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Labyrinthine Passages: The Reader Through the Text

A Dissertation Presented

by

Stephen Szolosi

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The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation argues that pre- and post-modern authors employ the labyrinth to represent epistemological struggles. The five examined books—St. Augustine of Hippo’s *De doctrina christiana* and *Confessions*, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and Paul Auster’s *The City of Glass*—use labyrinthine imagery to represent our relationship to mystery, to identify the limits and consequences of a search for understanding, and to implicate their readers in that process. While the selected authors represent the hope of finding one’s way through the labyrinth, they also affirm that our passages need not be directed toward a masterful or a map-like understanding to be rewarding. In fact, the selected authors immerse their

audiences in a reading process that obstructs interpretive resolution in order to esteem acceptance of human finitude and acknowledgement of incomprehensible mystery.

The first chapter contends that St. Augustine of Hippo utilizes the labyrinth in his treatise on exegesis, *De doctrina christiana*, to characterize both our use of signs and our living in the world. Augustine suggests that our reading and living do not extricate us from an experience of mystery, so much as enable us to enter into a maze that resists full understanding. The second chapter argues that Augustine composes the *Confessions* so as to engage the audience in a labyrinthine search for God. He represents that quest as loaded with spiritual consequence, but also suggests that no comprehensive overview permits us to map the order established by God. In chapter three, I turn to Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* that features maze imagery in a depiction of the author struggling to interpret and recount a dream. Chaucer appeals to mazes to discourage efforts to fix the poem's meaning and indicate that the truth sets us in motion rather than furnishes a fixed position. The fourth chapter takes up Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in which the readers find a labyrinthine structure. In relation to the maze, Ondaatje links both encounters with mystery and claims to epistemic mastery to violence and eroticism. Finally, in chapter five I argue that the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* suggests that both epistemic mastery and disregard for the truth lead to our entrapment. The story's graphic rendering sets readers before a maze-like text and challenges them to find ways through the book that avoid this hazard.

By drawing together these works, it is possible in conclusion to note points of intersection and divergence between pre- and post-modern uses of the maze to characterize our epistemic position vis-à-vis mysteries.

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## **Introduction: An Entrance, a Thread, an Overview**

“To open a book is to enter a labyrinth.  
To read it is to pass through one.”

Jacques Attali *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society*

This dissertation examines the use of the labyrinth by pre- and post-modern authors to represent the epistemological struggles we meet in life and to immerse their audience in analogous struggles as they read. The five examined books—St. Augustine of Hippo’s *De doctrina christiana* and *Confessions*, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and Paul Auster’s *The City of Glass*—all represent the struggle to arrive at the truth in relation to labyrinths and deliberately accentuate the maze-like character of reading. These authors depict people who strive to find their way through complex mazes, some of which are physical spaces and others of which are immaterial labyrinthine processes. The stories raise for consideration varied consequences of our drive for the truth, of our failures to attain it, and of the ways we imagine those possibilities. The literary passages depicting those struggles are themselves labyrinthine. The books engage readers overtly in a process of choice even as the stories note that we regularly have to determine our course lacking knowledge or any assurance that our decisions will lead toward a position of understanding. Thus, the authors build literary mazes that lead readers to experience and reflect on the character of mystery and understanding and the ways that we live in relation to them.

Labyrinths and mazes have taken so many forms and served so many purposes that they furnish an elaborate paradigm for representing our relation to complex realities,

the process of pursuing an understanding of them, and the ways we define that venture.<sup>1</sup> Having discovered a limitless elasticity in the labyrinth, Allen Weiss proposes that the labyrinth “is an all-encompassing signifier, embracing every contradiction and possibility from the chaotic to the structured, the aleatoric to the necessary, the sacred to the profane, life to death” (133). If the connotations of labyrinths are myriad, a few key features can be highlighted in relation to their structures and the psychological experiences promoted by them. One classificatory distinction is worthy of particular note: certain mazes can be probed, exited, and mastered by those who enter them and others resist such mastery and remain both impenetrable and inextricable.

