# THE GRACE OF HERMENEUTICS

Michael Edward Moore

The grace of hermeneutics suggests an experience of plenitude in the depths of reading. The following essay examines some remarkable episodes of reading in the Book of Acts, the *Life of St. Anthony*, and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. Part One considers the art of interpretation and the role of the spirit, while Part Two takes up the theme of *Kairos* and absolute time. At the outset, however, I wish to reflect on the permanence of things, especially in connection with the letters and words in books.

## PROLOGUE: NOTHING CEASES TO BE

The Orkney poet George Mackay Brown once said that he had "a deep-rooted belief that what has once existed can never die: not even the frailest things, spindrift or clover-scent or glitter of star on a wet stone."[1] Brown's poetry became an attempt to accommodate this omnipresent and enduring character of being, especially in its frailest presence. A volume of poetry would become an effort to realize the world in a book. Books participate in what Emmanuel Levinas referred to as "being without nothingness," a fullness or plenitude of being. Among other implications, the permanence of being, in Levinas's view, means that a suicide cannot expunge his own being as

[1] Maggie Fergusson, *George Mackay Brown, The Life* (London: John Murray, 2006), p.289. I already discussed these lines in a different context: "An Historian's Notes for a Miloszan Humanism," *The Journal of Narrative Theory* 37.2 (2007): 191-216. Note that this notion is also found in the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz. It is perhaps comparable to the emanation theory of neoplatonism (outpouring or unfolding): Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 45-46. This is certainly true of 14th century neoplatonism: being as an idea of God. See Stefan Swiezawski, *Histoire de la philosophie européenne au XVe siècle,* trans. Henry Rollet and Mariusz Prokopowicz (Paris: Beauchesne, 1990), p.228.

he hopes.[2] Through the letters in books we often become aware of the continued existence of ancient people and realities. It is as though we were rowing on a foggy lake, hearing birds and smelling flowers, but not quite finding the shore. Those ancient realities are right beside us, but in a secondary condition. Secondariness is the form of the world offered by books and letters.[3]

Reading is an act of divination that stirs up the realities hidden in the letters in books.[4] The reader actualizes what is lurking there, or as Husserl noted, we have to reactivate the past in order for it to be available to us in the present.[5] Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, therefore involves careful reading and research, in conjunction with contemplation.[6] For Hugh of St. Victor, the beautiful things of nature, which he calls the book of this world, in all their beauty, are not themselves the destination, but the subject of learning and a platform for something higher, a return to them in the purity of thought. This research, which ranges from the pages of nature to the pages of written books, can then serve as the foundation for "the heights of

[2] "But first I want to stress at greater length the consequences of this conception of the *there is*. It consists in promoting a notion of being without nothingness, which leaves no hole and permits no escape." Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p.50.

[3] On the principle of secondariness: Jean-Pierre Sonnet, S.J., "La Bible et l'Europe: une patrie herméneutique, in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 130 (2008), 177-193.

[4] This explains the "ancient newness" of commentaries on the Bible: Emmanuel Levinas, "The Strings and the Wood: On the Jewish Reading of the Bible," in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University, 1994), p.127.

[5] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976), p.92. On Husserl: Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore-Rinvolucri (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1984), p.73.

[6] "For historical interpretation, copious notes are requisite," August Boeckh, *On Interpretation and Criticism*, trans. John Paul Pritchard (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1968), p.86. Boeckh's perspective is similar to other notable historians of his age, such as Droysen, who also considered research to be a fundamental and exhaustive demand, our ability to understand the writings of the past being possible because it is congenial to our minds.

contemplation."[7] In a similar vein, the poet Mallarmé argued that books are spiritual instruments, observing that "through the act of reading, a solitary tacit concert is performed for the spirit." Mallarmé's cult of letters and books is indeed theological. The book is in the fullest sense a spiritual instrument, and it is the *reader* who reveals the depths of the text, bringing it to light.[8]

Friedrich Schleiermacher viewed divination as a basic procedure of hermeneutics: by means of it, a causeway extends from our own individuality to far-off souls of the past, making it possible to interpret their works. Everyone is here with us, including the dead.[9] If we pose the thesis: *no historical research without hermeneutics*, then we are also saying: *no historical research without divination.* Czeslaw Milosz often described such actualizations of the past in his poetry: as he wrote in "Bells in Winter," long-ago scenes and people will emerge from the past "as long as I perform the rite and sway the censer and the smoke of my words rises here. As long as I intone: *Memento etiam, Domine*."[10] Their being has taken up residence in the letters of a book, and therefore the poem (a reading of the poem) seems to have liturgical

[7] Cf. Hugh's commentary on John: Franklin T. Harkins, *Reading and the Work of Restoration. History and Scripture in the Theology of Hugh of St* Victor (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2009), p.82.

