

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# A Hermeneutics of Humility and Conviction

The conclusion, as a literary genre, traditionally provides an opportunity for authors to pull the arguments of their texts together and to demonstrate their overall coherence. To this end, I want to suggest three ways in which readers may relate Parts 1 and 2 of the present work. A conclusion should, after all, be fitting, and I take it for granted that readers may feel the need not only to digest the individual arguments presented herein but also to interpret the whole. Accordingly, each of these ways offers a descriptive framework that focuses on a different level of meaning and so proffers an answer to the question, “What am I doing in this text?”

### TRINITARIAN HERMENEUTICS

In the first place, I have sought to expose the philosophical, and ultimately theological, presuppositions that underlie debates, ancient and modern, about biblical interpretation. Theology is obviously hermeneutical, insofar as it seeks to interpret Scripture. Yet I have argued throughout this work that the converse is also true. Hermeneutics is theological, insofar as the interpretation of texts in general rests on beliefs about God and humanity. Specifically, beliefs that have to do with God, the world, and ourselves are implicit in the views interpreters take on the nature of the author, text, and reader. The present work represents a sustained plea to literary theorists and philosophers to make their implicit theologies explicit.

### From Theological to Trinitarian Hermeneutics

The belief that there is something “in” the text, a presence not of the reader’s own making, is a belief in transcendence. To read in order to encounter something beyond the mere play of signs is, to use Steiner’s phrase, a “wager” on transcendence and a hope in the possibility of transformation. Both the believers (e.g., Steiner) and the unbelievers (e.g., Derrida) agree at least on this, though the former affirm the reality of such a meaning while the latter deny it. The unbelievers—Undeers and Users—deny the existence of a determinate message that transcends the surface play of the text. Disputes about the nature of interpretation are ultimately theological, therefore, insofar as they revolve around the possibility of transcendence.

On the one hand, then, we should read the Bible like any other text, though due consideration must be given to those factors that set it apart (e.g., its divine-human authorship, its canonical shape, its function as Scripture). On the other hand, we

should read every other text with the same theological presuppositions that we bring to, and discover through, our study of the Bible. To argue that interpretation is theological is already an ambitious thesis, but it does not go far enough. In this book I have made the further claim that *the best general hermeneutics is a trinitarian hermeneutics*. Yes, the Bible should be interpreted "like any other book"; but every book should be interpreted with norms that we derive and establish from trinitarian theology.<sup>5</sup>

I do not wish to be misunderstood. The Trinity is not merely an illustration of a general intellectual process. I am not beginning with a philosophical framework and saying, "The Trinity is like that." Nor am I using the Trinity to justify a particular interpretive approach, as did Origen in relation to his tripartite distinction between the body, soul, and spirit of a text. *My appeal to the Trinity arises rather from the perception that the literary crisis about textual meaning is related to the broader philosophical crisis concerning realism, rationality, and right, and that this crisis, summed up by the term "postmodern," is in turn explicitly theological.* After all, it was Nietzsche's announcement of the "death of God" that eventually led to the "death of the author." Deconstruction, we may recall, is the death of God put into hermeneutics.<sup>6</sup> However, Nietzsche's was essentially a theological mistake that followed from a misleading view of God—a non-trinitarian view, to be exact. My recourse to a specifically trinitarian hermeneutics thus reflects my attempt to coordinate the remedy with the diagnosis. The degenerative disease that is slowly destroying Western civilization is a result of its denial of the Christian God and the Christian Gospel.

- I have appealed to a number of threefold distinctions in the course of this study:
- (1) to the literary triad of author—text—reader;
  - (2) to the traditional triadic division of philosophical labor: metaphysics—epistemology—ethics;
  - (3) to the three key interpretive issues that follow from these branches of philosophy: hermeneutic realism, hermeneutic rationality, and hermeneutic responsibility respectively;
  - (4) to the three components of the speech act: locution, illocution, perlocution;
  - (5) to three central Christian doctrines: creation, Incarnation/revelation, sanctification;
  - (6) to the trinity of God: the Father, Son, and Spirit.

What exactly has been the role of trinitarian theology in my analyses? I have been at pains not to use the Trinity merely as an illustration of a point obtained elsewhere. On the contrary, I have accepted Steiner's fascinating premise that God somehow "underwrites" language and attempted to clarify it from an explicitly Christian point of view. *The Trinity thus serves the role of what Kant calls a "transcendental condition": a necessary condition for the possibility of something humans experience but cannot otherwise explain, namely, the experience of meaningful communication.* From a Christian perspective, God is first and foremost a communicative agent, one who relates to humankind through words and the Word. Indeed, God's very being is a self-communicative act that both constitutes and enacts the covenant of discourse: speaker (Father), Word (Son), and reception (Spirit) are all interrelated.<sup>7</sup> Human communication is a similarly covenantal affair, though we cannot pour ourselves into our com-

municative acts and ensure their effects as God can through his Word and Spirit. Humans have the dignity of communicative agency, though not its perfection.