The first type entails a transition from an experience of the maze as an enigmatic structure to one of extraordinary design. The wayfarer’s course shifts from being one of disorientation to clarity of direction. That shift follows either a moral or epistemological change in the wayfarer’s position. Two modes of extricating oneself from the maze—completion of its course and Daedalian flight to a position overhead—reveal that the complex path of the labyrinth is a site of observable artistry and order. The design of the maze can be identified diachronically if one can thread the maze completely and retrospectively examine the course taken. Or, one can assume a position overhead that allows for the maze’s complexity to be surveyed synchronically. Either from the exit or

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<sup>1</sup> In the ancient world, labyrinths stood in Egypt and Crete, held prominent posts within the mythology and literature, and served as choreographic guides for dances. Through the Middle Ages, labyrinths served authors in literary, rhetorical, and theological works. They were set in the floors and walls of cathedrals, etched in baptismal fonts, and painted in the manuscripts of such authors as Boethius, Dante, and Chaucer. Their circuitous course has served as a rite of passage, a prompt to religious conversion, as well as a sign of wayward diversion. Their form has been given to gardens, prisons, tombs, and treasure houses. Still more recently, others have recognized labyrinthine forms in the World Wide Web and the nomadic and tangling paths cut by subways, highways, and airlines. In relation to this history, they can call to mind our hopes for some guiding thread, a sense of order, and perhaps a controlling view, but they are nevertheless also places that are known to bewilder and perhaps even to hide a beastly Minotaur.

from the overview, the wayfarer can survey the course and chart the maze's layout.<sup>2</sup> In relation to those positions, one can hypothesize a totalizing mastery of the labyrinth: the routes are fully explored, the center is probed, the exits and entrances are identified. All the apparent structural ambiguities and complexities of the labyrinth are fully mapped and tamed by making the transition. Thus, the wayfarer can take delight in overcoming the challenges of the maze and in comprehending its order.

The second type of labyrinth or maze does not allow for this conversion. Occupants of such a maze are unable to identify their position or direction in relation to a determined point such as an entrance, center, or exit. As a result, these mazes necessitate that choices be made even as one is uncertain where those decisions may lead. Such a structure deprives its wayfarer a controlling overview or sure thread. The wayfarer is unlikely to discern marks of design so long as they remain ensnared within the winding course of such a labyrinth. As a result, one is likely to experience such a maze as an inextricable and impenetrable trap. This infinite maze conjures a sense of confusion and constraint.

Yet, immersion in such a maze need not be construed negatively. When a labyrinth resists cartographic mastery, the structure can also inspire a sense of awe, freedom, and diversion. The routes of such a maze allow its occupant to move in ways that cannot be subordinated to a single and fixed rule of design. This maze is not

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Idea of Labyrinth*, Penelope Reed Doob has highlighted the occurrence of these metaphors when imagining the maze that can be probed, exited, and mapped. She proposes that ancient and medieval authors and artists tended to represent labyrinths, whether multicursal or unicursal in form, as “an embodiment of contraries—art and chaos, comprehensible artifact and inexplicable experience, pleasure and terror” (24-25). When Doob examines medieval literature, she proposes that this metaphor of labyrinthine “convertibility” prevailed in the religious characterization of books and the world (24). Doob claims that the medieval religious imagination reconciled this duality of the structure by proposing that once wayfarers “learn the maze or see the labyrinth whole, then, elaborate chaos is transformed to order” (24). In my dissertation, I differ with Doob’s assessment, and examine how God is on occasion also imagined as a maze-like mystery that resists such epistemic mastery.

governed by a restrictive and law-like master plan, but is a place of diverging routes lacking a single fixed entrance, center, or exit. In this instance, the conceptually infinite maze is a source of delight precisely because its lack of a fixed form suggests flexibility, movement, and freedom of choice.