[8] Stéphane Mallarmé, "The Book as a Spiritual Instrument," in: *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Harvard: Belknap, 2007), p. 228. According to Wolfgang Iser, likewise the reader "causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections." See "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," in: *New Directions in Literary History,* ed. Ralph Cohen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974). pp.125-147. On Mallarmé's theological approach to the book, see the interesting discussion in Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kaballah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 2002), pp.76-77.

[9] "The divinatory is based on the assumption that each person is not only a unique individual in his own right, but that he has a receptivity to the uniqueness of every other person . . . divination is aroused by comparison with oneself." F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics. The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Ducke and Jack Forstmann (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), p.150.

[10] Czeslaw Milosz, "Bells in Winter," in *Bells in Winter*, trans. the author and Lillian Valee (New York: Ecco Press, 1980), p.70. In another poem, Milosz wrote: "I would like everyone to know...that what is most their own is imperishable, / And persists like the things they touch, now seen by me beyond time's border: her comb, her tube of cream and her lipstick / On an extramundane table." From "Elegy for Y. Z.," in *Unattainable Earth*, trans. by the author and Robert Hass (New York: Ecco Press, 1986), p.99.

and divinatory force. The character of these beings from the past is no doubt different from "the originals" – they have become invisible and spiritualized. The classical scholar may only meet with a "second Horace," despite the real presence of Horace in a book – especially during the time of contemplation and reading. The ghostly Horace may seem to be less spontaneous or talkative. However, the text still demands answers to its questions, and if we are "sensitive to the text's alterity" to follow the argument of Hans-Georg Gadamer, it may even shake us out of our situated sleep, and challenge us to our core. [11] Divination and interpretation thus become a dialogue of author and reader, an intimate communication in an extra-mundane space. "When I read, my skull becomes a crystal."[12]

PART ONE: *DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?*

I begin with a mysterious episode from the Book of Acts. Obedient to the command of an angel, Philip the Deacon walked along a road through the wilderness between Jerusalem and Gaza. There he met an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official, riding in a chariot, who was reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked him "Do you understand what you are reading?" – this is the hermeneutical question *par excellence*. The Ethiopian was reading a difficult text from Isaiah: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter" (Isa 53.7). Here, in what Childs calls "the most contested chapter in the Old Testament," Isaiah intones the destiny of the suffering servant, evidently a vicarious figure of Israel, expressing the pain of Israel in the period of Isaiah's preaching, the Babylonian Exile.[13] But Philip explained that the real meaning was otherwise: that the suffering servant was none other than Jesus, and that the entire work of Isaiah announced Christ and his history.

For Christians the question of biblical interpretation became: how to understand the books of the Hebrew Bible as Christian

[11] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2d ed., rev. London: Continuum, 2004), p.271.

[12] Christian Bobin, *Carnet du soleil* (Castellare-di-Casinca: Éditions Lettres Vives, 2011), p.24.

[13] In chapter 53 we have to do with Second Isaiah, or deutero-Isaiah, who wrote after the fall of Jerusalem in 587. Brevard Childs, *Isaiah*; Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). On the general period of Second Isaiah's utterances, see p.289; on the hermeneutical problem of chapter 53, see p.410. Childs suggests that this chapter almost defeats the possibility of a contained exposition.

scripture? Christian typology could discern the messianic figure of Christ behind the surface of Israel's history, and this was joined to an eschatological sense that the end of history had been initiated.[14] Isaiah in particular was the object of intense Christian scrutiny and interpretation. For Luke, as for other early Christians, Isaiah was nothing other than an ancient prophecy about Christ.[15] Many of the sayings attributed to Jesus contain echoes and quotations from Isaiah, and it even seems that the events of his life were understood by the Gospel authors in light of Isaiah.[16] Jesus himself interpreted Isaiah in the synagogue, unrolling the scroll to where it says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Isa 61.1).[17] He commented: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4.16-21).[18] Commentary and the Spirit came together in this hermeneutical drama, with its profound secondariness. How strangely the new seems to have the ability to initiate something older, as if the fabric of time has been reversed.[19]

Philip the Deacon explained the Christian meaning of Isaiah to the eunuch, who, seeing a body of water nearby, asked at once to be baptized. When the two men got up from the water, behold, Philip had vanished: the Holy Spirit had "snatched [him] away." Philip suddenly "found himself at Azotus" (Acts 3.26-40). It seems that Philip, in his commerce with angels and the Holy Ghost, had become a kind of aerial spirit. Luke, the author of Acts, thus totally identified Philip with the art of interpretation. As an angelic mediator, Philip could convey the meaning of written words, fly across the wilderness, appear and disappear like the very Hermes of hermeneutics.[20]

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[14] Julio Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p.492.