Contemporary literary theory is bound up with the modification or the outright rejection of orthodox Christian positions. We can readily see the effect that the loss of a Christian doctrine of God has on theories of textual interpretation by working backwards through the six triads listed above. To deny that God speaks into being what is other than himself is to refuse to ascribe locutions and illocutions to God; it is to reject the notion of the Creator's *parole*. But this is to reject the idea that the created order has meaning and authorial intention. This in turn leads to metaphysical non-realism, to the denial that there is an inherent order or structure in the "book" of nature. Metaphysical non-realism, next, spawns other forms of non-realism, including the hermeneutic variety. If meaning is not there, then there is nothing to be known and nothing for which interpreters are responsible. As a result, the author is pronounced "dead" on the reader's arrival. The death of the author "thus liberates an activity we may call counter-theological . . . for to refuse to halt meaning is finally to refuse God."<sup>8</sup>

Such is the postmodern "a/theology" that has led to readers becoming writers and to the ideology of pluralism. Postmodern skepticism thus represents an anti-theosis, not only to modernity, but to Christian theology as well. The thesis underlying the present work takes God's trinitarian communicative action as the paradigm, not merely the illustration, of all genuine message-sending and receiving. God is a speaking God. The Father is the one who, in the words of the creeds, *est locutus per prophetas*. Most of what God does—creating, warning, commanding, promising, forgiving, informing, comforting, etc.—is accomplished by speech acts. Moreover, God's speech agency is the epitome of clarity and efficacy.

Speech act theory serves as handmaiden to a trinitarian theology of communication. If the Father is the locutor, the Son is his preeminent illocutor. Christ is God's definitive Word, the substantive content of his message. And the Holy Spirit—the condition and power of receiving the sender's message—is God the perlocutor, the reason that his words do not return to him empty (Isa. 55:11). The trine God is therefore the epitome of communicative agency: the speech agent who utters, embodies, and keeps his Word. Human speakers, created in God's image, enjoy the dignity of communicative agency, though as sinners their speech acts (and interpretations) are subject to all the imperfections and distortions that characterize human fallenness.<sup>9</sup>

### True and False Religion

Current debates over right and wrong ways to read quickly become debates about true and false religion, about the nature of ultimate reality, and about distinguishing the divine voice from the dumb idol. Indeed, this would be one way to construe the relation of Parts 1 and 2 of the present work. The two parts describe two *theologies* of interpretation: the hermetic and the hermeneutic—and so confront the reader with a choice: to approach the theory and practice of interpretation with explicitly non-Christian theological assumptions or to work with assumptions drawn from Christian faith. What makes this dispute a religious one is that each side accuses the other of idolatry—of constructing false images of God.

In suggesting that general hermeneutics is a predicate or subset of theological hermeneutics, I have been aided, in a backhanded sort of way, by several secular philosophers and literary theorists (most notably, Derrida) who recognize the counter-theological quality of their own proposals. Only by reviewing contemporary trends and current developments in some detail could I hope to convince readers that many of the basic issues in literary theory and criticism depend on positions that are philosophical and ultimately theological. To repeat: the essential difference between the various postmodern approaches to interpretation and the approach represented here is to be found on the level of one's worldview, which is to say, theology. For me, interpretation is the positive attempt to recover the author's enacted intention, in all its complexity, and to relate it to the present. The doctrines of creation, incarnation, revelation, and reconciliation are the main theological ideas that inspire and govern my approach. Postmodern critics, on the other hand, generally treat claims to have grasped objective meaning as illusory and view interpretation that is oriented to transcendence as idolatrous. The unbelievers of our time therefore urge various moralities of disbelief that are funded by negative theologies and *a/theologies*. For Derrida, God is less a presence than an absence; interpretation a matter of what is purely immanent to language.

The *a/theology* of deconstruction predisposes one to look at the world and at texts as a sea of indeterminate forces that lacks any transcendent ground or meaning. Contemporary non-realists follow Feuerbach in explaining belief in God and meaning alike in terms of human projections and the will to power. I readily acknowledge the partial truth of this position. I grant the inevitable role of subjectivity. We do not see the world or a text as God sees it, but through finite and fallible interpretive frameworks. I have argued that some frameworks—in particular, the literary frameworks or genres of Scripture—let more reality through than others. The Undoers, however, acknowledge neither the possibility nor the actuality of a genuine cognitive contact with reality. Postmoderns are unable to account either for literary knowledge or for biblical revelation. According to the Scriptures and Christian tradition, however, God is a speaking, revealing God, whose Spirit accompanies his Word from inspiration through its scripturation to appropriation.

