climactic revelation guaranteeing the legibility and meaningfulness of earthly events from the perspective of a divinity who organizes those events to serve his own ends. Boethius is more confident than Augustine’s Neoplatonist opponents that earthly events are important enough for God to bother to make sense of them.

Where Augustine and Boethius differ is in the mode of this revelation and its temporal location. For Boethius, the revelation radically breaks the narrative patterns of the estranged self; Lady Philosophy saves Boethius from disillusioned imprisonment. Her philosophy opposes itself to his narrative. The resulting consolation of philosophy is meant to transcend narrative as soon as is reasonably possible. The end of the story is the cessation of all story in the stasis of eternal

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63 Miller, pp. 136-37.
philosophical truth. As we have seen, Augustine the disillusioned Neoplatonist longs for such stasis, but he cannot tell a story that ends there. His mode of revelation is fundamentally narratival, a climactic event led up to by a pattern of events. He is saved in part by means of frustrated or disillusioned wanderings on which climactic revelation casts retrospective sense. And whatever (considerable) intimations of eternal truth that revelation offers, the Augustinian protagonist (self or City) returns to an interim *saeculum* charged no longer with typological necessity but performative urgency. No longer does an Augustinian protagonist unwittingly prefigure coming revelation; now he aggressively models himself after a climax he has already witnessed or read about. Boethian narrative is prospective, never quite finished on earth. Augustinian narrative is retrospective, essentially complete already; all that remains is its earthly re-performance in a partially knowing posthistory.

Such an orientation toward temporality, such a dissatisfaction with narratives of progress and the closure of philosophical proclamation, makes Augustine, not Boethius, Chaucer’s natural authority in the art of consolation within the secular sphere. Chaucerian narrative delights in

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64 Any ambiguity at the end of the *Consolation of Philosophy* occurs because Boethius’s voice disappears, deferring to an onslaught of revelation as book 5 concludes, so that it is unclear whether he makes the appropriate responses that would lead him along the path to complete consolation. In Augustinian terms, he has heard the word; whether he has converted is unclear from the narrative, although the existence of the text itself heavily implies such a conversion.

65 R. James Goldstein, “Future Perfect: The Augustinian Theology of Perfection and the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007), pp. 87-140, is an important reconsideration of the intersection between Augustinian theology and Chaucerian narrative. Goldstein distinguishes between narratives of transcendence and amelioration, calls Augustinian narrative ameliorative, and concludes that Augustine gives very little guidance for how that amelioration occurs within time after conversion. Chaucer provides precisely the “detailed road map” (p. 135) that Augustine ignores, in typical medieval fashion fulfilling a lacuna left by an authority. But both authors see
the irony of wheat and tares growing tangled together before the last judgment. To the extent that it is written or read as a Christian nontriumphalistic vision it is indebted to the great ambiguities and ambivalences of Augustinian theology and narrative. Its consolatory mode of interpretive performance is not linear but recursive, appropriate both to the aimless eddies of a pre-Christian paganism and the retrospective formlessness of a narrative that has traveled past revelation into secularity.

The death of Arcite is the Augustinian revelatory climax of the *Knight’s Tale*. While Arcita’s graciousness in death during the analogous scenes in the *Teseida* is the culminating expression of his natural gentility, the revelation his death in the *Knight’s Tale* provides is primarily negative, destructive of all previous explanatory systems. Neither Venus nor Mars effected it, so, no allegorical or astrological explanation holds true. Athenians brought it about neither by conquest nor linear progress; it transpired despite their best efforts. A Theban explanation has satisfied many critics, but a strictly Theban narrative would have ended with Arcite and Palamon dead at each other’s hands, witnessed by mourning women. Arcite’s dying expression of affection for Palamon extricates him from that causal chain. Saturn arranges the homicidal Fury, but he short-sightedly aims only to satisfy the promises of both Mars and Venus. Refraction of all the narrative patterns through Arcite’s death would be beyond him, not a god diligently devoted to order. The death preemptively undermines Theseus’s Boethian explanation by occurring prematurely and outside providential schemes of nature. Nevertheless, it hints at a narrative logic that could not heretofore have been guessed. From within a structure of repetitive

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the earthly pilgrimage as an in-between place, middle ground “between the conversion of the will and the final perseverance” (p. 101).
violence, a man who gratuitously exercises his virtue in death can destroy that structure by its
own imitative machinery, clearing the way for someone else’s static happiness.

Without the peculiar shape of Arcite’s death the peculiar shape of the resolution is
impossible. First and most simply, Palamon can live out his days without being haunted by the
possibility of fraternal strife because his only other family member, Arcite, is already dead.
Arcite’s entrance into “his cold grave / Allone, withouten any compaignye” (2778-79),
66 enables Palamon to continue in life without any close kin, thus without enemy. Someone did have to die
in the tournament for there to be a happy ending, an elimination of the possibility of rivalry. 67

Second, Arcite’s death outside the structures of fratricidal strife permits the Theban line
to continue through the potentially fertile marriage of Palamon and Emelye. Throughout the tale,
both refuse to observe the other successfully woo and wed Emelye. Again, had Arcite and
Palamon eventually accosted each other in lethal combat, as Thebans of the royal line generally
do, neither would have survived. Practically speaking, it is now impossible for Palamon to

66 On the isolation of characters from each other in the Knight’s Tale, see Boitani, Chaucer and Boccaccio, Medium
141. To Judith Ferster, Chaucer on Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 23-45, the
characters are epistemologically isolated because they cannot appropriately interpret each other’s signs.

67 R. Howard Bloch, Medieval French Literature and Law (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 18-
25, explains that medieval judicial combat is an explicit invitation for divinity to intervene on behalf of the more just
cause. Such a combat in this polytheistic setting, with various gods backing various fighters, confuses rather than
simplifies matters. Only Saturn taking administrative charge can fulfill each of the promises from Mars, Venus, and
Diana with his ingenious solution. Yet he intervenes on behalf of the gods, not the Thebans, saying to Venus: “Al
be ye noght of o compleccioun, / That causeth al day swich divisioun. / I am thyn aiel, redy at thy wille; / Weep now
namoore; I wol thy lust fulfille” (2475-78). A happy ending for any Theban is incidental to his concern that divine
desires are fully satisfied.
continue the Theban cycles of familial violence. For that violence to engage, there needs to be more than one royal Theban alive.

The necessity of death to free survivors is an old sacrificial logic that here takes on a distinctly Christic tinge. Arcite is not a Christ-figure, nor does he represent Christ in a one-to-one correspondence. Nevertheless, although salvation by means of a sacrificial ceremony descends from both pagan and Christian religious sources, Chaucer’s most readily accessible model for such an event is Christian history. Its sacred patterns pagans such as Troilus or even Beowulf can prefigure, though unwittingly and from afar. Thus the ending of the Knight’s Tale is Christian not in character but in form: one knight dies and frees the other. Arcite neither wishes nor intends such a thing. The resemblance seems accidental and merely abstract. But it, finally, reveals a Christian figural structure behind the unfolding narrative. A Christian pattern, cast by providential subterfuge, is the only one Arcite is likely to foreshadow through imitation.

In these first two aspects, Arcite’s death prevents Palamon from acting as a normal Theban would. Familial violence is no longer open to him; he is trapped into something that looks like health. But in the final two, Arcite’s death enables Palamon to imitate him, to take on a role he had won or received by means of death. Palamon cannot be a violent Theban, but he can still participate in a cycle like a Theban, though the cycle is now new.

Third, then, Arcite’s death introduces the possibility of uncontaminated fraternal love into the Theban line, enabling Palamon to love appropriately in his turn. Arcite’s love for Palamon survives despite his greater desire for Emelye, and the circumstances of his death permit him to affirm them both, whereas a marriage to Emelye would have forced him to choose

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68 John Halverson, “Aspects of Order in the Knight’s Tale,” Studies in Philology 57 (1960), pp. 606-12, reads the Knight’s Tale as recapitulating the old patterns of the nature gods.
between them. This affirmation occurs in an in-between time, when death is imminent, his physical strength had already failed, and his erotic hopes had receded permanently out of reach. All that was left for Arcite to exercise was his intellect. Frozen, with nothing quickened but his mind, he is trapped into reflecting over and interpreting his peculiar recent history. In the moments directly before his death, he gives the first, preliminary interpretation of that full history: “I have heer with my cosyn Palamon / Had strif and rancour many a day agon / For love of yow, and for my jalousye” (2783-85). This diagnosis does not exactly connote regret or repentance, but its decisive past tense designates a sharp break with the earlier pattern of strife. Clearly he has not extricated himself from love of Emelye, but his ambition to possess her, his reason for competitive jealousy or anxious vigilance, has passed. He is now free to commend Palamon’s virtues in detail and to recommend Palamon to Emelye as her most appropriate husband.69

In fact, the attributes Arcite ascribes to Palamon—“trouthe, honour, knyghthed, / Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede,” and, most notably, “fredom, and al that longet to that art” (2789-91)—make “Palamon, the gentil man” (2797) seem more like a self-description. That “fredom,” with its dual connotations of liberty and generosity, now appropriately describes a Theban is startling.70

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69 Ferster, p. 38, sees Arcite’s isolation from worldly concerns at the moment of death as the key to his freedom for compassion. Her discussion of interpretation within the Knight’s Tale concentrates on Arcite’s and Palamon’s self-centered and erroneous interpretations of each other’s motives; it is less concerned with the characters’ interpretation of the past.

70 Typically in the Canterbury Tales, “fredom” within a list of chivalric virtues or otherwise in a chivalric context denotes generosity, being free with one’s goods (Monk’s Tale 2642, Manciple’s Tale 126). It is in fact an attribute of the Knight in the General Prologue (46). But the importance of imprisonment in the Knight’s Tale, and its
and Palamon until now. Fierce jealousy over Emelye, never a hint of generous behavior, had characterized both men since Arcite had added his love to Palamon’s. Only now that Arcite is dying can he afford to be gracious, recommending the suit of his cousin while giving Emelye some self-determination in the matter: “if that evere ye shul ben a wyf, / Foryet nat Palamon, the gentil man” (2975-76). Notably untrue and dishonorable (according to Palamon’s accusations in tower and grove), not particularly wise, and certainly not free throughout the body of the tale, Arcite at the point of death is free to be free: to do the right thing by his affianced spouse and his love-stricken kinsman. His action is the first thoroughly gentil action from a Theban in the tale: gracious, benevolent, worthy of high birth, aristocratic in its concern for the orderly transfer of power.

For his part, Palamon has not evinced the virtues from this list in any significant fashion until after Arcite has evinced them and died. His kindred is high, but Theban. His behavior toward Arcite as rival in love is aggressive, malicious, and uncompromising when he confronts Arcite in the grove then snitches on them both to Theseus. But once that rivalry is eliminated, Palamon grieves for Arcite with honor. He becomes “gentil Palamon” (3077) to Theseus also by the time Theseus arranges his marriage, then serves Emelye “gentilly” (3104) with a love finally free of “jalousie” (3106) and aggression. In his death scene, Arcite begins to see Palamon in terms derived from his own positive example; after Arcite’s death, Palamon begins to behave as if the implicit equivalence with Arcite were valid.

Finally, Arcite’s complete assimilation into Athenian society at his funeral facilitates a similar assimilation of the surviving Palamon. Even when accepting the two Thebans as

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Boethian emphasis on determinism, also lends the term here a nuance of liberty. Cf. Chaucer’s *Boece* 5pr3-4. The Aristotelian virtue of generosity is *liberalità* in the Italian.
prisoners within the walls of Athens, then enclosing their violence within the stricture of a
tournament, Theseus and Athens could never quite contain them in Athenian order. But once
Arcite is dead, free of his Theban destiny, Theseus too is free to dress Arcite’s compliant body
and parade him through the streets like an Athenian noble and warrior, right down to giving him
arms (2891).\textsuperscript{71} Theseus has thoroughly domesticated the spectacle he once had feared: an armed
Theban in Athens. As the grief for Arcite faded and the political realities of the situation
intervened, not by accident did the Athenian parliament seek a more tangible assimilation
of
Thebes. Now they had seen it could be done, the best of Thebes made thoroughly Athenian as if
he had been born to it. The marriage between Palamon and Emelye therefore took place entirely
under their auspices: “Bitwixen hem was maad anon the bond / That highte matrimoine or
marriage, / By al the conseil and the baronage” (3094-96).

Arcite’s death created this potential narrative energy where none had earlier existed. The
death accomplished nothing on its own, but it propped the door open for future resolution. Since
the death occurred within the systems of polytheism, Athens, and Thebes, but with a narrative
logic from outside them, the event is impossible for them to read. Paradoxically, an inexplicable
phenomenon demands appropriate action.

Theseus reads the death incorrectly but successfully in his First Mover speech. His onus
is to understand it enough to harness it for the benefit of Athens. Using the naturalistic and
vaguely monotheistic concepts available to him, he concocts an explanation of the event

\textsuperscript{71} Fowler, “The Afterlife of the Civil Dead: Conquest in the Knight’s Tale,” \textit{Critical Essays on Geoffrey Chaucer},
plausible enough to motivate action. It almost does not matter what reading he gives the death; what matters is that he sees to the practical heart of the issue: Palamon can now marry Emelye with no imaginable malign consequences. Theseus’s ill-digested philosophical ruminations are enough to give that marriage an excuse. In this way, his speech is certainly pragmatic, the emphasis less on its content than its consequences. But it is important that his speech take this form: contextualizing the event within a universal history, close-reading the detail that death occurred at the peak of Arcite’s glory. The platitudes with which Egeus consoled Theseus after Arcite’s death—“Right so ther lyvede never man . . . // in al this world, that som tyme he ne deyde” (2845-46)—opened the consolatory resources of history and memory. Theseus here models a reading of the past unashamedly for the service of the present. If his reading is partial because he lacks all the facts necessary to construct a definitive answer, all such readings are and have always been. As Robert Edwards has argued, “Chaucer does not impose a Boethian resolution so much as rearrange the various perspectives on choice and action that Boccaccio had already offered into a coherent perspective. Moreover, the view he finally sets out in Theseus’s First Mover speech comes at the end of a process that reproduces the partial understandings

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72 Thus Robert R. Edwards, Chaucer and Boccaccio, p. 43: “Theseus’s speech aims at no more than claiming a territory in which the direction of the will can be a meaningful human act, even in the face of providence, destiny, and Fortune.”