[15] Isaiah plays a special role in Luke: Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp.14-25.

[16] John F.A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.21-41.

[17] Evans and Sanders, *Luke and Scripture*, pp.22-23.

[18] This is a case of the principle that Scripture comments on Scripture, the contextus remotus.

[19] I am grateful here for the suggestions and comments of Nicola Masciandaro.

[20] On Hermes / hermeneutics: Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p.1; the origin of the term is *hermeneia*, having to do with Hermes (Boeckh, *On Interpretation*, p.47).

The prophecies of Isaiah convey a sense of historical gloom and elevate the notion of Divine Sovereignty.[21] The roaring sea, the seraphim, the millstones and veils of Isaiah now turned even stranger and more powerful. Pulled from the dry old husk of their traditional sense, the ancient words of Isaiah suddenly flashed brightly in the reader's mind. The prophecies have come to pass in an unexpected way. Similar effects of renewal and transformation-through-commentary were known and highly regarded in Jewish exegesis as well, the intensive search for meaning and appreciation for secondariness. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet describes the art of rabbinical commentary: "beyond time, as if time did not exist, a text is reread and updated."[22] Scholem likewise points to the unending search for significance in the Torah on the part of the Sages, and that indeed "the gates of exegesis were never shut."[23] Philip's Christian interpretation of Isaiah combined a radically new reading with an act of divination.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian is about the transforming power of a basic text (we might call it an *Urtext*) now understood for the first time – for only when it is truly understood can the written word shake the reader to his core. Correct interpretation of an *Urtext* does not simply decode, but induces a change in the reader, bringing her to a crisis, to the edge of a precipice.[24] This is a moment of

[21] Sandra M. Schneiders *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as a Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p.125. See further E. W. Heaton, *A Short Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), pp.91-100; still valuable is Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp.303-346.

[22] Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present*, trans. David Ames Curtis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.15. On timelessness in the rabbinical stance as such: Jacob Neusner, *Rabbinic Judaism: The Theological System*, Boston: Brill, 2002), pp.107-110.

[23] Gershom Scholem, "A New Spiritual Perspective on the Exegesis of Primary Sources," in: *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, edited by Abraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), p.72.

[24] It is sometimes suggested that we can begin our episodic encounter with a text by adopting a certain method or approach, or by asking certain questions: see Schneiders, *Revelatory Text*, pp.111-113. This would make the impact of the encounter into the outcome of a properly selected technique or procedure.

inspiration: inhaling the Spirit wafting from the pages and letters.[25] The interpretation of Isaiah becomes a cold breath of *pneuma*, the Spirit emanating from and explaining the words that it inhabits. For Luke, following the portrait in the Old Testament, the Spirit of God was at the same time the divine word – and a divine breath or wind, a numinous force.[26] The ability to interpret Scripture was a prophetic capacity. Reading the Old Testament in the spirit of the New Testament led naturally to analogical methods of interpretation.

Analogical reading was the gift of Alexandria, where this hermeneutical style was refined by pagans, Jews and Christians. Alexandrian reading unfolded meanings from the text without reference to author or historical milieu. The historical and the litteral were not held in high esteem. You could say that the Alexandrians abolished distance in favor of appropriated meanings.[27] This became the most favored kind of reading throughout the patristic and medieval period. And of course it provided the design for a Christian structure of time that saw Judaism as worn out and done for.

PART TWO: *KAIROS – TIME OF THE TEXT & TIME OF THE READER*

Not long ago I watched a hawk in an oak tree outside my study as it broke off large, twisted branches, weighed and judged them, then ponderously flew off with them to build a nest. I wondered what made this *the time* to build a nest? The hawk's actions seemed to take place in absolute time. Such intensified moments are what the New

[25] Inhaling: this is suggested by a passage in Ambrose: "Aperite igitur aures et bonum odorem uitae aeternae inhalatum uobis munere sacramentorum carpite" – "open your ears and inhale the good odor of eternal life wafted to you from the gift of the sacraments." Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, I.3, in Ambroise de Milan, *Des sacrements, des mystères*, ed. Bernard Botte; Sources chretiennes, 25 (Paris: Cerf, 1950), p.108. According to Congar, the breath of God "hovers over a creation that God brings about by speaking – through his Word"; in the Gospel of John, Jesus says "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63). See Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, trans. David Smith (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986), pp. 15 and 17.

[26] The most significant study of this question is still G.W.H. Lampe, "The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St. Luke," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, edited by D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), pp.159-200; see p.160. "I will pour out my Spirit," says Jesus. According to Luke, the Spirit was "poured out" or "came down" over the apostles and the early Church. Evans and Sanders, *Luke and Scripture*, p.32.