Ultimately, Undoers and Users only bruise the heel of hermeneutics. The postmodern suspicion of hermeneutics can only be partial; in fact, even postmoderns believe they sometimes encounter what is more than their own projections in texts. Suspicion cannot become a consistent worldview; that way madness lies. Consequently, the postmodern bite is most effective when directed at the prideful interpreter; the wound need not be mortal so long as one heeds its moral. Undoers and Users helpfully expose the lie behind interpretations that too quickly claim to have attained the "plain" meaning. After Derrida, every honest interpreter will have to acknowledge that his or her interpretation always falls short. I therefore agree with Jeanron's assessment: "One of Derrida's main contributions to hermeneutics lies precisely in his powerful warning against any form of absolutist or authoritarian reading of texts."<sup>8</sup> But postmodern theories have not succeeded in showing that interpretation is impossible. For while our knowledge of textual meaning may never be absolute, it may nevertheless be adequate. Against Feuerbach, atheism is not the

secret of religion, nor is meaninglessness the secret of interpretation. There is something in texts to recover, a presence that is more than the reflection of my own face. In reading, we confront a mediated immediacy and meet with a face or a voice of an other, of an author. This brings us to my second integrative theme.

### THE VERBAL ICON AND THE AUTHORIAL FACE

William Wimsatt, in his 1954 book *The Verbal Icon*, set forth the credo for New Criticism, an approach to literature that focused, as we have seen, on the text itself, independent of its origins or effects, as a source of knowledge in its own right. I have considered but rejected this approach in favor of a view that sees texts as communicative acts characterized by intention, illocution, and efficacy. Nevertheless, the image of the "verbal icon" is a rich and suggestive one. Indeed, we could view the positive argument in Part 2 as an apology for the verbal icon, as opposed to the more negative treatment in Part 1 of the text as a verbal idol.

#### The Empty Place: The Verbal Idol

I have already conceded that interpretations can become idolatrous. Insofar as they have pressed this point home, the Undoers and Users deserve our thanks. However, I have resisted their further claim that the text is an idol, a dumb object rather than a communicative act, a void rather than a voice.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol. . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Ex. 20:4–5). The biblical prohibition against idolatry is well known. What, however, does it have to do with hermeneutics? Just this: in both cases, religion and reading, the idol in question is a social construction. The unbeliever considers "God" and "meaning" to be the *effects* of adoration or interpretation respectively, not their prior conditions. The implications of treating the text as an idol—as the social construction of a community of readers—are, I believe, far-reaching. The most important of these implications is the one that leads to hermeneutic non-realism: to see the text as an idol is to suggest that it is the worshipper (e.g., the reader) who endows it with whatever power it has. Meaning is "graven" by the reader, not "given" by the author. For idols, as the biblical authors well knew, are dumb; they cannot speak or communicate anything new.

The idol, to return to the metaphor with which I began this work, is a *mirror* in which one sees only oneself: one's own beliefs, one's own values, one's own image. The divinity of the idol is a measure of oneself. Idols are projections of the human will to power. The idol confines the divine to the measure of the human gaze; precisely because idols are man-made, they cannot help us see or get beyond ourselves. Readers treat the text as an idol whenever they see in it only what they themselves have produced. On this view, the reader is the author, writer, or creator of the text-as-received. What the idol images is ultimately its maker—its reader-god. The idol thus acts "as a mirror, not as a portrait."<sup>9</sup>

Insofar as postmodern Undoers and Users resist the temptation to turn interpretations into idols, well and good. But insofar as their iconoclasm breeds indifference to the text, insofar as their suspicion renders every text dumb and mute, unable

to speak, they go too far. And insofar as their cleansing of the temple lets in other spirits or enshrines self in the place of the other, their iconoclasm is damaging and dangerous. To say that the reader creates meaning is ultimately to give the reader only himself or herself, which is the same practical outcome of all forms of idolatry. Because the idol has nothing to give beyond what the idolater has put into it, any time spent tending and attending to idols is futile. In the end, it is the idolater who is deceived and ultimately undone.

#### A Meaningful Space: The Verbal Icon

Seen from an explicitly Christian point of view, the text is more like an icon than an idol. While the icon is also an "image," it is an image that opens onto an infinite depth to which one's gaze has ultimately to surrender, not a surface on which the reader writes. For Jean-Luc Marion, on whose analysis of iconicity this section largely relies, the difference between "idol" and "icon" is not the difference between two kinds of objects but of two different ways of regarding the same object.<sup>19</sup> Where the idol is a projection, the icon is a revelation; in the icon, that is, something comes to us from beyond.