73 Aers, p. 186, sees Egeus’s platitudes as exemplifying “marked intellectual and emotional debility.” But in the classical consolatory tradition Egeus invokes (using material derived from Teseo’s speech in the Teseida), that cyclical history generates platitudes about the inevitability of death is precisely the point. Platitudes are true because what they describe is true enough to reach the status of convention or cliché. See Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 80-82.
characters achieve in the story.” The high point of consolatory “sentence” this tale offers is radically perspectival and thus incomplete. The Augustinian emphasis on multiplicity and partiality of human interpretation could have taught him that.75

Because Theseus’s rhetorical and legislative power is finally so derivative of prior events, responsive not proactive, he is less a providential figure than a figure of the author who works with the material given him by the past. In this tale we find Chaucer not in the harried, overzealous, and self-conscious narrator-Knight but in the gently ironised Theseus who has come to learn his own limitations and to presume no more than a mission to provoke right action. Theseus’s narrative of philosophical enlightenment is already contextualized and chastened by an Augustinian narrative. Chaucer has him not transcend events but interpret them and, by interpreting, generate new ones.

The Knight’s Tale ends in Palamon’s wedded bliss, what Theseus had created: derivative, belated, perfunctorily described. According to the generic expectations of romance, a successful consummation of desire should close a story satisfactorily. The Teseida ends with a furious celebratory exuberance. The marriage’s seven-fold consummation on the wedding night underscores the satisfactorily decisive romance closure (12.77). The afterglow of that wild night lingered throughout a feast of fifteen days during which other nobles could share the erotic joy through secondhand account (12.79-80). Chaucer instead leadens the mirth of his source with

74 Edwards, Chaucer and Boccaccio, p. 39.

75 Conf 13.23-27 and DDC 3.27emphasize the inevitable multiplicity of figurative interpretations, which Augustine sees as positive: the more valid interpretations the better! To him culture partially relativizes interpretation: the eternal divine word not only will but should take on different forms in different contexts (DDC 3.12-22, Conf 13.27, Letters 102 and 138). Chaucer’s view on the epistemological reliability of language is similarly bleak; see Fyler, pp. 145-88.
political and philosophical matter (most notably Theseus’s speech) and dismisses the wedding festivities in a terse couplet: “thus with alle blisse and melodye / Hath Palamon ywedded Emelye” (3097-98). The happy couple is shunted out of the tale almost as soon as they are introduced, making its ending seem forced, abrupt, facile, and curiously muted.

Yet it properly completes a formal pattern exchanging Arcite for Palamon.\textsuperscript{76} Not only does Palamon’s marriage correspond to Theseus’s marriage to Ypolita at the beginning of the tale, but Palamon, not Arcite, was first to love Emelye. If Boccaccio’s \textit{Teseida} focuses on Arcite more than Palamon,\textsuperscript{77} to the extent of having Arcite love Emelye first, Chaucer’s revision renders Palamon prior in chronology at least. From this perspective a central narrative problem in the \textit{Knight’s Tale} is the elimination of Arcite as obstacle to Palamon’s love for Emelye. But Arcite entirely usurps the narrative momentum from Palamon by winning the tournament. Palamon’s wedding scavenges Arcite’s remnants: affianced bride and Athenian good will. Thus Palamon is both prior and subsequent, Arcite belated and penultimate. At the end of the tale, this chiastic structure closes.

Generally seen as alike in nearly every attribute that matters, what distinguishes Arcite from Palamon is their location in time. By preceding and surviving him, Palamon surrounds and contextualizes Arcite the lover. Arcite became a lover because Palamon did first; Palamon became a successful lover because Arcite had already won the role and relinquished it to him. In

\textsuperscript{76} For views of the marriage as insufficient closure to the tale, see Aers, p. 194; Anne Payne, p. 255; Leicester, pp. 375-76. Even Helen Cooper, \textit{The Structure of the Canterbury Tales} (London: Duckworth, 1983), who reads the ending as a Christian analogy, admits, “it is hard to reconcile the ending fully with what has gone before” (p. 105). Patterson, \textit{Chaucer}, p. 209, sees all the structural repetitions as undermining the sense of progress. This misses the typological point; progress occurs by means of subtly differentiated repetition.

\textsuperscript{77} Boitani, \textit{Chaucer and Boccaccio}, p. 48.
this complex pattern of repetition Arcite is the center that effects change, Palamon the continuity on which effect is registered. Because they are nearly interchangeable, change in one easily transfers to the other. Belated in love, Arcite is antitype to Palamon’s type; belated in success, Palamon is antitype to Arcite’s type.

In this scheme, Arcite’s position is that of climax, Palamon’s that of prefiguration and retrospective posthistory. Palamon needed Arcite to break the destructive Theban pattern; Arcite needed Palamon to give his suffering continued meaning by performing the function death had denied to him. Palamon will become the lover of Emelye Arcite could not be, and he will do so from the position of gentility and lack of jealousy Arcite had won. In short, Arcite is the solution to the problem Palamon first broaches. Palamon lives out the implications of that solution.

In a variety of ways, Chaucer minimizes Palamon’s resolution, showing that he is merely borrowing Arcite’s narrative energy, diminished. Chaucer gives neither Palamon nor Emelye a voice at the end. He omits the Teseida’s verbal portrait of Emelye as beautiful bride, the joyous nuptials, and the seven-fold consummation. Theseus’s recommendation to make virtue of necessity is not triumphant but resigned. This marriage is the best he can do, not the best he can imagine. Arcite’s glory will always haunt Palamon’s bliss, keep it secondary. The immediate cause of the marriage is not love but political expediency: the Athenian determination to draw Thebes finally under its aegis. But the most important diminution is delay. In another important revision of the Teseida, Chaucer’s Palamon does not marry Emelye “many days” (12.2) after Arcite’s death, but waits for years. Mourning for Arcite passes through “process” and a “lengthe

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78 Curtius, pp. 89-91, argues that poetry cannot end with recapitulation of argument, the default ending of a classical oration. Without the guidance of rhetorical convention, medieval poetry tends to end abruptly, generally in weariness expressed or unexpressed. This explanation does not account for endings that continue well past a clear narrative climax. It does, however, establish weariness as a topos of conclusion.
of certeyn yeres” (2967), gradually losing urgency. There is no sense of καιρός, of seizing the opportune moment, when Palamon and Emelye marry. It is not a decisive action to redeem a recent tragedy. Instead Theseus must work up vigor from an indifferent woman and a distracted man in order to move them toward bliss after the titanic energy of the funeral had spent them into a slowly subsiding grief. Arcite’s death and funeral do end the story. Whatever claim the final marriage has to a part in the tale’s closure is strictly derivative of that earlier ending.

Thus the problem of resolution for the Knight’s Tale is the problem of Augustinian narrative: what to do once narrative has ended but time continues. The Confessiones peters into analysis of Augustine’s present state and a disquisition on memory. De Civitate Dei leaves the coming of Christ behind when complaining of an unsatisfactory nunc. The entire Christian life and Christian era are backlit by climactic events that drain them of narrative momentum.

Transposing this posthistorical form to an even more epistemologically compromised era of pagan history, Chaucer makes his revelatory climax, the guarantor of great cycle-rupturing news, seem to be the worst news possible to horrified onlookers whose pagan explanatory systems shut down at that very point. The event that delivered the content of their consolation they saw as the one requiring it. Philosophy operating from this premise proved ineffective to console. The only thing that really worked was decisive, imitative action, filling the role now vacant by the glorious, repeating in a minor key the consequence of a narrative already complete.

This imitative action matches the Augustinian solution for what to do: perform the duties and desires of love between individuals within an interminable saeculum. Theseus and the Athenian parliament may see the ending as satisfactory chiefly from a political standpoint, but neither Palamon nor the narrator agrees. Athens validates the marriage but disappears from the married life of the final lines, during which Palamon clearly has neither Athens nor Thebes on
his mind. Unrivaled by other loves (even that of Thebes) that could force it into a disordered proportion, his love is free to be tender, gentil, untroubled, utterly safe from obstacles. Chaucer, more than Augustine, is interested in the extent to which happiness is possible in the interim on earth. He finds it in the simultaneity of political and personal ends, but perhaps more importantly, the subordination of political ends to serve the personal. As the tale closes, the virtue and welfare of the self, not the polis, is in focus.

What requires consolation in the *Knight’s Tale* is not so much the death of Arcite as the demolition of all explanatory and causal systems martial and erotic institutions perpetuate. What effects consolation is the freedom for an individual to act with moral if not epistemological clarity, to do what ought to be done but could not have been done before. The elimination of rival loves was not a practical solution for the moral conundrums of fourteenth-century chivalric England that Chaucer implicitly addressed. The *Knight’s Tale* is not advice. It does, however, reiterate a consolatory narrative form: a posthistory following a sharp climactic break in the narrative. And through its almost obsessive repetitive patterning it implies that the key to present consolation lies in past prefiguration, that meaning inheres in context, that performative

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80 Elizabeth B. Edwards, “Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and the Work of Mourning,” *Exemplaria* 20 (2008), p. 381, believing that Theseus’s generalized speech is the primary consolation the tale offers, sees that consolation as depending on “the annihilation of the perspective of the singular.” Because its final event is the appropriate fulfillment of Palamon’s long-cherished desire, I am arguing that the tale ends exactly in the perspective of the singular.

81 See Robert Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio*, pp. 39–43, for the ways in which Chaucer affirms the moral and ethical value of choice despite inevitably partial human understanding.
interpretation is the best way to understand.\textsuperscript{82} Recursiveness has been redeemed, no longer the trap for Thebans but the mode of their escape, after the example of the Hebrews and Christians.\textsuperscript{83}

The \textit{Knight’s Tale} describes the destabilization of a hierarchical, martial society, a pattern from ancient pagan history recurring in Chaucer’s England and necessitating consolation. To challenge its strictly political competitors, Augustinian figural narrative must chase them into the pagan past whence they derive, meet them on their own civic ground. But after Athenian and Boethian narratives fail to stabilize the tale and the Theban narrative fails to destabilize it, the marriage of Palamon and Emelye introduces into the tale a retrospective, muted, Augustinian temporality, imitative of the climax Theseus had intended (the marriage between Arcite and Emelye). The only narrative answer the tale gives to its cosmic and political questions of theodicy is temporal, temporary, but genuinely realised love and community between two individuals freed to arrive there by the good death of another.

In the end, then, is the \textit{Knight’s Tale} a successful \textit{secular} consolation? It does take place entirely in a secular sphere, and is meant to be replicated in the secular polis of Chaucer’s own day. Its language is carefully pre-Christian; even Theseus’s incipient monotheism describes

\textsuperscript{82} Howard, p. 88, notes a bivalence of past and present of Chaucer’s Knight in: “Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye; / And God save al this faire compaignye!” (3107-08). “Compaignye” could refer to the characters in the story, the pilgrim audience of the Knight, or both. Earlier lines of a similarly bivalent reference are “And God, that al this wyde world hath wroght, / Sende hym his love that hath it deere aboght” (3099-100). At least we can say that the ending draws past and present into analogue.

\textsuperscript{83} Repetition is the mode of consolation in the Psalms, which repeat the same narrative refrain: God was faithful during these crucial events in Israel’s history, and will be faithful again, though it may appear presently that he is absent. And it is the mode of redemption in both Christian typological and sacramental traditions: the incarnate Christ was present to fulfill what came before, and he is present now in the Eucharist to save.
nothing more than a pagan Neoplatonic God. Yet the narrative logic is providential, taking the form of unexpected grace by means of suffering. This paganism is, like Augustine’s, permeable by Christian narrative form. The *Knight’s Tale* is successfully interim, secular, provisional. It is a secular space, but not a closed system.

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84 Augustine’s Romulus (*DCD* 5.17) and Vergil (*DCD* 10.27, 18.23) prefigure Christ.
Chapter Five: The Tower and the Turks: More’s Meditative Consolation

Thomas More’s *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (written in 1534) stands at the end of the Augustinian medieval consolatory tradition. In the Tower of London, awaiting sentencing for his refusal to acknowledge Henry VIII as head of the English church, More thought both his personal and ecclesial situations looked bleak. He was about to die; Protestants were about to seal their conquest of England. He resists closure by leaching meaning from those sure events like Augustine, like *De Civitate Dei*’s response to the fall of Christian Rome.

Consolation was what the Protestant Reformation finally demanded of More. After his colossal polemical works such as *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523), *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), and *The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer* (1532-33), once more heresy drove him into the breach. More had to console himself, because his imminent death promised severe physical pain. He had to console his family, who could not understand his refusal to swear an oath acknowledging Henry as head of the English church. He had to console his fellow Catholics whose hope that England would return to the Catholic fold was fading with its champions, himself and Bishop John Fisher.