[27] Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p.44.

Testament calls "the fullness of time," *kairos*, the critical moment, or the right time.[28] This is why historians and prophets could understand the *signs of the times*, and foresee the approaching end of history, when all things would be made new (Rv 21.5).

In the course of historical criticism, we distinguish between the time of the text and the time of the reader. The time of the text consists of its historical moment, with all the ramifications of influence and audience: the historical context of the author's world. For it seems that "the era in which an author lives, his development, his involvements . . . constitute his 'sphere'."[29] This is true, even if historical criticism must be aware of its limitations.[30] The time of the reader is more open-ended. Possible readers might live in any time and place. On occasion, the time of the text and the time of the reader can both take the form of absolute time. A work can be written under the pressure of messianic time, in a mood of crisis, which can correspond to the crisis (*kairos*) of the reader.[31]

In Milan, Augustine once listened to Ambrose discuss the methods of reading Scripture. Ambrose explained to his students that many passages in the Bible appear to be absurd, but only so long as they were read only at the level of the literal meaning. "As if he were most carefully enunciating a principle of exegesis," Ambrose recited: 'The letter kills, the spirit gives life' (2 Cor. 3:6). "Those texts which, taken literally, seemed to contain perverse teachings he would expound spiritually, removing the mystical veil."[32] And indeed, Ambrose's odd little work *De Mysteriis* provided this type of clarification, showing the meaning of the liturgy (*rationem edere*), with allegorical interpretations of the Biblical lections including Isaiah.[33]

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[28] Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Terrence Prendergast (San Francisco: 1983), pp.404-405.

[29] Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, p.118.

[30] "It is not the key that opens all of the locked chambers. There are proofs that see further." Gershom Scholem, "What Others Rejected: Kabbalah and Historical Criticism," in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays,* ed. Avraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), p.79.

[31] Amos Funkenstein, "Gershom Scholem: Charisma, *Kairos*, and the Messianic Dialectic," in: *History and Meaning* 4 (1992), 123-140.

[32] *Confessions*, 6.4.6. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.94.

[33] Ambroise de Milan, *Des Sacrements, des mystères*, ed. Dernard Bott, Sources chrétiennes (Paris: Cerf, 1950), p.30.

But Ambrose's theory of interpretation left Augustine a little cold: after all, Augustine was a professional rhetorician. "Fearing a precipitate plunge, I kept my heart from giving any assent."[34] For Augustine that moment only came later, when he was living with his friends in Cassiciacum.

Now when Augustine began his cultured retreat and meditations at Cassiciacum, he was already familiar with the heroic stories of the desert monks, and in particular knew about St. Antony.[35] St. Antony's retreat to the desert had been set in motion by a text he heard being read one day in church: "Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mt. 19:21). Not long afterward Antony also heard the text: "Do not be anxious about tomorrow" from the Sermon on the Mount.[36] Antony only heard the lections, not reading the Bible for himself, because in Athanasius's portrait, Antony was a rustic hermit and illiterate.[37] For his part, spending his days reading in Cassiciacum, Augustine's heart was already poised, when he heard the mysterious childlike voice, either male or female, telling him to "pick up and read, pick up and read."[38] Giving heed to the voice, Augustine took up the Epistle of Paul to the Romans and read "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Mt. 19:21). In relation to the conversion of St. Antony, this was a carefully recorded instance of secondariness. Augustine's conversion represented a choice in life, and a movement from hearing to reading.[39] After reading the passage, Augustine made the ultimate gesture of the reader: "I inserted my

[34] Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.4.6. See comments in Raymond Studzinski, *Reading to Live. The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), p.80.

[35] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo, A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), pp.113-114.

[36] Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1980), pp.31-32.

[37] As Samuel Rubenson amply demonstrates, Antony's illiteracy was a deliberate fiction of Athanasius. Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p.134.

[38] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VIII.xii (29), pp.152-153.

[39] "For I had heard how Antony happened to be present at the gospel reading, and took it as an admonition addressed to himself." Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.xii (29), p.153.

finger or some other mark in the book and closed it."[40] An absolute moment had arrived in the time of the reader. Soon afterward Augustine was baptized in the mysteries as celebrated by Ambrose in Milan, and now his feelings were quite different: "I wept at the beauty of Your hymns and canticles, and . . . tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them."[41]

In my own case, a phase of *kairos* coincided with discovering Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, and I would like to dedicate this essay to his spirit, which still emanates from those pages.[42]

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[40] Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.xii (30), p.153.
[41] Brown, *Augustine*, p.126; on Milanese liturgy, see p.124.
[42] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995).