Christ is the "icon" (Gk: *eikon*) of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). Marion notes that an icon lets the visible image be "saturated" by the invisible. Christians do not project divinity onto Jesus; rather, divinity shines through (at least to those with the faith, spirituality, and interpretive virtue to perceive it). The historian Norman Davies states that religious icons are the most enduring genre of European art.<sup>20</sup> The icon summons the human gaze to surpass itself by not remaining on the level of what is merely visible. Icons do not call attention to themselves, much less to their surface; they are rather "gates of mystery" and "doors of perception" to transcendence, to what lies beyond the surface level. Neither does the body of Jesus call attention to itself or exhaust his meaning. As in iconology and Christology, so it is with texts. The picture of postmodern interpreters as those whose gaze remains "frozen" on the surface—the level of the semiotic, of *langue*, of the play of signs—is a compelling one.

Let us take the notion of the verbal icon a step further. The Greek fathers, in particular St. John of Damascus (c. 675–749), distinguished between worship, which one directs to God alone, and reverence, which one may give to persons or objects. This reverence is directed not to the icon as an object, but rather to that which the icon represents or attests.<sup>21</sup> *The icon is a witness to transcendence from transcendence.* But this is precisely what we earlier concluded about texts: the task of interpretation is to get beyond oneself by attending to the form of a literary act in order to encounter an embodied intention. Interpretation is the attempt to bear true witness to what an other has said or done. Similarly, the posture demanded by the icon is that of "watchful calm." One cannot wrest its meaning from it; one does not master an icon or a text so much as attend, and pay attention, to it. To claim that the Bible is a verbal icon thus leads not to bibliolatry, but to the idea of *Holy Scripture* and to the idea that the text points away from itself.

One last feature of the icon is worth mentioning. Religious icons typically highlight the face (of God, of Christ, of saints), a potent visual symbol. What sense, then, does it make to speak of a "verbal" icon? The text is a verbal icon that represents the

"implied face" of the author and mediates the author's presence. Marion states: "The body of the text does not belong to the text, but to the One who is embodied in it."<sup>22</sup> This sentence indicates how great is the distance between Wimsatt and the New Critics on the one hand, and Marion on the other, regarding the use of the term "icon." For Marion, the icon is a face that resists attempts to "master" it as one would an object of theoretical knowledge. It is a commonplace that, while we have no difficulty in recognizing faces, it is well-nigh impossible to explain how we know that we know them. Recognizing faces involves a form of personal knowledge, not merely a technical mastery of a person's physiognomy. Might there be an analogy between recognizing faces and interpretation? Could it be that the goal of reading Scripture is to have our gaze drawn and directed to the face of Christ?

The Second Council of Nicea in 787 states: "He who venerates the icon venerates in it the *hypostasis* of the one who is inscribed in it."<sup>23</sup> What matters, above all else, in the icon is the subject matter: the sense of a personal presence. The church fathers, of course, had in mind a pictorial face. Yet something similar holds for the text that mediates a personal presence in the form of a voice. To attend to the *hypostasis* of a visual or a verbal icon need not imply the substantial presence of a person, only a person's *intentional* presence.<sup>24</sup> In the visual icon, it is the gaze that emanates from the icon that counts: "Instead of the invisible mirror, which sent the human gaze back to itself . . . the icon opens in a face that gazes at our gazes in order to summon them to its depth."<sup>25</sup> Every face, says Marion, is like an icon; it is the public sign of a person's inmost being. The face, then, is both symbol and sacrament of the other to whom we owe an infinite ethical obligation.

#### The Authorial Face: Practicing the Presence of an Other

Le vrai lecteur est presque toujours un ami.<sup>26</sup>

I have argued that a text has an identity that is more like a person than a thing. Thanks to Marion, we can now see why. An icon—whether verbal or visual—shows us a face "that gazes at our gazes in order to summon them to its depth."<sup>27</sup> Like Marion, Emmanuel Lévinas links the visual to what knowers are able to grasp and to exhaust. Neither the face nor the icon, however, can be exhausted by our gaze or by our interpretations. For the face represents the singularity of the person to whom we owe an infinite obligation. We can never say that we have ever done all our duty towards the other. If I am right in linking Marion and Lévinas in this way and in relating the verbal icon to the face of the author, then ethics has been successfully established at the heart of interpretation theory. The reader's first obligation is to recognize in the text a face or voice other than one's own. Lévinas writes: "Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks."<sup>28</sup> The verbal icon shows us an implied face, and an explicit voice. I believe that this voice, like the face, summons the reader to responsibility.