More’s personal plight seems strikingly similar to that of Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*. Like Boethius, More writes a dialogue during a last imprisonment before a political execution, preoccupied by finding comfort or consolation within a dire situation he feels he does not merit. But, despite the natural affinities of their circumstances and his own evident regard for the *Consolation of Philosophy*, More drew on the Boethian consolatory tradition hardly at all.1 A certain abstract resemblance inheres in the book’s dialogue structure: an authoritative

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teacher provides therapeutic instruction for a mendicant facing crisis. But More explicitly calls a consolation of philosophy insufficient almost immediately. He uses instead the consolatory resources of faith: “We shall therfor neyther fully receve those philosophers resons in this matter / nor yet vtterly refuse them/ but vsying them in such order / as shall beseme them / the principall & the effectuall medisyns against these diseases of trybulacion, shall we fetch from the high great & excelent phisicion,” that is, Jesus (11/13-17). As to Boethian or Neoplatonic

and More wrote home to his family school on 23 March 1521 that in Lent “auribus vestries occinere carmen illud optimum ac sanctissimum Boetii, quo docemini mentem simul in coelum ferre, ne animus belluarum vita pronus feratur in terram corpore celsius leuato” (“that beautiful and holy poem of Boethius keeps singing in your ears, teaching you to raise your mind also to heaven, lest the soul look downwards to the earth, after the manner of brutes, while the body is raised aloft”). The Latin is from Elizabeth Frances Rogers, ed. The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), pp. 250-51; the translation is Martz’s.

See K. J. Wilson, Incomplete Fictions: The Formation of English Renaissance Dialogue (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1985), p. 160, for the link of “therapeutic conversation,” and A. D. Cousins, “Role-Play and Self-Portrayal in Thomas More’s A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation,” Christianity and Literature 52.4 (2003), pp. 462-64, for a discussion of Antony as Boethian teacher, although Cousins concludes that Antony’s situation is more like Augustine’s in De Doctrina Christiana, accommodating divine truth to the reader (468n.12). The problem with considering the Dialogue a Boethian dialogue, as Cousins also notes, is that More, who needs comfort, resembles not Vincent but Antony the authoritative teacher and comforter—elderly, about to die. Unlike Lady Philosophy in Boethius’s Consolation, no speaker in More’s Dialogue comes from outside the system of suffering.


All citations of the Dialogue are taken from the Yale edition. The first number in each citation is the page number, the second the line number.
consolation specifically, More predicates his climactic book III on the failure of dualism to console. Escape from bodily and temporal circumstances is impossible short of suicide (which he explicitly condemns in book II). Refreshingly, he insists over and over that pain really hurts, and that someone like himself, or even Jesus, who knows he is going to suffer has no choice but to think about it, to dread it.

More finds his consolation within the structures of time and narrative, opting for an Augustinian alignment of individual and sacred history. He writes a figural dialogue, veiling a description of his personal dilemma and prognosis thinly but completely in the guise of sacred history. No criticism has yet identified the dialogue as figural or the consolation as Augustinian. The dialogue consists of two Christian Hungarians, the elderly sage Antony and his respectful auditor and nephew Vincent, who together discuss an imminent invasion of Muslim Turks. This Hungarian predicament stands for the peril of wider Christendom, including England, threatened by analogously satanic forces of Islam and Protestant heresy. But it also stands for More’s own haplessness to save himself from Henry VIII’s overwhelming political and religious power. The Great Turk whose threat cows Antony and Vincent throughout the Dialogue recalls both the devil and the Henry who bedevils More. For Augustine, an autobiography and a sacred history

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share the same shape. For More they fuse. He speaks of the one not alongside but in terms of the other. In discovering this public, sacred historic role for his private self to play, More once again indulges his lifelong penchant for performance, coyly revealing his private self from a distance (between London and Hungary, between 1527-8 and 1534). 7

Unlike the other authors in this dissertation, More uses figural narrative to create a strong sense of an ending. He situates the Dialogue in Hungary during 1527 or 1528, between the two Turkish invasions of 1526 and 1529. The first invasion resulted in the catastrophic battle of Mohács, in which the Turks killed Hungary’s Christian king but afterward withdrew. The second invasion sealed much of Hungary as a Turkish puppet state and threatened wider Christendom by besieging Vienna. 8 The Turks had defeated Hungary but had not yet claimed it;

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7 Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 11-73, influentially argues that More enjoys the ephemerality of political performance but longs to dissolve his private, tortured self into a public role in which he can believe (e.g., martyr for the church after Christ’s example). Cousins, pp. 457-70, further discusses More’s role-playing through imitatio Christi. Ackroyd, pp. 52, 90, explores this principle of role-playing in More’s early life and writings. John Guy, Thomas More, Reputations (London: Arnold, 2000), faults More, Erasmus, and all subsequent biographers for irretrievably hiding More’s true self (whatever it was) behind carefully wrought personae and encomia. Seth Lerer, Courly Letters in the Age of Henry VIII: Literary Culture and the Arts of Deceit, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 18 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), examines the rise of a literary private self (voyeuristic, transgressive, secret) within and in tension with the court of Henry VIII, noted for its emphasis on dramatic performance by king and courtiers.

8 For a background on the Turkish threat to Hungary and Christendom, and More’s sustained and frequent interest in it during his later political career, see Manley, pp. cxxii-cxxxv.
the Hungarians knew that claim was coming and could only wait. In 1534 More remembers that the Turks did return in 1529, as Antony and Vincent feared. This retrospective setting permits More to explore the future-haunted interval just before an inescapable negative apocalypse and to remove the possibility that narrative consolation will involve a happy ending for himself or for “the common corps of Christendom” he served and loved. That More composes this work not merely for himself but for his family and for fellow Catholics also means that his intended consolation had to survive his own death, just as the text of this dialogue supposedly survives the collapse of Christian Hungary.

More’s position is perhaps the most desperate of any we have seen. He knows that he is about to die but also suspects that the medieval narrative of Catholic history that had consoled so many others even in its shapelessness may soon dissolve. To the medieval Augustinian project of remembering backward, More adds dreading forward. This additional emphasis on the future indicates a slight influence from the Reformation, oriented toward the future in its struggle for realized eschatology. To preserve his faith and to pre-empt despair, More identifies himself and his Christendom with Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, preparing for an agonizing death. He resists the certain closure of narratives precious to him via a double retrospect: the proleptic knowledge of imminent disaster but its recontextualization in a wider narrative that More

9 Antony mentions two potential Christian leaders of Hungary “that strive wherther of them both shall raygne vpon vs, & ech of thm calleth hym selfe kyng . . . the tone is you wote well to farre from our quarter here to help vs in this behalfe / And the tother while he loketh for the Turkes ayd / either will not or I wene well dare not / fynd any faute with them that favour the Turke & his sect” (195.15-21). The first is Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, who invaded Hungary in 1527 to crown himself king. The other is John Zapolya, who although Christian allied himself with the invading Turk Suleiman and would be crowned king of Hungary in 1529 as Suleiman’s vassal. See also 8.3.
believes to exist but cannot imagine. In face of this inscrutability, all that remains is More’s historical death, with figural, thus performative, significance.

Abelard, Langland, and Chaucer have shown that medieval consolatory narrative emerges when an author conceives of himself as absent or exiled from divine help. Abelard has moved away from the Paraclete abbey; Long Will has watched Grace and Piers move away from him; the gods abuse not abet Chaucer’s Athenians and Thebans. A book More read attentively—Thomas á Kempis’s enormously influential devotional work *The Imitation of Christ* (c.1418)—follows suit, devoting its entire third book to consolation. Its treatment makes clear that God may withdraw his consolation from the Christian (2.9.4, 2.12.4, 3.52.1, 4.11.3) or at least manifest it in varying degrees (3.7.2, 3.49.4). The presence of consolation is tenuous; when it is gone, a sufferer must find ways to make comfort out of the material of tribulation, using the resources of faith, hope, and humility (2.9.4, 2.12.4, 2.12.8, 3.47.4).

For More, on the other hand, consolation is necessary not when divine help is absent but when it is hidden, imperceptible. Consolation is the solution to a hermeneutic problem. Divine help is never absent: “Yf ye be part of his floke, & beleve his promyse: how can ye be comfortles in any trybulacion / when christ & his holy spryte, & with them their vnseparable father, yf you put full trust & confidens in them / be neuer one finger brede of space, nor one mynute of tyme from you” (5/8-13). No space or time can possibly open between the Christian and a God who is radically present for that Christian always. But the *Dialogue* also charts the ubiquity of evil. The problem in a time like More’s or 1528 Hungary’s, in an age of persecution, is that the

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workings of evil come out into the open, visible as the “noonday.” What the devil does in persecution is plain; how Catholics are to derive comfort is not plain, because what God is doing is not so plain. God is easier to ignore or misread than the devil, or the pain the devil brings. A person cannot avoid paying attention to pain. But to that pain More recommends adding hermeneutical attention paid to Christ. Only when properly employing the imagination through meditation on Christ’s suffering example can More find the figural consolation that contextualizes the grievous closures he sees ahead.

The Individual in Terms of Sacred History

The Dialogue obviously has multiple reference. Although its protagonists Antony and Vincent are fictional, it has a literal setting: Hungary just before Suleiman’s second invasion. But applicability to More’s personal situation is immediately obvious. He, too, awaits violence from a religiously heterodox oppressor (or so he might define Henry VIII). Furthermore, the Turkish threat to Hungary evokes the Protestant threat to Catholicism. Hungary’s fall to Suleiman forced a considerable chink in Christendom’s defenses. But should England or Germany capitulate to Protestantism, Catholic Christendom would take a similar wound. Then the final chapter of the Dialogue reveals the Turk to be an example of the devil’s favorite show of force: persecution. Despite these specific applications, however, the Dialogue clearly aspires to be a complete anatomy of tribulation, in which sufferers can find comfort for any predicament. The literal Hungarian scenario is at once apocalyptic and universal, appropriate to the man at the end of all things and every man.

Critics have had considerable difficulty finding precise and adequate terms for this strategy of multiple reference. The first and dominant tendency identifies a fairly rigid allegory centered on the figure of the Grand Turk. More’s sixteenth-century biographers, Nicholas
Harpsfield and Thomas Stapleton, see the Turks strictly as an allegory of Protestants overthrowing English Catholicism. Leland Miles, the first literary critic in the twentieth century to analyze the *Dialogue* in detail, agrees, calling the Grand Turk “an allegorical smokescreen” enabling More to denounce Henry VIII and comfort those Catholics Henry oppressed. Disdaining the attribution of “any elaborate and carefully thought out scheme” to More’s *Dialogue*, Miles nevertheless assigns further roles in the allegory: the Hungarians stand for English Catholics, the Turkish army stands for Protestants aligned with Henry, the Hungarian converts to Islam stand for Catholics who swear Henry’s oath anyway, “Uncle Anthony is a thin allegorical disguise for More himself,” and Vincent may stand for More’s favorite child Margaret Roper. More’s most provocative and polemical twentieth-century biographer, Richard Marius, allegorically equates Turks with Protestants while arguing that the *Dialogue* continues More’s obsessive opposition to heresy. K. J. Wilson finds up to four levels of reference in the *Dialogue*—“the historical danger in Hungary, the religious upheaval in England,

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More’s personal strait, and the tribulations of all Christians”\textsuperscript{15}—but these do not correspond to four-fold medieval allegorical schemes.

Other more sophisticated interpretations note that the \textit{Dialogue} progressively broadens its reference in the direction of the universal. According to Romuald I. Lakowski, the Grand Turk is literally historical, metaphorically Protestant, and “symbolically all the forces of chaos.”\textsuperscript{16} Judith P. Jones describes the Turk’s allegorical referent as oscillating between Henry VIII and Lutherans until he becomes a universal archetype.\textsuperscript{17} In his introduction to the Yale edition of the \textit{Dialogue}, Frank Manley provides the best critical elucidation thus far: because Protestants and Turks are both symptoms of the evil within and outside humanity, “masks—agents or representatives—of a more ancient power of evil,” Protestant, Turk, the individual conscience, and the devil all share a natural unity, overlapping identities.\textsuperscript{18}

Metonymy or figura might be better names for this intrinsic relation: the literal participating in the universal. A superstructure of allegorical meaning for the Turks would clutter the obvious and rigid tropological classification the \textit{Dialogue} does accomplish. Most of book II and all of book III organize temptations into the four categories of Psalm 90.5-6:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Scuto circumdabit te veritas eius / non timebis a timore nocturno / a sagitta volante in die, a negocio perambulate in tenebris, ab incursu & demonio meridiano:} The trouth of god shall compasse the about with a pavice, thow shalt not be aferd of the nightes feare, nor of the arrow fleyng in the day, nor of the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} p. 146.
\textsuperscript{16} p. 219.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Thomas More}, Twayne’s English Authors Series 247 (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), pp. 122-23.
\textsuperscript{18} Manley, cxxxiv.
bysynes walkyng about in the darknesses / nor of the incursion or invacion of the devil in the mydde day. (105.17-23)

For the night’s fear, read a temptation to impatience (107); for the arrow flying in the day, a temptation to lofty but impermanent ascents of pride (157); for the business of the darkness, a temptation to wealth and the things of this world (167). Persecuting Turks constitute only the fourth climactic category, the midday devil. Every time Vincent wants to bring them up earlier, Antony tells him to save them for the end.¹⁹ Within the interpretive parameters of the work, the Turks exemplify a universal temptation that demands an appropriate response from the Catholic Christian. Unlike the first three categories that do not attach to particular moments in Christian history or a Christian life, however, persecution does not happen all the time, or just anytime. It is a historical category. The midday devil, the persecuting Turk, both is a general ahistorical category of temptation and participates in a series of finite, particular historical phenomena. The fates that threaten—dead More, Islamic Hungary, and Protestant England—are all instances of the same kind, versions of the same experience. The particular historical phenomena participate in the general ahistorical category. Yet a particular moment in history, Christ’s passion, determined and defined how Christians ought to respond to persecution. Defining a series of historical events by a climactic one in the past (or future) is a figural, not allegorical, mode of interpretation. Comfort from the midday devil looks backward to see and reperform how Christ lived up to and through a similar encounter.