Two distinctive characterizations of narrative and reading can be formulated in relation to these two conceptions of the maze. First, one can treat a text like a maze built according to an obscure but finally determinate and coherent plan. Initially, the text's meaning is enigmatic and the story leads us through a series of obstructions to the discovery of its organizing principle. As we make our way through such a text, we anticipate, despite the obstacles, that some final meaning makes sense of the whole. Reading such a book is directed toward interpretive closure. To arrive at that position necessitates utilizing either one or some set of possible interpretive threads to acquire a resolute and defensible understanding of a book's meaning. For example, we can propose that the true, stable, and coherent meaning is observable after seeking out an author's intention or by following a plot line as the guiding thread. The discovery and pursuit of that underlying principle converts the enigma of the literary maze into an order of meaning over which we have mastery.

Alternatively, one can imagine that a text's significance is maze-like because it defers perpetually any conclusive and fixed charting. Neither any single nor any set of compositional and interpretive principles can fully account for this text's meanings. No comprehensive or integrated system governs how this literature generates or defers meaning. Thus, a reader's passage through such a text will never lead to a single and fixed point in relation to which the meaning of the whole text can be determined. The

literature frustrates that aspiration. In fact, this text not only obstructs a reader's efforts to determine its meaning, but flaunts its lack of a specifiable ordering principle. Thus, the reading of such a text is not oriented toward the discovery of some final meaning, but is instead a participation in the text's enigmatic signifying process.<sup>3</sup>

These two possible ways of construing the maze-like character of literature are both called to mind by the examined works and contribute to my readings of them. Each author likens the passages formed by signs to the passageways of a maze. The authors make their books' structures an overt object of attention. They make ambiguous whether their books can be submitted to a linear reading by obstructing such analysis repeatedly and by putting in question whether one can move to a terminal point. In effect, they accentuate the labyrinthine features of their writing without clarifying whether their books permit a comprehensive charting or deprive their readers of such interpretive mastery. They engage the audience in a reading process that entails interpretive choice even as the books situate those choices within enigmatic structures of meaning. By creating such works, the authors attempt to situate their readers in literary labyrinths.<sup>4</sup>

In effect, these books anticipate the diverse dispositions readers can bring to the process of analysis. Readers can hypothesize that a point external to the story furnishes a

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<sup>3</sup> Contemporary literary theorists including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and J. Hillis Miller have raised for consideration the possibility of construing meaning apart from frameworks ordered in relation to fixed positions, overviews, or unified lines of logic. My dissertation highlights those features not only in postmodern literature that reflects contemporary theory, but also indicates that pre-modern writers utilized comparably complex frameworks when considering the operation of signs and meaning.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Wilson notes in a conclusion to his article that a "narrative can be a labyrinth if it seeks to capture its reader in the complexities of interpretation" (21). While Wilson's article posits this possibility, his article is devoted principally to characters trapped in mazes. This dissertation attends to the labyrinths appearing in each work and elaborates on the ways that the books themselves form labyrinths for their readers. My analysis differs from Wilson's also by highlighting that these authors do not restrictively associate the labyrinth or maze with the negative experience of entrapment, but also with diversion, irreducible complexity, refuge from oppressive systems, and freedom of choice.

position of interpretive mastery with respect to the literature. Or readers can concede that no final and fixed interpretation can be attributed to the books and insist that this undermines the books by emptying them of meaning. Or readers can cut passages through the literature while relishing the book's lack of any single overarching interpretive principle because they find in this the possibility of prolific meaning. The authors highlight within their literature these possible expectations and lead readers to reflect on their choices to proceed in one way rather than another. In doing so, the authors confer upon their literature a labyrinthine quality.