Albert Schweitzer, at the end his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, compares scholars who believe they have discovered the historical Jesus to people looking down a deep well and discovering their own reflections at the bottom.<sup>29</sup> It is all too easy to project one's own values and interests onto the gospel. Postmodern thinkers are right about that. Interpreters who seek literary or historical knowledge must thus beware

of Schweitzer's well. Interpretation requires belief in transcendence—a belief in a face or a voice that the text mediates *and is not our own*. Interpretation is a deeply ethical act: we have a duty to respect the voice of another, not to crush it. And when that voice testifies to the acts of God, readers should not only respect but revere it.

#### HERMENEUTIC HUMILITY AND LITERARY KNOWLEDGE

We have now characterized the relation between Parts 1 and 2 in terms of the debate between true and false religion and in terms of the difference between idols and icons. My final attempt to bring out the coherence of the two parts highlights the "morality of literary knowledge." Just how confident can we be as interpreters that we have discovered the meaning of the text rather than ourselves and our own projections? The short response is to say both that *our knowledge (Part 2) must be tempered by humility (Part 1), and that our skepticism (Part 1) must be countered by conviction (Part 2)*.

There are two sorts of responsibility in interpretation: a negative requirement not to exceed one's epistemic grasp and claim knowledge of what *cannot* be known, and a positive responsibility to make the effort to know what *can* be known. There must be a recognition of givens and of limits; the morality of literary knowledge demands both. If we are to live this tension, we must avoid absolute knowledge and absolute agnosticism alike. To be an interpreter, which is our vocation as humans and Christians, is cause both for dignity and for humility; we can know, but not as God knows.

Can we "prove" the realists' intuition that we have heard the voice of an other—the voice of the author or, for that matter, the voice of God? No, I am a critical realist, chastened by the conflict of interpretations and by the undoing of interpretive pride and prejudice. Readers with a healthy sense of the limits of interpretation need not fall prey to interpretive idolatry. Here, too, what we discover in Scripture holds true for hermeneutics in general. As Sternberg brilliantly observes, the Scriptures themselves inscribe the cognitive difference between God and humankind into the very fabric of the biblical story, a narrative with so many gaps and reversals that "the only knowledge perfectly acquired is the knowledge of our limitations."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, readers with a healthy sense of the givens of communicative agency need not fall prey to interpretive skepticism. As we saw in chapter 6, God designed the human mind to seek, and to attain, understanding of communicative action.

#### Two Deadly Interpretive Sins

The sins of the interpreter are two: pride and sloth. This book will have succeeded if it has established the possibility of a reading that yields knowledge while resisting both temptations, a reading that would be both humble yet confident.

We have repeatedly encountered, during the course of this work, the interpretive sin of pride in its various guises. It is the sin of conservative and liberal alike; for pride knows neither party nor denominational boundaries. Pride is a corrupting influence on the interpreter for a number of reasons. First, it encourages us to think that we have got the correct meaning before we have made the appropriate effort to recover it. Pride typically does not wait to listen; it knows. Indeed, at the limit pride is certain; it encourages claims of absolute knowledge. In Taylor's words: "The decor-

struction of the Western theological network discloses the recurrent effort of human beings to achieve a position of domination. This struggle appears to grow out of the conviction that mastery results from the ability to secure presence and establish identity by overcoming absence and repressing difference."<sup>22</sup> Readers who take pride in their readings seek to "master" the text and so risk elevating their commentary over the text in importance. Pride neglects the voice of the other in favor of its own. It may therefore be the preeminent temptation of the fundamentalist, insofar as he or she craves certainty.

However, pride is, as I have said, non-partisan. Those on the radical left of hermeneutic theory are not immune to its pull. Oddly enough, it is possible to take pride in one's skepticism as well as in one's certainty. Indeed, it is sometimes hard to tell the two apart—particularly when the skeptic insists that one cannot know anything. Some of the more sophisticated Lindoers adopt a superior tone even as they inform us (through texts) that the author is dead. To ignore the reality of the author's claims on us, however, is ultimately to refuse to recognize the otherness of the text. There is something troubling about the more extreme expressions of this defiance. To be preoccupied with one's ego and one's own pleasure is, according to Piaget, one of the lowest levels of child development. The refusal to respond to the genuine otherness of the text may be the hermeneutical equivalent of sucking one's thumb. Finally, the skeptic signals a tendency toward pride by his or her laughter—the laughter of debasement and ridicule, and perhaps of the madness of despair. Interpretive pride at its ugliest leads not to humility but to humiliation.