¹⁹ Miles, “ Literary Artistry,” pp. 11-12, argues that More’s foreshadowing but delaying a discussion of physical suffering skillfully increases tension throughout the Dialogue, making it “like a lengthy piece of adhesive tape pulled slowly off the skin” (12).
The literal level of the *Dialogue* contains only one external event. It takes the shape of a warning. As book III begins, Vincent hears that a Turkish army has begun to assemble, and he promptly tells his uncle (188). Fear of that possibility had caused Vincent to ask Antony to console him in the first place. Now what he feared has finally come, perhaps. Christendom does not yet know where the Turks will strike: Naples, Sicily, or Hungary. At first Antony, too, hedges. Sometimes people send “farced” letters about the Turks for their own purposes; sometimes Turks force troop movements to keep their troops lively; sometimes obvious military maneuvers feint away from true targets. Then, even with all those qualifications, Antony lowers the boom: “Howbeit full likely Cosyn it is of very truth, that into this realme of Hungary he will not fayle to come / for neyther is there any countrey thorow Christendome that lieth for hym so mete / nor neuer was there any tyme till now in which he might so well & surely wynne it” (189/8-12). The *Dialogue* from here on out assumes Turkish invasion.

Thus the space in which the book III discussion of persecution unfolds contains certainty (we know the Turks are coming), ambiguity (we do not know when they are coming), and deferral (they are mobilizing their forces, not coming yet). Antony and Vincent must live in a gap of time bounded by clear borders but unstructured between those borders, an internally shapeless eddy of waiting. The essential facts of the situation are clear and dismal. Interpretation has closed. Hungary will fall to the Turks. What remains unclear and even malleable is what shape Hungarian experience will take in the agonizing interim, occupied not with remembered experience but with uncertain imagination of the certain future. As More and his audience know from their perspective, years later, Antony and Vincent have not long to wait. They had better learn quickly how to find comfort.
To an English Catholic like More, the Turkish conquest of Hungary carries similar certainty and deferral. Hungary is a natural choice as his literal setting because of its strategic synecdochic location. The *Dialogue* imagines that both Turks and Christians think of battles on the Eastern front as blows against their adversary religion. The Turk’s conquest of the city of Rhodes “he countith as a victory agaynst the hole corps of Cristendome” (8.7-8). Hungary is an even more important site; Antony acknowledges that “out of dout yf Hungary be lost, & that the Turke haue it ones fast in his possession / he shall ere yt be long after, haue an open redy way into almost the remenaunt of all christendome, though he wynne it not all in a weke / the greate part wilbe wonne after I fere me within very few yeres” (193.7-11). As a Privy Council member during Suleiman’s 1526 invasion of Hungary and victory at the Battle of Mohacs, More had access to political dispatches from the region and could recognize its military importance.

Thus the aptness of Hungary as a literal level for the *Dialogue* rises in part because it represents the whole corps of Christendom figuratively. A blow to Hungary is a blow to every part of Christian Europe. More hoped that European Christians could unite not merely around doctrine but against their common Turkish enemy.20 He truly feared the Turks. One of his early complaints against Henry VIII was that Henry did not pay the Turkish threat enough attention when preoccupied with the merely personal matter of his marriages.21 Alone with his own person, More jotted notes about the Turkish threat in the margins of his prison psalter.22

20 Franklin L. Baumer, “England, the Turk, and the Common Corps of Christendom,” *The American Historical Review* 50 (1944), pp. 26-48, traces the history of “the solidarity of Christian Europe as against the Turk (p. 26) from its medieval origins to its unexpectedly late demise around 1700 when Christian Europe finally accepted the Turks as an equal European power. Henry VIII pushed for a league of Christian princes against the Turks as late as 1544, well after he broke from Catholicism (pp. 42-43)

21 Ackroyd, p. 314.
In the *Dialogue*, the literal meaning of Hungary is as inextricable from its wider context of Christendom as microcosm is from macrocosm. The prologue to book I demonstrates the permeability between microcosm and macrocosm and helps to set parameters by which to interpret the rest of the book. Antony easily moves from individual instance to macrocosmic applicability. He identifies an unchristian style of comforting “not here in hungery onely, but almost in all places of christendome” (4.8-9), a natural movement of thought. A return from sacred history to individual plight goes as smoothly: “A lytell before your comyng, as I dyvisid with my selfe vpon the Turkes comyng / yt happed my mynd to fall sodenly from that, into the dyvisyng vpon myn own departyng” (8.21-23). The death throes of Christendom and Antony’s personal death are not entirely similar—in fact, Antony cares more about the eternal destiny of his soul than about whatever a Turkish invasion might wreak bodily—but they belong in the same conversation because they are akin.

The figures of Antony and Vincent stand in for Thomas More, his family, and his fellow Catholics so easily because they are, in More’s fiction, all parts of a wider church macrocosm. Their identities, circumstances, and fates are similar because related. Much of the scholarship on the *Dialogue*, driven typically by hagiographical or iconoclastic impulses, searches for autobiographical truffles in the Hungarian fiction. Most agree that Dame Alice peeps from behind its every merry account of a shrew. Stephen Greenblatt believes so fimly that a pompous man (fishing for compliments after a speech) is Cardinal Wolsey that he begins his book on Renaissance self-fashioning with it. Leland Miles argues that the expository sections of the

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23 Greenblatt, pp. 11-13.
Dialogue are primarily auto-consolation, permitting More to grapple with his own temptation to suicide and fear of bodily pain and beheading.\(^{24}\) Certainly Antony the speaker, a frail man waiting for his sure death like “the snofe of a candell that burneth with in the candell styk nose” (85.20-21), resembles the ailing More in the Tower and consoles with a rate of success to which More aspires.\(^{25}\) Surely dying, Antony is not sure how long he has left (86.13), in an undefined period of waiting, like More.

Vincent’s situation recalls More’s family and friends who survive him, and More himself who needs to be consoled. As Vincent points out immediately, in an age of anxiety those who die quickly escape; those who survive need comfort the wise can provide. Before Antony can “leve of your kindred a sort of very comforts orphanes” (4.2), he ought to render his wisdom so that Vincent can record it for a soon-to-be-bereft posterity. Cut off in the Tower from his family, and soon to be cut off for good, More writes the Dialogue in part to guide his orphaned survivors who looked to him as their source of wisdom. All these characters, fictional and real, resemble each other like family because More sees a family resemblance in their situation. All are members of the same church. All share a passion for its defense and a fear that they will fail it and its God through weakness and despair.

So Antony, or Vincent, or the Grand Turk can represent one, or both, or many sides of an issue. The slipperiness of these fictional types and the referents they point to is the slipperiness


\(^{25}\) The text of his comfort, the Dialogue, was translated from Hungarian to Latin to French to English in less than a decade (or so claims the title page, in on the fiction).
of the Morean polemic and devotional self, a self in context of a church. Against the Donatists
and Pelagians, who believed that what Christians do in time could visibly damn or save them,
Augustine found himself in visible instantiations of an eternal and changeless church: in the
Eucharistic rite, in the recitation of a psalm, in the voicing and interpretation of words that had
been converted into text and thus out of time. Against the Protestants, who read the Scripture
timelessly as if it were addressed without context to their naïve hearts, More found himself in
terms of a church that had to be historical. Refusing to swear the Oath of Supremacy did not
assert the independence of More’s conscience but a conscience reflecting the consensus of “the
whole [or common] corps of Christendom,” More’s favorite description for the Catholic church.
More’s problem, what made his gesture look solitary, is that no one else in schismatic England
could see this common corps. Only More’s imagination could witness the contemporary
European consensus against Henry that he believed existed. His letters from the Tower—to no
one who supported his stance—repeatedly claim this general counsel, this common faith, as


From at least the time of Burckhardt the Renaissance has frequently been associated with
individualism. But, particularly in thinking about northern humanism, a stress on individualism
must be replaced with some notion of an individual and personal encounter with the impersonal,
represented by tradition, the church, and the state. . . . [More] embodies and lives out this kind of
humanism: in his late works the profoundly experienced personal element is subsumed within and
transcended by an ultimate emphasis upon universal Christian experience.

27 cf. Conf. 11.35, 38.

28 Greenblatt, p. 62.
evidence justifying it.\textsuperscript{29} Were that not enough, however, he appeals to “them that are dead before” and have left texts behind—in short, to the 1500-year tradition he thought Protestants sought to spurn and escape.\textsuperscript{30} To shore up the conscience of his self, he brought invisible resources from the entirety of Christian time.

What More the polemicist could use against heretics, More the comforter could use against tribulation. As in Hebrews 12.1, More imagines a cross-section of the church from across time rooting on the persecuted: “the glory of god, the Trynitie in his high meravelouse maiestie, our saviour in his glorious manhood sittyng on his Trone, with his Immaculate mother & all that gloriouse companye callyng vs there vnto them” (315/22.25). Grounded and vivified in the continuing divine presence, the past church comes alive to console a struggling present. One advantage of his Catholic faith More plies vigorously is its rich history called into service and support of the tempted and persecuted self.

\textbf{Stranded in Augustinian Time}

Most of book II and all of book III in More’s \textit{Dialogue} anatomize tribulation according to Psalm 90, particularly its four-fold categories as More interprets them: the night’s fear, or impatience; the arrow flying in the day, or pride; the business that walks about in the darkness, or worldly distraction; and the midday devil, or persecution. More makes no particular meaning out of the sequence. Even the psalm’s time references—night, day, night, day—do not give him a coherent chronological framework. Persecution as the midday devil still culminates More’s sequence, as in Augustine’s exposition of the psalm.\textsuperscript{31} Vincent’s request for comfort from the

\textsuperscript{29} Rogers, pp. 506, 525-26, 528, 558.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 528.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Enarr.} 90.1.6, although Augustine calls all four temptations persecutions and distinguishes the fourth one by its ferocity, or heat. Martz and Manley, ed., \textit{Dialogue}, p. 413, trace this tradition through Cassiodorus, Pseudo-Bede,
Turks instigated the dialogue, and Turkish persecution breaks through proleptically in the
discussion several times, always postponed. The whole dialogue pitches forward toward it.
Before and when it arrives, the midday devil feels like an end. Like the fall of Christian Rome in
Augustine’s *City of God*, however, it is an end unattached to a meaningful narrative, an end that
ends and means nothing. An event the Hungarians might otherwise think of as eschatological is
not even nightfall, but the middle of the day.\(^{32}\)

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32 Perpetuating the work’s cavalier attitude toward patterns of time, Antony determines to expound on the midday
demon after dinner, in the afternoon (165.27, 29). Compare Walter Hilton’s suggestion in *Qui Habitat* that the
temptations occur in consecutive stages of the Christian life. More certainly knew Walter Hilton’s *Scale of
Perfection* and possibly knew *Qui Habitat*, Hilton’s exposition of Psalm 90. In Hilton, the night’s fear haunts an
intimidated new believer, the arrow flying in the day aims for an overconfident believer whose developing
spirituality makes him prosperous, the business of the darkness distracts a diligent believer into the things of this
world, and the midday devil illuminates the mature believer with the subtly false light of the devil. See *An Exposition
of Qui Habitat* and *Bonum Est in English*, ed. Björn Wallner, Lund Studies in English 23 (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup;
Placing the Turkish invasion within a non-narrative structure denies it as eschatological. Its priority among the temptations of the *Dialogue* is merely logical. It hurts the most. It is when Antony and Vincent can see the devil clearest, when the devil makes his move. More in the *Dialogue* insists that the Turkish invasion of Christendom is not the end of the world. Mahomet will have a “foule fall” eventually; Christendom will flourish again (194.12-13, 206)—but, Antony and Vincent agree, probably not “in our dayes” (234.9). The Turks are no end, although the Hungarians will experience them as one, guaranteed.

Like Augustine’s Rome that falls, but meaninglessly, More’s Turkish invasion of Hungary does not have the meaning it looks as though it has. Alistair Fox traces More’s gradual disillusionment with a project of Christian political history. More’s lifelong project was an “attempt to discover the precise nature of the divine providence by which he believed the world must be ruled. . . . His whole doctrinal and intellectual position came to depend upon his view of universal history and the grand design of God.” The way humanists like Polydore Vergil rhetorically arranged history promised meaning through a careful structure, but when

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33 Alistair Fox, *Thomas More, History and Providence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 146, 199-222, reads More’s polemical diatribes as a desperate attempt to stave off an apocalypse he believed was imminent, but his devotional writings (particularly the *Dialogue*) as an identification of persecution as normative, not apocalyptic, element in church history.

34 Peter Iver Kaufman’s recent monograph on the similarities between Augustine’s and More’s political thought, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More*, sees both thinkers placing secondary value on the earthly polis, as if it did not carry essential meaning. Greenblatt, p. 15, declares that the political world was both absurd and opaque to More, clouding and not clarifying access to the absolute truth in which he believed so strongly.

35 Ibid., p. 5.

More tried to protect the Catholic tradition Christian history had achieved, he failed. His writings grew harsher and more frantic until in the Tower he came to realize that history was not linear but repetitive, reperforming through Christian suffering the archetype of Christ. This realization freed his style and authorial persona in the Tower works to become better, kinder.

More’s project in the *Dialogue* is to deny suffering the meaning it looks as though it has. If the signs of worldly events were plain, bad things would happen to bad people and good things to good. In book I Antony inverts this principle. Life on this earth is not a laughing time but a weeping time; people sow with tears now in order to reap joy in heaven (42). God scourges those whom he loves (43-44). Antony insists on this point so strongly that Vincent, rather comically, forces him to justify why good things sometimes happen to good people and bad things to bad (47/20-26). Eventually Antony must admit that “our lord giveth in this world, vnto euery sort of folke eyther sort of fortune” (48/7-8). Earthly prosperity or suffering, bad or good fortune, empties of direct moral causation and significance. Antony spends much of Book I cataloguing the various reasons why suffering may occur (its potential to return the sinner to God, its remission of earthly sin, its accumulation of merit, its friction between good intentions and temptation), but he presents them as an array of possibilities, not necessarily a path to exact diagnosis.