Interpretive sloth is a kind of shadow image of interpretive pride, its evil twin. Whereas pride claims knowledge prematurely, sloth prematurely claims the impossibility of literary knowledge. Whereas interpretive pride ignores the reader's finitude, interpretive sloth ignores the reader's freedom and responsibility. Make no mistake: interpretive sloth is every bit as deadly a sin as pride, for sloth breeds indifference, inattentiveness, and inaction. Sloth is another name for what Kierkegaard called the "aesthetic" stage of existence: the way of the unconvinced and uncommitted. Specifically, interpretive sloth leads the reader to forgo the effort of attending to the text. Those on the theological right are slothful when, instead of interpreting for themselves, they rely on someone else—the Spirit, a television preacher, a teacher—to tell them what the text means. Those on the theological left are similarly slothful when, instead of working towards the best interpretation, they remain satisfied with a plethora of conflicting, often contradictory, readings. Interpretive sloth thus ignores the voice of the other every bit as much as does interpretive pride.

#### What Christianity Gives the World

"What Christianity gives the world is hermeneutics" (Buber). More to the point: I suggest that the distinctively Christian contribution to the debate about meaning and interpretation is best presented under the rubric of a "hermeneutics of humility and conviction."

Why humility? First, because humility is the solution to many post-modern objections to the notion of literary knowledge. Given the ever-present temptation to make idols of our interpretations, humility appears as a prime interpretive virtue. In rec-

ognizing real limits, humility is pride's defeat. In recognizing that interpreters are not makers but receivers of meaning, humility is realistic about the aims and objectives of hermeneutics and a natural ally of hermeneutic realism. Humility is also significant for epistemology (i.e., for a critical rationality that acknowledges one's fallibility) and for ethics (i.e., for a sense of responsibility that acknowledges one's obligations to others). In short, humility is the virtue that constantly reminds interpreters that we can get it *wrong*. More positively, humility enables the reader to wait upon the text, to participate in the covenant of discourse, and, if need be, to empty oneself for the sake of the text. C. S. Lewis describes such interpretive "kenosis" in a justly famous passage: "But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself, and am never more myself than when I do."<sup>23</sup>

Deconstruction, together with the varieties of hermeneutic suspicion, performs a valuable service in checking interpretive pride. I readily grant this point. Yet I have also argued that the humiliation of meaning and interpretation that results from this undoing is not the same as interpretive humility. Humility, I have suggested, is a specifically Christian contribution to hermeneutics. This last observation warrants further comment.

As we have seen, late twentieth-century interpretation is rife with ideological warfare. The ideological aims and interests of readers and interpretive communities seem to have taken precedence over the aims and interests of either authors or texts. The postmodern crisis in interpretation is actually a legitimization crisis. Whose voice, which interpretation, what aim counts, and why? Cultural theorists increasingly warn us that all knowledge claims are really instances of institutional power. For Foucault, to cite but one case, the "morality of literary knowledge" may be a contradiction in terms. Set against this backdrop of suspicion, the Bible stands out for its profound *anti-ideological* thrust. The Bible has a number of built-in strategies that challenge and resist the will to power. Indeed, a number of the high points in the biblical story line involve, at least implicitly, the critique of pride and prejudice. Moreover, it is largely through the hard exercise of interpreting the Bible that readers acquire the anti-ideological virtue of humility. Perhaps this is what Barth had in mind when he noted that biblical interpreters are the freest thinkers.

Is it really the case that the Bible represents an exception to Nietzsche's rule that sees truth as in thrall to the will-to-power—that Scripture propounds, as it were, an anti-ideological ideology? I have already commented on the importance of the Creator-creature distinction for hermeneutics. It was the willful ignorance of this distinction that led both to the Fall and to the tower of Babel, and thence to the will-to-power and to the confusion of tongues—in short, to distorted communication.<sup>24</sup> The climax of the Old Testament critique of ideology is the second commandment against idolatry, which reinforces the absolute distinction between God, the Creator-Author, on the one hand, and human being, the interpreting animal, on the other.

In the New Testament, Jesus consistently teaches that it is the lowly and the meek who will inherit the earth. For example: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed

them to little children" (Matt. 11:25). In light of humanity's utter dependence on God, humility is clearly the most honest and appropriate attitude—and the most fitting—to adopt. The apostle Paul states that the foolishness of human beings is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Indeed, it is Paul's theology of the cross that provides the most compelling safeguard against the human will to power and its product, ideology. Ideology is the preeminent idiot of the mind and of the illusion that meaning, like the ill-fated Tower, is ultimately a matter of social construction. The cross of Jesus contains counter-cultural wisdom; it teaches us that we must die to self in order to find self. This is especially true in the case of interpretation, in that it is only when we surrender our previous understandings that we are open to receive new ones.

What Christianity gives to hermeneutics is the contrast between a "hermeneutics of the cross" and a "hermeneutics of glory."<sup>25</sup> Those who read according to the hermeneutics of glory revel in their own interpretive skills, impose their interpretive theories on texts, and eclipse the text's own meaning. Such "glory" is, of course, short-lived. According to the hermeneutics of humility, by contrast, we will only gain understanding—of God, texts, others, and ourselves—if we are willing to put ourselves second and our interpretive theories to the test of the text.

One last doctrine completes the case for hermeneutic humility. It is eschatology, which we have already examined. Here I need only add that one should pursue the quest for the single correct interpretation under the aegis of hope and its reminder "not yet." That the meaning and significance of a text are never a present possession, but a partially fulfilled promise, is perhaps sufficient antidote to the poison of prideful interpretation.

To speak only of a hermeneutics of humility, however, would be a one-sided description of what Christianity gives hermeneutics. Humility must be balanced by conviction. Why? Here it may perhaps be best to start with eschatology—with the theme of Jesus' own preaching that the kingdom of God is already among us.<sup>26</sup> The "already" is as important an eschatological theme as the "not yet." There is a similar eschatological qualification that could be made of epistemology: while absolute knowledge is not a present possession, adequate knowledge is. Some things about God, that is, may be known on the basis of the revelation we already have in Christ. Indeed, we might here speak of "realized epistemology." God has already staked his truth claim in the cross of Christ. He has already redeemed his claim in resurrection. Of course, this is another aspect of verification that is "not yet"; only at the last day will we know more than provisionally. Nevertheless, the apostle Paul urged his interpreters to boldness on behalf of the gospel message. While there may be more light on the Bible's meaning to come, we have a firm enough grasp of the overall story line as to encourage boldness in our witness. Only such confidence, commitment, and conviction about what can be known can serve as the corrective to interpretive skepticism and sloth. The uncommitted interpretation is not worth hearing.

As I have argued, God created humans in his image with the dignity of communicative agency. The design plan of the human creature includes the ability to achieve understanding through verbal communication. Is it not the case that we only communicate with others because we presume that they will understand us? The despair

of language's frailties must not engulf the delight in language's capacities. The "hermeneutics of conviction" encourages readers to have the courage of their communicative convictions. All knowing begins in commitment, but it need not end there. The hermeneutics of conviction thus stands for the belief that the same interpretive virtues that arise from the motivation for literary knowledge are also reliable means for attaining cognitive contact with meaning.<sup>27</sup> Faith not only seeks understanding but often gets it.

A hermeneutics of humility and conviction. We must hold these two aspects together in a constructive tension. Emphasize one without the other, and you quickly fall prey to one or the other of the two deadly interpretive sins. Emphasize the two together, and you are able to avoid hermeneutic dogmatism and skepticism alike. The situation of the reader thus parallels that of the believer who is *strenuus iustus et peccator*, saint and sinner. As in soteriology, so in hermeneutics, the pastoral challenge is to balance the themes of assurance and perseverance. When the saints are besieged by doubts, the good pastor reminds them that they are in Christ. When, on the other hand, they begin to think too highly of themselves, he or she will minister an imperative word: *remain* in Christ. Both assurance and perseverance are necessary for the believer. So it is with the interpreter: he or she must be assured that literary knowledge and understanding are possible, but not led to think that reaching understanding is easy. On the contrary, one must be encouraged to keep on persevering after meaning and significance in light of one's infinite obligation to the voice of the other. A similar dynamic characterizes the work of the scientist as well. Michael Polanyi perfectly captures the tension between humility and conviction that constitutes the Christian morality of knowledge: "The principal purpose of this book [*Personal Knowledge*] is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false."<sup>28</sup>

#### "Here I Stand"

The history of biblical interpretation includes a precursor to Polanyi's picture of the responsible scientist. Martin Luther summed up the hermeneutical virtues when he confessed, in a context fraught with political and ideological power, "Here I stand."<sup>29</sup> Luther's brief confession sums up much of I want to say about the interplay between humility and conviction.<sup>30</sup> "Here"; not there, not everywhere, but here. I stand *here*. This is an acknowledgment of finitude. I am here in space and time, here in culture and tradition, here in this body with this history. In this sense, "Here I stand" is a confession of hermeneutic humility. At the same time, Luther did not simply find himself placed, but occupied a place. He stood where he stood because he believed it to be the right place. "Here I stand," Luther was passionately committed to his interpretation of Scripture because he believed it to be faithful to the meaning of the text itself. That is, Luther stood by and stood with the text, and stood against the tradition of its interpretation. Luther's stance thus manifests hermeneutic conviction.