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37 Fox structures his *More* as this linear narrative, following More from aspiring through frustrated to fulfilled reader of history.

38 More’s polemical writings are notoriously vitriolic and scatological. Francis Atterbury in the eighteenth century is particularly quotable on the subject, calling them “the greatest heap of nasty language that perhaps was ever put together” and claiming that More has “the best knack of any man in Europe at calling bad names in good Latin” (qtd. in Sullivan, Moreana, 1, 23). Martz, *More*, p. 23, holds a minority view: that More’s abuse piled on Protestants is infamous not because it was unusually toxic or vindictive but because it was so wittily effective.
For More, decisive meaning forms at the end—of a chain of events, of the *Dialogue*, in heaven. A way to tell whether an action is good is to look at its fruit or end. The end of the *Dialogue*, its discussion of the prospective Turkish invasion, determines the beginning of the *Dialogue* and haunts its central sections. Antony wanders far from the Turkish subject matter that sparked the *Dialogue*, but never too far to return, and whether his comfort holds when the Turks finally overrun Hungary will make or break it. That it has supposedly been translated from Hungarian to Latin to French to English and finds its way to England five years after that 1529 invasion implies that the comfort held. Obviously, for More ultimate comfort resides in heaven, but heaven is beyond human understanding. People cannot imagine it: “those hevenly Ioyes, shall surmount above all the comfort that euer came in the mynd of any man lyvyng here vppon earth” (310/15-16). They desire so poorly that thoughts of it are not enough to comfort them, and merry tales must do instead (84).

While the end of the *Dialogue* comes eventually, apocalypse never does, and Antony makes sure to explain that he does not expect it anytime soon. For him the earth is neither in its ultimate resurgence nor its penultimate decay (193-94). Yet fervor has decayed from early church heat to “kay cold” (204-05, 242/24, 313/4). This decay does not anticipate the end in any special way, but it exists, is the state of affairs in Christian Europe.

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39 Fruitlessness is itself a closure. As Langland does in *Piers Plowman*, More condemns false closures like worldly goods (frequently), wanhope and impatience (14-15), suicide (122-57), and even dualistic philosophy’s contempt for the world (9-12) that illegitimately truncate the human condition of pilgrimage and waiting.

40 Vincent will slip and mention “the Turkes cruell incursion” (33/12) before Antony reminds him to wait till the end. Antony maps out the four-fold temptation, two-verse structure of the rest of the book at 105/11-16. A story about war with the Turks pops up on 109-11. Turks and Saracens appear as God’s enemies in 183/20-21.
Those agitating for progressive change More would call apostates or heretics. These days in Hungary “mens myndes harken after newelties, & haue their hartes hangyng vppon a chaunge (192/15-16); such an impulse leads them toward alliance with the Turks as agents of change. In his Dialogue Concerning Heresies, More points out that those he calls heretics seem to assume that the world is changing. One dead heretic left behind a sermon hopelessly Protestant but “redy to be preched as it semed yf the worlde wolde so chaunge that the tyme wolde serue it” (270). The man was so far ahead, so newfangled in his religion that the world would have to change before the sermon found a home. Yet the man wrote it as if in faith that that change would come. Elsewhere More conceives of this change as a willful pursuit of pleasure. He warns that if the world was changed to suit the pleasure of reformers, a stronger man would come along and take his pleasure at their expense; they wouldn’t like it much (DCH 405). This illegitimate passion for change uproots 1500 years of Christian history and tradition for the whim-to-pleasure of a moment, or such is More’s polemical refrain.

More’s figural reperformance at the end of book III reinfuses a ancient Catholic historiography with new narrative vitality. It rings interpretive changes on an old story, making it new, while deferring full assignation of meaning to the last judgment.

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43 Ibid., 257-58, argues that More conceives of scriptural revelation itself as evolving and progressing, because rhetorical and culturally contingent.
Protestants enough, More could draw from 1500 years of Christian history. He had stories and examples enough to repeat. But he needed to draw them from the past, because his present was undefined except through imitation of Christ’s passion, and his future (though not the world’s) seemed securely in the grip of devilish Turks like Henry.

**Imagining in an Age of Persecution**

Whereas in the first three temptations (of book II) the devil employs sleights of hand, secret dealings, and seductions, the fourth or “midday devil” is:

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this playne open persecution for the fayth / he cometh evyn in the very mydd day
/ that is to witt evyn vppon them that haue an high light of fayth shynyng in their
hart, & openly suffreth hym selfe so playnely be percevid by his fierce maliciouse
persecucion agaynst the faythfull christiens for hatrid of christes trew catholike
fayth / that no man havyng fayth, can doute what he is. (200/17-22)
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While More agrees with Augustine that the midday devil equals persecution, he interprets noon as light, not heat—epistemological clarity, not excruciating torment. The devil stops playing a role and lays down his disguises; his identity, “what he is,” is now obvious. This explication of the text reflects the sudden clarity that inaugurates book III: Antony and Vincent have just heard that the Turks are definitely mobilizing an army. Something bad for Christendom is obviously happening, and the faithful are watching.

This plainness and openness would seem to obviate the need for interpretation by the aid of the Spirit as refracted through the patristic and ecclesial tradition: the mechanism of More’s Catholic hermeneutical understanding. Even plain-reading Protestants could figure out such a perspicacious threat (perhaps why More was optimistic about a pan-Christian alliance against the
Unfortunately, the devil’s plain meaning cannot satisfy Antony and Vincent intellectually nor console them.

Reading for consolation from the clear bad news faces two challenges demanding a more sophisticated hermeneutic. In this time of persecution when the devil moves openly and clearly in the present, divine action of equivalent clarity resides only in the past: the incarnation and passion of Christ. It is hard work to read the present divinely. Fox proposes that one of More’s purposes in the Dialogue is to derive hope from the conditions that, read alternatively, produce despair. Antony advises, “if we consider yt well” (275/8-9), “let vs therfor consider & well way this thyng that we drede so sore” (282/26-27), and “yf a man wold well waye those wordes, & let them syncke as they shuld do downe depe into his hart” (303/23-24). This laborious hermeneutic procedure, meditation, exemplifies More’s and Augustine’s estimation of how difficult it can be to read well. Furthermore, the Hungarians (and More) await their perspicacious end in a gap of uncertain duration between a past example (Christ’s passion) and their future performance of that example (the violent death of persecution). The future of the Turks is sure; the Hungarians have a sure faith to match but require a preemptive comfort (12). The prospective sufferer cannot help but imagine imminent suffering. To find its double ground in past and future, the imagination must engage, distending with past, present, and future like the Augustinian present of the past, present of the present, and present of the future (Conf 11.26). Yet Antony knows how deceptive the imagination can be and proposes to discipline it through

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44 More, p. 228.

meditation. Book III constitutes a schoolroom for how to imagine truly and not falsely in the service of consolatory interpretation.

The trick is to read the certain, clear future in its proper context, but More acknowledges that pain is irreducible, difficult to contextualize. He early on announces, “Now the body not to fele that it feleth: all the wit in the world can not bryng about” (10/8-9) and has not changed his mind deep into book III: “Payne wilbe payneful spight of all the wit in this world. . . . no man can with all the reason he hath, in such wise chaunge the nature of payne, that in the havyng of payne he fele it not” (292/22, 292/24-293/1). Proffering a dualist contempt for pain as escape from pain into some impenetrable mental refuge simply does not work. The pain and humiliation of mortal persecution logically concludes More’s catalogue of temptations. It is the sharpest, “the last & vttermost poyn of the drede” (280/24), “the sore pinch”(281/10-11). The dread of it “woundeth vs to the hart & strikith our devocation ded” (205/6-7). More cannot advise avoiding it, because he himself cannot avoid it; he must give it its full weight. But since prospective sufferers cannot help thinking about it, they might as well imagine rightly (197-98), imagine it into a useful shape.

Thus book III, set entirely in “playne open persecusion,” ironically devotes itself to an epistemological or hermeneutic problem inherent not in knowledge but the knower. The data and a certain kind of (infernal) meaning are secure, plain, open, but the human faculty of imagination through which a divine consolatory meaning could emerge is insecure, vulnerable to an obsession with pain. Alongside More’s regimented anatomy of temptation lies a less systematic skeleton of epistemological folly through imagination or fantasy. Knowing that Turks are coming “there falleth so continually before the eyen of our hart, a fearefull imaginacion of this terryble thyng” (6/22-23). The “eyen of our hart” see in uncertain shapes the certain truth;
the fear these imaginative products generate unnecessarily assumes the worst (7/14-15), prompts the need for consolation, and is therefore primary motivation for the Dialogue itself (7/19-23).

Throughout the Dialogue, More defines and condemns various kinds of fantasy and imagination—“frantike fantasye” (143/28), “fond affeccion & fantasye” (210/5-6), the “fond fantasye of fame” (212/18), “worldly fantasies” (225/1, cf. 287/12), “wrong Imaginacion” (251/14), “a childish fantasye” (277/27), and “folish fantasies” (283/22)—particularly those kinds that lead toward fear. 46 Near the end of book III, however, he condemns two kinds of fantasy under which the rest could be subsumed: “our own” and “sophistical.” Fantasies are frantic, fond, worldly, wrong, childish, and foolish because they come from the human imaginative faculty as opposed to reality, and because they elaborate upon a truth that should appear simple. Imagination and reality work together in a consolatory project, but they work against each other in the throes of fear.

Horror is at least partially the distance between our own pain and our own fantasy on the basis of that pain, a distance that fantasy creates: “I am not so madd as to go about to prove that bodily payne were no payne / yet . . . a grreate parte of our horrour, groweth of our own fantasie / yf we wold call to mynd & consider the state & condicion of many other folke / in whose state &

46 Fantastical fear is one of Antony’s infernal trinity—“fantastall feare, false fayth, false flatteryng hope” (297/25-26)—that leads to apostasy. Fearful imagination and fantasy are a major part of temptation generally, and temptation accordingly diminishes to the extent that fear does (154/10-28). Fantasy can in fact shape conscience, “now drawyng yt narrow now strechyng it in bredth after the maner of a cheuerell poymt” (120/3-5), and cause suicide (122/18). The extended digression on suicide is—according to Paul D. Green, “Suicide, Martyrdom, and Thomas More,” Studies in the Renaissance 19 (1972), p. 143, “the first significant discussion of suicide in the English language”—chiefly explains how one might convince a prospective suicide of the folly into which his imagination has led him.
condicion we wold wish our selfe to stand” (256/6-7, 9-12). Pain itself (here the pain of being a prisoner) is undeniable but not necessarily horrifying. Seen properly, in fact, it becomes the basis of a community. As Antony goes on to argue, the entire world is a prison, and its every inhabitant a prisoner. The person whose fate seems least horrible (say, a king) still suffers curtailed liberty curtailed and a gradually dying body. That fact holds some intrinsic horror, but “our own” fantasy produces the rest when a prisoner of Henry (More) or the Turks (Antony or Vincent) falsely imagines himself in a qualitatively different predicament. In short, an exaggeration of horror, “an horrour enhauncid of our own fantasy” (277/4-5), arises when one of these prisoners through his own fantasy individuates himself from a common fate.

Comfort in this case would mean collapsing the distance between “our selfe” and the common weal, re-familiarizing what “our fantasy” has made strange: “the thing that I say Cosyn for our comfort therin ys, that our fantasy frameth vs a false opynion, by which we deceive our selfe and take yt for sorer than yt is / And that do we, by the reson that we take our selfe before for more fre than we be, & prisonment for a stranger thyng to vs than yt is in dede” (276/8-12). After he has explained that no human is free, and no imprisonment strange, Antony aligns a series of proportions: sorer, freer, stranger. The distance between a false and true assessment of human imprisonment is roughly how far or much a human self believes itself free. 47

47 In a jarring instance of making strange the familiar and making familiar the strange, Antony argues that of the selves in this worldwide prison God is the jailer. God is a good jailer, administering his incarcerated with justice and mercy. He does not have to guard them because they cannot escape, so lets them roam unchecked within those bounds. He judiciously and benevolently employs sicknesses as his torture instruments: a hot fever, a migraine, a quinsy, a palsy, the gout, the cramp in the shins, the crick in the back (274/20-275/3). Uncomfortably for a Christian prisoner, the self grown free is a self grown distant from God the good jailer.
Like the Augustinian self, the Morean self is better at desiring and willing than at knowing. The freedom to fantasize, or interpret, seems to be distinct in his mind from the freedom to act. Given a Catholic inch of freedom, the self may take a Protestant mile. In *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, More condemns Lutheran thought for its emphasis on irresistible predestination. Lutherans imagine that anything they do has been predestined by God; thus, actions are wholly unfree. They can do whatever they want—wed a nun, for instance—while claiming lack of responsibility and ultimate divine cause (pp. 398-402). That is, for More the heart of the Lutheran heresy is its fantasy of dependence that permits complete freedom of action. More believes that Catholics, knowing they are free to act, should seek to exercise that freedom in conformity with structures of ecclesial wisdom larger than themselves, run equably by a Holy Spirit who truly knows. While Christians can fantasize, they should not because they know better, else they will end by looking like “very nydeot folys, as he that had kept from his childhed a bagge full of chery stones, & cast such a fantasy therto, that he wold not go from it for a bigger bagge fillid full of gold” (285/15-18). When people cast a fantasy, willfully, often that fantasy is foolish. Because of the paucity of human experience on which it can operate, the self-guided imagination might settle for less fantasized as great, for cherry stones believed equivalent to gold, for a prison renamed “our own land & our lyvelod” (273/6-7). The power to name in this instance is an act of free desire imposing an inaccurate reading upon a plain, clear sign.\footnote{Greenblatt, p. 13, argues that one of the *Dialogue’s* great and repeated insights is that the political world moves from fantasy to fantasy, the movement created and caused by power “whose quintessential sign is the ability to impose one’s fictions upon the world: the more outrageous the fiction, the more impressive the manifestation of power.” As will become evident, I think this reading of the *Dialogue* is inaccurate chiefly in its incompleteness or its subtle shift of emphasis. More is not content to let the matter rest, whether to condemn the fantasies of power or to perform within them, both of which Greenblatt implies. He contends that plain signs exist and that the personal}
Selves in the *Dialogue* are mostly hidden, unreadable. A good man can look indifferent. Behaving like a wealthy man immersed in the things of this world, yet in “his godly set mynd” (72/2) he “taketh his weth for no weth / nor his riches for no riches / nor in hart settith by neyther nother / but secretly liveth in a contrite hart & a life penytentiall” (71/25-28), refusing to take a wealthy man’s pleasure in a wealthy man’s goods. In mind, heart, and penitential orientation a man can hide his goodness from the corrupt public sphere. It is tempting to read this passage autobiographically and think about More and his hair shirt. Bad people can look good. Those who know that desire for worldly gain is evil can still nurture that desire furtively (226/1-7). Bad people can look good and not know that they are bad, that their desires are askew for the things of this world (226/18-19). Deceived by their own sturdy appearance, they are instead “like a puff ring of parice holow light & counterfayte in dede” (228/27-28). People can believe they know their own minds and be right, or wrong, depending on whether God or the deluding devil is giving the surety (137-39). The self is slippery, guaranteed only by an outside ground difficult to discern.