"Here I stand." This was Luther's answer to a difficult hermeneutical question. He stood before the Holy Roman Emperor at the Diet of Worms, accused of heresy and threatened with excommunication and death. His interrogator asked, "Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand Scripture?" perhaps anti-

padding the postmodern suspicion that interpreters see only themselves in the text. In response, Luther asserted that interpretive tradition alone would not sway him. Only Scripture could convict. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God."<sup>31</sup> Luther insisted that it was "through the Word, and not by force, wisdom gov[er]ns."<sup>32</sup> He believed that speech was God's special gift to humanity; for it is by speech—"by reading and preaching Scripture—that faith and understanding come. Ultimately, Luther stands for the possibility that the text and its meaning remain independent of the process of interpretation and hence have the ability to transform the reader. Indeed, one reliable indicator of a good Protestant hermeneutics is whether it enables reflection. A hermeneutics of humility and conviction may well be a necessary condition for reforming individual self-understanding and interpretive traditions. Perhaps it is even a sufficient condition. It is certainly the condition for authentic interpretation, that is, for bearing true witness to textual meaning.

Neither standing nor understanding, however, is the final word in interpretation. The final word belongs to following. The church should be that community of humbly confident interpreter-believers whose consciences, seared and sealed by the Spirit, are captive to the Word, and whose commentaries and communities seek progressively to embody the meaning and significance of the text. Readers who work and pray over the text, who interpret freely and responsibly and who follow its intricacies of meaning, will be progressively transformed into the image of him who is the ultimate object of the biblical witness. Those who stand in this dynamic way understand and *witness*, and so fulfill their vocation as witnesses and martyrs to the Word. These are the interpreter-believers who, like the psalmist, take up their book and walk:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path (Ps. 119:105).

#### NOTES

1. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 227.
2. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14.
3. Only on such a basis can we secure the possibility of meaningful interpersonal communication. The alternative—a naturalistic, evolutionary account—sees language as an instrument of domination and manipulation, not communication.
4. Here is a growing literature analyzing modernity in terms of its rejection of a certain, non-utilitarian view of God. See esp. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many*.
5. Karl Barth famously arrives at the doctrine of the Trinity by analyzing God's revelation in Jesus Christ (see his *Church Dogmatics* I/1).
6. Barthes, "Death of the Author," 54.
7. On my view, the human speech agent has real freedom and responsibility with regard to his or her words. According to the Unders, however, the self is less a speaker than a cipher of a language, a mere pawn of a linguistic system that shapes the way it talks and thinks.
8. Jeanron, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 104.
9. The analogy of the icon is put to striking use by Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 12. Marion is concerned not with hermeneutics so much as theology. He believes that the attempt to think God as a metaphysical reality with the concepts of being falls prey to a form of conceptual idolatry.

10. For a somewhat different analysis of "iconological interpretation," see Ervin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955) ch. 1.
11. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 247.
12. See Symeon Lash, "Icons," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, 275.
13. Marton, *God Without Being*, 1.
14. Cited in *ibid.*, 18.
15. *Ibid.*, 19. Marton actually defines the icon as over against the idol according to the "aim of the intention," 19.
16. *Ibid.*
17. A quote by Pagnoli: "A true reader is almost always a friend."
18. Marton, *God Without Being*, 19.
19. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 87.
20. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 3d ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1954).
21. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 47.
22. Taylor, *Erring*, 15. The kind of presence that we can achieve as readers, I have argued, is an iconic presence that mediates but does not surrender its meaning without remainder.
23. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 141. "Kenosis" refers to the Son of God's "emptying" himself for the sake of the human other in his incarnation (cf. Phil. 2:5-11).
24. Cf. Augustine on Moses' intent in Genesis 1 (*Confessions*, 12.24-25) and how to deal with the plurality of interpretations. Pride is the prime hermeneutical sin. See also Calvin's remark that the conflict of interpretations serves to keep us humble and in communication with other interpreters (Calvin: *Commentaries*, 75-6).
25. I am amending Luther's contrast between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory as found in his "Heidelberg Disputation."
26. I am referring to the "realized eschatology" associated with C. H. Dodd's interpretation of Jesus' parables in his *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1961). See also N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), chs. 6-8.
27. I am here borrowing (and amending) Zagzebski's definition of knowledge as "a state of cognitive contact with reality arising out of acts of intellectual virtue" (*Virtues of the Mind*, 270).
28. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), 7.
29. My interpretation of Luther's confession is largely an example of oversteering on my part. Yet I believe Luther would agree that I have correctly caught the "spirit" of the letter of his remark (that is, if it is authentic!).
30. For a fuller account of the incident, see Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), ch. 10.
31. Luther, *Table Talk*, 25.

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