Persecution, however, drives the Christian selves of the *Dialogue* into the open, because the whole person cannot escape the body and its fate. Accurate self-knowledge is part of the terror persecution brings. Those who see a choice coming between apostasy and horrifying death inevitably wonder which they will choose. It is impossible to know ahead of time but tempting to fantasize that knowledge for better or for worse. Antony predicts that many who think they would stand will fall; the majority will get bad news. He prays that those who would

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imagination can perceive and use them to create a self performed but not invented. The power to impose fantasies exists for More but is not as interesting to think about as the power to see truly. Greenblatt returns to the Tower Works on pp. 72-73 to suggest that the role-playing Morean self is finally and with relief swallowed up in a totalizing God, institution (church), and way of knowing.
fall will never face persecution or the truth “where payne or fere shuld shew them (as it shewid S peter) how farre they be deceyvid now” (205/19-20). On the other hand, the Turkish persecution can prove a teaching mechanism: trying true and feigned minds, revealing to each, publicly and privately, how they ought to discern themselves (226/24-227/1). For those in whom the Word of God has sunk its roots, persecution can serve as repriorization, clearing away worldly weeds so that the sunny grace of God can act directly on the heart (241/4-16). In every case, persecution rescues the persecuted from their own fantasies by facing them with the plain and open truth.

Whereas “our own” fantasies signal unnecessary distance between the self and the truth, “sophisticall” fantasies signal unnecessary complications to the truth. The opposites of sophistical are plain and substantial. After hearing Antony prate on about the world being a prison, Vincent remains unconvinced. Despite all due respect for his elder relative, he admits that Antony’s arguments sound like “sophisticall fantasies” (262/17). Antony, inspired by this new boldness and insight from Vincent deep into book III, declares his intention to prove “that euery man vniuserally ys a very prisoner in very prison playnly / without any sophisticacion at all” (263/17-18) even though this has always seemed to him “very substanciall trewth” (262/30-263/1). He opposes “sophistry” (265/25) to “substanciall trew” (266/1) soon after, and once he’s proven his point, he triumphantly announces, “than is all the mater playne & open evident trewth / which I said I toke for trewth / which is yet more a litle now, than I told you before, when you toke my profe yet but for a sophisticall fantasye” (267/5-8). The logic of this interchange between sophistical fantasy and plain, substantial truth seems to be that when a rhetorician adds sophistry to the plain truth, the additive corrodes the substance of the argument, so that sophistry is both more and less than what it should have been.
Yet this much-vaunted plain understanding of the world as a prison is not particularly plain. It is counterintuitive; the notion of punitive imprisonment requires a conceptual distinction between earthly imprisonment and freedom. Otherwise the Tower of London would serve no purpose, a tool of nonsense. It is not easy to see; Vincent’s own confusion at the idea provokes his most well-reasoned and earnest challenge to Antony’s authority. After chapters and chapters of placid or confused capitulation, Vincent seems energized at the opportunity for such a challenge. Finally Antony has claimed something entirely indefensible. In order to claim his plain truth that the world is a prison, Antony must redefine liberty as imprisonment—“that ymprisonment / which because of the large walke men call it libertie” (269/20-21)—no small violence to either word. What Antony apparently means by “plain” is “that which does not require argument.” Vincent’s confusion takes him aback, he admits. He has to work hard to imagine a point of view for which his opinion is not self-evident. And he is over-eager (though apparently correct) to assume that Vincent comes to see earthly imprisonment from his point of view. In his peroration he repeats “very playne” thrice and “sophistical fantasy” or “fantasy sophistical” twice, protesting a bit too much that his argument is the first and not the second.

When theorizing his reading practice, More usually argues for exegetical accretion and qualification, as opposed to Protestant plainness. According to Marius, Tyndale’s knowledge of Scripture is immediate, like encountering Turks, while More’s is mediated, like hearing about them. Simpson removes the personal element from Tyndale and gives it to More instead. Whereas Protestant reading is impersonal, stripping the uniformly printed text of authorial circumstance, More always qualifies a scriptural reading with its pre-textual oral community and

with the Holy Spirit’s interpretation on behalf of the current reader. But all texts for him are insufficient and need trusting human partners with whom to build meaning.\(^{50}\) Brian Gogan identifies four Morean mediators of revelation: the interpretive community of the church, new revelation through the Holy Spirit, hermeneutical innovation by the Holy Spirit, and conceptualization of scriptural ideas through rational theology.\(^{51}\) Meaning has to travel a long way to get to More, and passes through many hands.

In this he follows closely his favorite church father, Augustine, a proponent of complex and fecund exegesis. Garry E. Haupt isolates four ways Augustine influenced More’s reading: the interrelation of senses as the soul interrelates with the body, interpretive multiplicity and fecundity, explicit attribution of authorship to the Holy Spirit, and an emphasis on moral exegesis (for which we can read: performance).\(^{52}\) More will claim in another Tower work, *De Tristitia Christi*, that “the words of holy scripture are not tied to any one sense only but rather are teeming with various mysterious meanings.”\(^{53}\) Scripture is both shallow and deep, depending on the listener; a mouse can wade in it but an elephant drown (*DCH* 152). It is, in fact, for both

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\(^{50}\) pp. 227, 229-33, 240-42.


\(^{52}\) pp. lxxi-iii.

More and Augustine, a dynamic stream running down through history, not, presumably, a stagnant pool of meaning to which the interpreter comes.

Even in the *Dialogue*, itself not primarily a treatise on scriptural hermeneutics, More stands with Augustine in believing that reading is complicated. He cites a story Augustine tells in Letter 138 about a physician who prescribed medicine at one stage of a sickness that did harm in another; circumstances altered its efficacy. In the same way, says More, it is difficult to evaluate properly “a mater nakidly proponid & put forth . . . without consideracion of the circumstaunces” (173/6, 8). This awareness of meaning as situational extends the tradition of Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* and its concern for the rhetorical situations of both author and reader during interpretation of scripture’s literal sense (e.g., 3.18-32).

Soon after, More cites Augustine again on some scriptures needing more interpretation than others—in this case,

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54 In Augustine’s *Conf* 13.37, the scriptural stream sends out rivulets of patristic interpretation. This diffusion produces multiplicity of meaning. In More, *DCH* 138, 152, readers must appropriate patristic guidance to steady themselves against the stream, lest they drown in its mysteries. More seems to have gotten the stream imagery from the saying about the wading mouse and drowning elephant, which Erasmus attributes (except it is a lamb and not a mouse) to Gregory; see the commentary on *DCH* in vol. 6, part II of The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Sir Thomas More (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 649.

55 Meaning has to travel a long way in More’s works as well. His longwindedness in polemical works and the *Dialogue* is related to an interpretive or at least a performative plenitude. Martz, *More*, pp. 34, 37-38, 51, characterizes More’s style as teleologically digressive and exploratory at the same time, in the manner of Augustine who could ramble on, blazing a circuitous trail toward a endpoint he knew was coming.

56 More follows suit in places like 184/10-15. Aiming for a specific audience who requires consolation and not something else like cure or counsel, he shapes his discourse a certain way, while acknowledging that if his audience were different, so would be his interpretation and his presentation.
Christ’s easily abused command to give to everyone who asks (181).\textsuperscript{57} Elsewhere in More’s corpus he argues that exegetes need patristic help, that even the fathers found scripture difficult, and that people should not believe Protestants who claim it is easy.\textsuperscript{58}

Yet he clearly values plainness and perspicacity of understanding as well. Most scriptural quotations in the \textit{Dialogue} he provides in Latin but then translates into English, facilitating direct encounter with the vernacular text. He likes to point out where scripture is “playne”: that tribulation comforts better than prosperity (70/30-31), that suicide is sin (140/18, 145/18). He often associates this scriptural plainness, however, with the wider Catholic church and tradition. For instance, with reference to those who decry works and penance, “the holy scripture of god is very playne agaynst them / And the whole corps of cristendome in evey cristen region . . . And all the old holy doctors haue euer more taught agaynst them / And all the old holy interpretours haue construed the scripture agaynst them” (98/27-28, 30-32). Holy Scripture makes the matter plain, but does so with a formidable array of allies adding clarification and emphasis. Holy doctors and holy interpreters fittingly urge the truths of holy scripture, probably because all three share in the Holy Ghost, continuously active in the church and guaranteeing what stability it, its texts, and its interpretations possess.

Scripture in this holy tradition is perspicacious, at least in comparison to subtle Protestant interpretations. When Christ says that he will reward the works of his people, he “shall neuer suffer our sowles that are but meane wittid men, & can vnderstond his wordes but as hym selfe

\textsuperscript{57} In \textit{DCH}, p. 343, More goes so (remarkably) far as to suggest spiritual directors assign certain scriptures to certain readers but prohibit them from reading others. One fellow might get Matthew, Mark, and Luke but not John; another Acts but not the Apocalypse; a third Paul’s readily accessible and applicable Ephesians but not the high difficulty of Romans. Take that, Luther.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Treatise}, pp. 112-13; \textit{De Tristitia Christi}, p. 445; \textit{DCH}, p. 304, respectively.
hath set them, & as old holy saintes hath constrewed them before, and as all christen people this thouwsane yere haue belevid / to be damnpnid for lack of percevyng such a sharpe subtil thyng” (39/23-27) as the Protestant claim that only faith results in salvation. Certainly this self-deprecation is sarcastic. More is a very smart man and knows it. He has no dim-witted, hayseed ways to apologize for. But the shape of his sarcasm is interesting. He is stealing Tyndale’s moral high ground. A dim-witted plowboy could perhaps put a Bible to good use, but he does not need someone like Tyndale telling him how, complicating matters (as a sophist might). Let the boy stick with God’s words,59 saints’ construals, and the church’s historical beliefs. When those three agree (and they always will, on matters of importance),60 the truth is plain enough.

More, then, has a vexed conceptual relationship with plainness. His scripture is plain and not plain, his times are plain and not plain—but in the same way that he believes sophistry is both more and less than the truth. By adding fantasy to substantial truth about scripture or an age of persecution, sophists complicate the plain. But by doing so they make the truth less true. True beliefs then look superfluous compared to the much-diminished sophistical fantasy that can, apparently reasonably, claim to be plainer.


60 Specifically, the Holy Spirit will not let the church fall into damnable error, although the church may make lesser errors, like attributing sainthood to someone unworthy (*DCH* p. 239; see also p. 254 and Rogers, ed. *Correspondence*, p. 206)
Fortunately, More produces a model of the imagination that emphasizes not propositional or substantial truth but consolatory performance. Prospective sufferers like the Hungarians will use their imagination to project what the noonday light of persecution will prove them to be, good or bad. And, Antony suggests, even imagining noonday persecution casts a certain kind of light: “the very fame and expectacion therof, may tech them this lesson [their owne affeccions /whither they haue a corrupt gredy covetouse mynd or not] ere euer the thing fall uppon them it selfe / to their no litle frute / yf they haue the wit & the grace to take it in tyme while they may” (238/7-12). The knowledge, particularly a knowledge of one’s own weakness, should lead to amendment. The consolatory imagination does not merely produce cognition but action.

The Dialogue recommends that prospective sufferers use their imaginations strategically to prepare themselves for and rehearse the worst.61 For the Dialogue’s meditative strategy to succeed as consolation it must be possible for “euery man & euery woman both, [to] appoynt with goddess helpe in their own mynd beforehand / what thyng they intend to do yf the very worst fall” (195/29-31). The surety that comfort seeks lies closer to “appoynt” than “intent,” since intentions are scarcely reliable. Imagination helps appoint an intent; that is to say, it fixes the desire and will ahead of time. Instead of a fearful imagination spinning its wheels, churning

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61 The term “rehearsal” is from Dale B. Billingsley, “‘Imagination’ in A Dialogue of Comfort,” Moreana 19 (1982), p. 62. Brad S. Gregory, Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe, Harvard Historical Studies 134 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 129, compares this diligent imaginative exercise ahead of martyrdom to “athletes committed to staying in top competitive form.” This discipline ahead of martyrdom is a logical extension of the common late medieval discipline ahead of death, e.g., Thomas á Kempis’s Of the Imitation of Christ: “Happy is he that always hath the hour of his death before his eyes, and daily prepareth himself to die” (1.23.2-3). More himself composed a meditation on The Four Last Things (1522), although he did not get past the first thing.
up dread for the future, a right imagination acts with purpose, so that when that future comes it has already been secured.

This Morean emphasis on the rightly ordered imagination affecting the will is predictably Augustinian. More provides a brief sketch of how affections imprint the human mind: either through the bodily senses or through reason, which both orders the impressions of the bodily senses and receives its own spiritual cues direct from God (281/25-282/25). Augustine’s faculty psychology credits the passions as spiritually beneficial to the will when ordered by the reason, a process A. D. Cousins calls “sanctification and thereby stabilization of the phantasia.\textsuperscript{62}

Augustine’s influence on the Renaissance encouraged the efflorescence of a passionate sacred literary style, for instance.\textsuperscript{63} More’s “right Imagynacion” (308/16, 28, 30) is entirely spiritual, in opposition to carnal hearts and fantasies; it piques desire for huge heavenly joys.\textsuperscript{64}

In a time not entirely spiritual, in an age of persecution, More echoes Augustine that the nearest humans can approximate this “right Imagynacion” is through the Holy Spirit’s intervention in the mind. Augustine argues in De Magistro that true knowledge does not impinge from outside but awakens from within, where the image of God lies. And Antony insists that any comfort comes not from his instruction to Vincent but from the Holy Spirit’s operation within Vincent: “yf you so haue [taken comfort] / give god the thanke & not me / for . . . nor all

\textsuperscript{62} “Role-Play,“ pp. 61, 65. For Cousins, More attempts a similar process.


\textsuperscript{64} This is the Dialogue at its most dualist. As Billingsley, p. 60, points out, the right imagination is unattainable on earth because on earth the human imagination has only earthly things to feed it. Billingsley sees the Morean Christ as a vision of heavenly perfection (the only true comfort), making the divine available to the sensory through meditation (pp. 61-62).
the good wordes in the world / no not the holy wordes of god hym selfe / & spoken also with his own holy mowth, can be hable to profit the man with the sown entrying at his eare / but yf the spirite of god therwith inwardly worke in his soule” (250/1-6). Comfort cannot come only from outside, not even if God brings it. It must join an administrative divine presence in the soul. A similar insistence comprises much of Antony’s benediction at the end of the Dialogue, partially unwriting the Dialogue’s efficacy: “bette men may set mo thynges, & bettre also therto / And in the meane tyme, I besech our lord to breth of his holy spirite into the readers brest, which inwardly may tech hym in hart, without whome litle availeth all that all the mowthes of the world were able to tech in mens eares” (320/22-26). Antony does value his efforts, but only as the Holy Spirit teaches them from within and not without the heart. Written discourse requires just as much divine intervention as oral dialogue, and each member of a wider audience requires just as much as Vincent does. As if to underscore the provisionality of the times, Antony admits that not even his comfort can arrive at closure. Even after finishing the Dialogue, his readers occupy a “meane tyme,” ahead of a better personal comfort and an even better, truly final resolution to history.

Yet this intermediate age of the Holy Spirit is the age of the church as public institution, and an enspirited use of the Morean imagination does not reduce to the private self. According to More’s polemical works, the authority of church tradition comes from the Holy Spirit guiding a variety of different interpreters toward a consensus, generally at a council. The Spirit guarantees a proper interpretive community and thus the meaning of the scripture. More’s

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65 Gogan, p. 12, argues that More believes church authority is pneumatic not papal, dependent on Spirit-led church councils not papal declarations. Gogan’s pp. 267-380 further explore More’s conception of the church as a pneumatic community.
emphasis on “sensus communis” may make room for this communal understanding within faculty psychology itself. For the late Middle Ages “sensus communis” means both a common ground for rhetorical argument and a mental faculty that combines images before the imagination interprets them. The two concepts seem to be related: a common way of knowing constitutes a common ground for rhetorical appeal. More links “sensus communis” to church consensus.66 According to this logic the church, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, shares a way of knowing, a mode of perception. When an individual believes he or she has received a message from God apart from communitarian understanding, that belief is likely fantastic and, worse, heretical.67 Many of More’s arguments are predicated on their being obvious once both sides operate from proper premises, premises provided by a Holy Spirit actively teaching the same thing on the insides of many people at once. That is what unity looks like to him.

Christ as Pattern

After gradual accumulation of tension during which More has put up all his epistemological scaffolding, his definitive mechanism of comfort, repeatedly forecast but now realized at the end of the Dialogue, is simple. Prospective sufferers like the Hungarians or More himself should imagine their way into the figural pattern of Christ’s Passion that gives two roles

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66 On this link, see Ackroyd, p. 43.

67 Greenblatt, p. 62, believes that Utopia’s social structures eliminate the private spaces necessary for such “interpretive anarchy.” Introducing the Dialogue’s discussion on suicide, Antony cites Jean Gerson’s warnings against withdrawing from “the comen rules of christendom” or falling into “any singularitie of opinions, agaynst the scripture of god, or agaynst the comen fayth of christes catholique church” (133/25, 27-29). Inclination toward such radical individualism may bring Christians down to suicide through erroneous interpretation, believing they have a secret knowledge and commandment shared only by God and them. Protestants of course read schismatically, like suicides.
for the persecuted to perform. Before persecution, in a shapeless time of waiting, they perform Christ’s sorrow in Gethsemane. Then, during persecution, they perform his suffering. They perform these roles whether they know it or not, but comfort occurs when they imaginatively understand their persecution as a figural representation of Christ and enter into that role self-consciously, believing it a holy privilege.

As the Dialogue narrows, discarding this and that temptation as less important, the image of the Passion comes into sharper relief. “The last & vttermost poyn of the drede,” says Vincent, is “the terror of shamefull & paynfull deth” (280/24, 281/4). Antony concludes his treatment of shameful death with a vivid meditation on Christ’s humiliating execution. Vincent responds that he is convinced—shame will trouble him no more—but “of trewth vnclle all the pynch is in the payn” (292/16-17). Again, Antony concludes his answer (and the Dialogue) with chapter 27, partially “a right Imagynacion & remembrance of Christes byttre paynful passion” (312/12-13).

As Vincent focuses to the argument-honed edge of the problem, Antony focuses his answers gradually to the sharp, vivid image of its meditative consolation.68

In Antony’s prescription, the persecuted should meditate on this image in order to recognize an abstract figural similarity of their circumstances with Christ’s, then to enter that sorrow and suffering alongside Christ. Deliberate entrance, the will fully engaged, makes that suffering redemptive. Meditation, says Antony, permits:

that you shall submit & conforme your will therin vnto his / as he did his vnto his father / and shall theruppon be so comforted with the secret inward inspiracion of

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68 Fox, More, pp. 232-33, says that “all the different structural patterns of the Dialogue . . . converge upon the same point: More’s demonstration that Christ’s passion archetypally embodies the purpose of all human experience, individual and common, present, past, and future.” This understanding Fox believes elaborated and personalized in More’s final work, De Tristitia Christi (pp. 243-53).
his holy sprite / as he was with the personal presence of that Angell / that his
agony came & comfortid hym / that you shall as his trew deciple folow hym / &
with good will without grudge / do as he did / & take your crosse of payne &
passion vppon your bak / & dye for the truth with hym, & therby rayne with hym
crowned in eternall glory. (245/27-245/5)

“As he did” by subtle gradation, through following him, leads to “with him.” First comes a blind
submission to the divine will whatever it contains. Then an internal comfort by the Holy Spirit
refreshes the waiting, prospective Christian martyr and enables the will to take up its specific
charge. The conversion of “as” to “with” occurs just before the decisive suffering, when the
martyr accepts that vocation through a conscious act of will, taking the cross upon the back.
Then the martyr will pass with Christ through redemptive suffering into the decisive triumph of a
community centered on the divine presence, a divine presence experienced proleptically in the
comfort of the Holy Spirit but completely as eternal reward for willful and obedient emulation.

As is usual for figural interpretation, the figure and what it figures share an intrinsic
relationship but not an indistinguishable identity. “As” becomes “with” but never “is.” The
precise relationship a martyr has with the suffering Christ is synecdochic. Christ is the head of
the body in which a martyr participates. The martyr is only part of Christ. Yet Christ makes up
what is intrinsically deficient in the human so that martyrs can look forward to a beatific vision:
“Now to this greate glory, can there no man come hedlesse. Our hed is Christ / & therfor to hym
must we be Ioynid / & as membres of his must we folow hym / yf we will come thither” (311/15-17).
Here it is difficult to avoid the autobiographical irony. While writing the Dialogue, More
fully expected to die soon, although no one knows what form he expected his death to take.
Although More’s official sentence was to be hanged, drawn, and quartered, Henry VIII
eventually commuted it to beheading. More must have known that beheading, a common way to execute important prisoners, was at least a possibility. Should this comment mark More’s accurate forecast of his own future, Christ completes or fulfills the head that More will soon be missing for the sake of Christ. 69

The discipline of meditation deliberately and systematically recalls the ground of More’s figural self: Christ’s long-past passion. Typically for Augustinian consolation, it reaches back to that event to orient itself. When prospective sufferers remember the future pain their imagination makes so vivid, in Morean meditation they refer consciously to the memory of Christ’s past pain instead and pray for strength to emulate his perseverance (198/13-18). Thus memory of the past forges as sure a hope as is available, while frequent meditation strengthens resolve, making hope for perseverance even surer (198/18-32).

In an age of persecution, when divine meaning is hidden but infernal meaning plain, Morean meditation reduces to a private exercise, as secret as the meaning it finds. Antony recommends a discipline similar to what may have gone on in More’s private chapel:

   Let hym also chose hymselfe some secret solitary place in his own house / as far fro noyse & companye as he convecniently can / And thither lett hym some tyme secretly resort alone / ymagynyng hym selfe as one goyng out of the world evin strayt vnto the gevyng vpp his rekenyng vnto god of his sinfull lyvyng / Than let

69 Sir Walter Ralegh, in “The Passionate Mans Pilgrimage,” expresses a similar wish when meditating upon his own imminent beheading: “Just at the stroke when my vaines start and spred / Set on my soule an everlasting head.” The head is not so clearly Christ’s, however, and Ralegh seems intent on the new head arriving as soon as possible, as if the important point is that no Ralegh would be spilt. Less than a century later than More (1618), Ralegh is trying to preserve his well-burnished early modern individuality. The quotation is from The Metaphysical Poets, rev. ed., ed. Helen Gardner, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 34.
hym there before an altare or some pitifull image of christes bitter passion / the
beholding wherof may put hym in remembrace of the thing & move hym to
devout compassion / knele downe or fall prostrate.  (164/15-23)

Behind the doors, away from the voices, where no human eyes are watching, this Christian man
intensely remembers Christ’s passion and performs his own death. At the spatial heart of such a
private self lives figural performance on the basis of past example.

During the undefined gap in time that generates the Dialogue, the waiting Hungarians
meditate on Christ’s sorrow in Gethsemane, dreading forward toward certain suffering. Antony
explains that Christ’s own flesh shrunk from meditating on his coming pain and death; in
Gethsemane, he had to master that horror and fear (245/18-25). Antony narrows the “pinch”
down farthest of all at the end of the Dialogue. Pain is not so much the problem as time, as the
dread of what’s to come: “almost euery good Christen man, wold very fayne this day that he had
bene for Christes fayth cruelly kyllid yister day . . . but to feare while the payne ys comyng, there
is all our lett” (319/12-16). When the imaginations of the persecuted reach forward and force the
future into the present, they live in unbearably dilated torment. Once the pain is past and
receding to a point of memory, or left behind on earth en route to paradise, they can enjoy the
afterlife of their obedient but difficult choices. Christ in Gethsemane demonstrates how to spend
that anticipatory time wisely—in prayer, for instance (67/4-8). In this sense De Tristitia Christi
is the natural sequel to the Dialogue. Once More has isolated the real problem that requires
consolation (fear of what’s to come), he meditates formally and extensively on how Christ
handled that problem (while sorrowing in Gethsemane). De Tristitia Christi is what the
Dialogue prescribes, the recollection of a pre-Passion passion, “Christes paynfull agonye, that
hym selfe wold for our comfort suffre before his passion, to thentent that no fere shuld make vs
displayre” (318/27-29). In that work More even more bluntly contends that Christ in Gethsemane deliberately experienced the full range of human emotive suffering in order to give a comforting example for timorous humans called to be martyrs without possessing the bravery requisite in saints’ lives.\(^\text{70}\)

But whereas infernal meaning is plain in the time of persecution, More’s church has lost an appropriate vision of the Passion as figure to be repeated. Antony has to work surprisingly hard in arguing what would have been self-evident to the early church: the imitative and participatory glory of martyrdom, not shameful at all (288/23-289/9). In the old days the martyrs lined up for persecution, the bitterer the better; that Hungarians do not intuitively sense the spiritual value of suffering measures how far they have changed (204/22-27). If in *De Tristitia Christi* More tries to reassure those who cannot muster the old martyr boldness, in the *Dialogue* he is trying to whip that boldness up again. Instead *imitatio Christi* has devolved into privatized, self-destructive neurosis. A Christian inclination toward suicide (or its close cousin, courted martyrdom) perverts the universal call to imitate Christ, claiming instead a secret, special, and privileged vocation to follow Christ in unredemptive death.\(^\text{71}\) Brad S. Gregory observes that

\(^{70}\) See, for example, *Tristitia*, pp. 55, 101-09, although Christ suffering to leave weak humans an example of how to triumph over emotional vulnerability is perhaps the unifying insight of the entire meditation. Seymour Baker House, “the field is won”: An Introduction to the Tower Works,” *A Companion to Thomas More*, ed. A. D. Cousins and Damian Grace (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), pp. 237, sketches a dispute between John Colet and Erasmus about the suffering Christ in the garden, Colet believing that Christ (functioning primarily as God) mourned the coming fall of Jerusalem and plights of the Jews but Erasmus believing that he as human mourned his own fate. As House indicates, More on the whole opts for Erasmus’s opinion. That opinion is certainly of more personal consolatory worth.

\(^{71}\) To illustrate this absurdity on the fringes of wisdom, Antony tells of a man who determined to crucify himself one Easter in imitation of Christ. Antony approves thoroughly of the wife’s canny dissuasions, all in the direction of
Catholics in the early sixteenth century had no good categories for martyrdom. The Catholic church had survived just fine for centuries without it, while Protestant and Anabaptist martyrs readily fit the violent apocalypticism of their historiographies. It took a while for More to be recognized as martyr among his fellow Catholics, for instance.72

Augustine wrote *De Civitate Dei* just after the first wave of Christian martyrs had receded, their sacrifice no longer necessary in a Christian Rome (even when sacked by quasi-Christian Goths). In sophisticated ways he sought to cope with the lack of urgency in Christian history. No one was dying on the front lines anymore. A Christian empire hardly had anywhere attractive left to expand. Disillusionment came not from stymied advance but from failed defense of the Rome Christendom had consolidated as its own. An alliance—tumultuous, variously effective—between religious and political power settled into governing western Europe for more than a millennium. This dissertation has charted the way that Christendom told its own history and the history of its selves after Augustine’s example, once it lost its sense of progress and imminent eschatological closure.

But in early modern Europe, a sense of historical progress, and with it eschatology, had come round again. Protestant martyrs would die to gain the future, not merely repeat the past. Stripping away the accreted tradition More loved, they hoped to gain a future that looked like what they believed the early church to be: simple enough for anyone to gain access to the mysteries (which turned out not to be so mysterious after all, to the iconoclastic delight of many).

72 *Salvation at Stake*, pp. 250-71.
Caught and about to drown in this current, More can only hope in authorship. He invents a prior history of publication for his book. Its full title is *A Dialoge of Comfort Agaynst Trybulacion, Made by an Hungaryen in Laten, & Translatyd out of Laten into French, & Out of French into Englysh*. The title fulfills Vincent’s promises to Antony at the beginning and end of the dialogue to write it down against Antony’s imminent death. Vincent has already spread Antony’s words of comfort among a circle of friends between books I and II. He returned to report its grateful reception. By the time More writes the *Dialogue*, it has supposedly comforted many over almost a decade, migrating intellectual routes as though careful attention and eager translation have validated its contents. More imagines an audience for himself at the last, an audience of Hungarian (for whom he apparently felt some kinship), of Latin, of French—a community he is sure exists, the common corps of Christendom, even if he can recognize no other members in England at the moment. He wrote for himself an audience that had already survived the author of his book. They, like Christ, console him—a community of like-minded Christian selves that spans history, a community of voices he heard when 1534 England was silent. These selves like Vincent convert at his word to performing their Christian identity by figural repetition, not by forcing the hand of history. And the book that invokes and tries to create these selves presents itself from its title page onward as the relic of a recently deceased civilization, from which only its consolation endures.

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73 Vincent adds an intent to translate it into German (320/11-16), a stream of transmission about which More’s fiction mentions nothing further.

74 From Latin to French to English would have been a natural route for such a book to travel; see *Dialogue*, p. 331, note to 3/2-6.
Conclusion

Augustine successfully clears a posthistorical gap within individual and sacred history where disillusioned and suffering medieval writers and readers could safely acknowledge an irreducible reality their ways of making sense could not master. That epistemological futility is temporary—therein lies part of the consolation—but it is real, and not only real, but predicted by the form of sacred history. Personal experiences that undermine a previous interpretive closure—Augustine’s call from the contemplative to the active life, the fall of Christian Rome, Abelard’s catena of catastrophes, Long Will’s loss of Piers, Arcite’s death when the hopes of Athens rest on the success of his knightly prowess, More’s dread of what would happen to his head and Catholic Europe—all align with the form of sacred history: once clarified in the present Christ but now administered by an interpretive, consolatory, invisible Spirit. The age of the church is the age of the Spirit; the age of the Spirit is the age of Christ’s absence. The Spirit functions to find and help to reperform meaning from the distant past when that meaning seems inaccessible in the present. The door into understanding past climactic revelation is the memory; the path through memory is reading (a life like Augustine’s Confessiones, a history like Augustine’s De Civitate Dei); the goal of that reading is interpretive reperformance in deed and word. Augustine works hard to activate his personal and cultural memory. Abelard will suffer like Christ and his apostles. Long Will will hunt Piers down, again. Palamon will take the place Arcite has won. More will put down his pen at the end of De Tristitia Christi and walk out into a martyr’s death. Augustine, Abelard, Langland, Chaucer, and More will all write stories without clear resolution and act as if they console.

This preoccupation with an inexplicable time, or narrative, clears room for a similar emphasis on space, or the material. Augustinian consolation supplements and eventually
outgrows the absolute dualism of its Boethian counterpart, in space because in time. It gradually validates physical suffering within the framework of classical philosophical and literary culture that late classical and medieval Catholicism inherited, by coming to admit the importance of embodiment for the self it tries to console. A threat to the body is a threat to the self.

Historiography is an intellectual puzzle, but bodily suffering makes urgent personal demands upon consolation. Human experience increasingly demands consolation on its own embodied and desirous terms, until Thomas More can finally admit personal physical pain as his most desperate need for consolation. Any consolation that works must find and orient him in that pain, not take him out of it. The request for, and the gift of, spatial and temporal consolation assumes the value of individual selves who inhabit space and time by means of their bodies.

Early Christians with intellectual ambitions, like Augustine, had to speak within pagan philosophical systems that had built up a head of anti-materialist steam. Stoic, and eventually Neoplatonic, apatheia cultivates an indifference to the physical and individual and a resistance to passions. For the physical and individual, Stoicism substitutes virtue and Neoplatonism substitutes the ineffable divine. Augustine tries to reconcile an incarnational Christian unity of spirit and body with the dualist pagan learning he inherited as a professional rhetorician and philosopher. Neoplatonist philosophy enamoured him as a young man. He never abandons its categories; in particular, he never fully reneges upon its dualism. Yet he proves a prophet of affect, not least in the Confessiones, which Peter Brown describes as “the story of Augustine’s ‘heart’, or of his ‘feelings’—his affectus.”¹ Passions can move the soul in the direction of heaven and the eternal. They always move the soul, in one direction or another. That motion, in

¹ Augustine of Hippo, p. 163; see also pp. 148-49, 254-55.
time, we can call narrative. Passion moving in the right direction Augustine calls charity; charity is the only human hope for full escape from the earth and its dualist quandary.

Thus Augustine manages to validate affect and its corollary, narrative, while maintaining a fairly strict dualism. Reason moves the passions, or should. Augustinian consolation appeals to the reason; after all, looking for meaning in history (in the rebellion of sensory pleasure, in the fall of Christian Rome) is primarily an intellectual puzzle, closely akin to reading. Yet his immediate refusal in sermons and eventually *De Civitate Dei* to explain away the 410 sack of Rome acknowledges the irreducibility of that physical catastrophe. He does not try to escape the event, merely its historiographic implications. It may not mean, but it was, and was worth talking about. Unlike Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, Augustine grounds his consolatory narrative on a close scrutiny of the problem.

At the heart of Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum* lies the physical pain and scar of his castration, but displaced in all sorts of directions. I have told his story with vigor and mischief on a number of occasions; it is always enough to make strong men cringe. Certainly when the *Historia* reaches Abelard’s castration, the whole tenor of the story changes. Abelard’s calamities have begun—indeed, are off to quite an impressive start. But he tells the physical pain as if it were the least of his calamities. Its description is sterile, almost medical, viewed from the outside: “They cut off the parts of my body whereby I had committed the wrong of which they complained” (75).² He does not refer to personal agony. The only people who feel in response to the action are “the whole world” (“mundus”), shocked at its barbarity (75). As if to represent the whole world in miniature, Abelard’s city gathers outside his door to mourn. Their calamitous outcries are loud enough that Abelard finally ventures to mention his own agony, precisely

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² “eis videlicet corporis mei partibus amputatis quibus id quod plangebant commiseram” (18).
because it occupies the lesser term of a proportion: “I suffered more from their sympathy than from the pain of my wound, and felt the misery of my mutilation less than my shame and humiliation” (75). Abelard does not mention his pain until he can cow it with something greater.

Again, after a council has condemned his book on the Trinity as heretical, Abelard “wept much more for the injury done to my reputation than for the damage to my body” (84). He raises the spectre of his pain only to render it comparatively impotent. Buried beneath all his subsequent calamities—the flight from St. Denis, the abandonment of the Paraclete, the poisonous monks at St. Gildas de Rhuys—remains the scar he cannot pretend away. Heloise knows to probe that unhealed wound in her response, confessing the sexual desire that only her husband should but cannot slake.

For Langland, bodily suffering is difficult to read, to find a place and category for. He conceives of it in negative terms—as poverty, privation, need, desire. It does not exist except as absence. But that absence itself can have a positive valence. When Langland dramatizes suffering through characters like Hunger (Passus 6) and Patience (Passus 14), both characters identify significant spiritual benefits. Hunger can keep workers virtuously working as long as it does not get out of hand or seriously dangerous. Patience recommends poverty as a way to squelch the seven deadly sins. Poverty requires comfort, but it can be comfort too. The boundless and uncategorizable energy of Need in Passus 20 entirely escapes categorization in bono and in malo. “Nede ne hath no lawe” (20.10), Need claims. Need justifies theft and evasion of conscience (20.17-22). Need makes God come down to find out what need is. At the beginning of Passus 20, Need tantalizingly appears then disappears, unabsorbed into the

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3 “plus erubescentiam quam plagam sentirem, et pudore magis quam dolore affligerer” (18).

4 “longe amplius fame quam corporis detrimentum plangebam” (27).
narrative structure. Langland is not quite sure what to do with Need but knows he’s around. That the prologue’s chaos, a chaos that includes poverty and plague, recurs in the conclusion foregrounds the physical and spiritual problems of Langland’s society. *Piers Plowman* closes on need, not consolation.

In Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, an unassimilable physical pain helps to overthrow the whole, neat, symmetrical, Athenian story Theseus keeps wanting to organize. Upon interrupting Arcite and Palamon in a bloody duel, Theseus moves to contain their violence by displacing it into a tournament grounds and offering the duellers the prize they crave: the princess Emelye. Arcite wins the tournament, and Theseus’s problem seems solved. Emelye will pass in an orderly fashion to Arcite as her spouse—she’s meeting his eye in proud pleasure already—and Theseus will have averted the threat of Theban violence toward his stable Athens. But the victorious Arcite’s horse throws him off, and the fall wounds Arcite mortally. To this point, Arcite and Palamon seem abstract and flat as characters, almost interchangeable. Their characters come alive when, in sequence, each sees Emelye from their shared prison cell and desires her with scarcely a hope of physical consummation. They operate only as rivals, defined by the other in that shared category. They are almost entirely intellectualized characters in a story almost philosophical and abstract enough to be a love allegory. Then, when Arcite dies, Chaucer inserts an unexpectedly detailed description of his suffering:

> Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore  
> Encreesseth at his herte moore and moore.  
> The clothered blood, for any lechecraft,  
> Corrupteth, and is in his bouk ylaft. . . .  
> The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle,
And every lacerte in his brest adoun
Is shent with venym and corrupcioun.
Hym gayneth neither, for to gete his lif,
Vomyt upward, ne dounward laxatif. (2743-47, 2752-56)

This abstract representation of a man suddenly has a swollen chest and pain at the heart, windpipes squeezed shut, festering wounds, and an inability either to vomit or to excrete. He’s physical. The story does not know what to do with this physicality but leaves it there, festering at the heart of the consolatory problem. Theseus’s Boethian speech at the end of the tale tries to absorb Arcite’s death into more general, more abstract natural cycles. It founders on what it cannot mention: the randomness and suffering of Arcite’s brutal death.

In the last sections of the last chapter of this dissertation, and in the last book of the work that chapter discusses—at, in fact, the climactic resolution of this project—lies More’s direct encounter with bodily pain, the thing itself, “the last & vttermost poyn of the drede” (280/24), “the sore pinch” (281/10-11). For him a painful death is obviously the greatest test for a consolatory model because the greatest threat to consolation. He knows it’s coming. His imagination cannot escape a recursive obsession with that agonizing future.

All of these works before More have found ways to distance themselves from personal suffering, although they refuse to elude it completely in the Boethian manner; they always find space for suffering in their narrative structure. Augustine looks unflinchingly at the fall of Rome, down to Christian women’s horrific choice between rape and suicide. He did not witness it, however, but is responding pastorally either across the Mediterranean or to exiles who found their way to Africa. The physical details of Abelard’s mutilation are infamous when he writes, but he acknowledges them only after years had passed, and then only to diminish them as lesser
Langland and Chaucer impose the buffer of fiction. Will may be Langland’s autobiographical protagonist, but he suffers and views suffering in an allegorical landscape. Chaucer tells a realistic story of suffering but long ago (pagan history) and far away (Athens and Thebes). But in the Tower works, despite various levels of fictionalization, More’s autobiographical voice and plight bleeds through. Of all these authors, More in the Dialogue of Comfort has consoled most consistently through the intervening centuries. Part of the reason is certainly that in his very pain More finds the shadow of his crucified God ahead of him, a God whose agonizing death and triumphant resurrection he can join through figural repetition. Part of it also is that by discussing physical pain More directly measures his comfort against its most implacable foe.

More is a humanist, intent upon the human as a knower and human political and ethical experience as topics of knowledge. In Boethius, the suffering self dissolves into a monologue by Lady Philosophy, at once an escape and dissolution. The Boethian model proved problematic for those who had to continue in a temporal embodiment marred by physical trauma and epistemological limitation. In More’s Dialogue the suffering self finally looks like the modern self: that from which we can never fully avert our eyes—and for good reason. Revering like Augustine the divine capacities accessed by the soul, More consoles himself into a nearly exact figural recapitulation of the divine in pain.
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