While the authors engage their audiences in a labyrinthine reading process, they do attempt to wield some control over the significance that this may have for readers. To prescribe what sense we might make of the mazes we tread when reading these books, the authors depict model reading strategies in the narratives.<sup>5</sup> Lucien Dällenbach, in "Reflexivity and Reading," proposes that reflexive narratives work to form readers by employing *mise(s) en abyme* or "doublings which function as mirrors or microcosms of the text" (435). One chief purpose motivates the use of such doublings by authors: through narrative reflexivity, a text can "condition readings by its use of signals, instructions or orders for decoding" (Dällenbach 436). In particular, authors can give guidance to readers by depicting characters in roles analogous to those of the reader or writer. By way of these models, authors can comment on such matters as how signs make sense, what processes yield understanding, and what understanding furnishes those who enjoy it. Nevertheless, not all authors utilize *mise en abyme* to furnish a clarity of

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<sup>5</sup> Naomi Schor proposes that literary works "are not only about speaking and writing (*encoding*), but also about reading, [...] the *decoding* of all manner of signs and signals" (168). The selected books make issues related to sign use a repeated thematic concern, but they do not simply suggest that signs bear encoded messages. Rather, these books invite readers to imagine varied ways of making sense of their passages.

direction. In fact, reflexive images, as Dällenbach notes, allow authors to embed literary mirrors that associate a text with abiding mystery.<sup>6</sup>

In the selected literature, authors employ *mise en abyme* to frame what it means to get lost, find one's way, run up against obstacles, acquire a position of understanding, relinquish the aspiration to mastery, and sometimes even to suggest that there are realities that are abidingly mysterious and in excess of our understanding. Thus, just as the audience can experience the mazes of these books in a variety of ways, the books also represent characters in comparably labyrinthine situations. In each book, maze-imagery appears overtly in the book's treatment of how characters relate to an enigma at the center of their lives. The authors utilize the maze consistently to represent epistemic limitation and to present characters with varied ways of construing that limitation.

The protagonists respond in diverse ways to the maze's complexity and sometimes alter their way of proceeding from one method to another. Some imagine that the obstructions of the maze are merely temporary and hope to acquire a comprehensive sense of the labyrinth's layout. Frequently, these characters are left in the maze struggling to surmount labyrinthine obstacles even as the book comes to its end. Others fail outright and are obviously defeated. These concede that the labyrinth will never give up its secret and experience their limitation as compromising their access to the truth. Finally, there are still others who lay claim to understanding precisely by conceding that the maze is irreducibly complex. For these characters, epistemic limitation need not be

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<sup>6</sup> Dällenbach writes that a text employs *mise en abyme* "not only to remove its own ambiguity, that is, fill in the gaps, but also to create the gaps and problematize its reading" (444). By using the device to put a text's significance in question, authors can make their works labyrinths that resist mastery. In addition, they can use reflective scenes to particularize why such mastery is difficult or impossible to acquire and what thematic significance even this impenetrability bears. For example, a book could frustrate interpretive mastery in order to affirm the mystery of God as does Augustine's *Confessions* or to suggest the mysterious character of history as does Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

overcome and the maze's order need not be discovered. These occupants of the maze grasp that it will not permit one to develop an overarching plan and find diversion and refuge in its complexity rather than a trap.

As the books depict these diverse attitudes, they raise for consideration what consequences may follow decisions to proceed with one expectation rather than another. In the stories, the consequences of pursuing epistemic mastery vary. Most frequently in these books, attempts to gain an overview or retrospective view of the whole proves a false aspiration with isolating consequences. Epistemic mastery is linked to a narrowing and foreclosure of possibilities. Moreover, claims to masterful understanding lead some characters to constrain others to a restrictive and imposed plan. Rather than celebrate characters who search out and acquire a fixed position vis-à-vis the truth, the examined literature allows readers to evaluate how such a drive can go wrong. By doing so, the books challenge expectations that a controlling grasp of the truth is an unambiguous good. Conversely, the authors also explore the advantages of relinquishing the hope of discovering a determinate plan in the maze's design. For example, wandering in the maze and refusing to adopt a firm position is associated with the enjoyment of diverging and unanticipated routes. Indeed, openness to mystery and the absence of resolved understandings is celebrated as a necessary virtue in a complex world. Passage through the maze while lacking a comprehensive grasp of the truth is linked to the dynamic experience of an embodied and temporal existence. Thus, the authors suggest that our choices can take on meaning even if they do not yield to aspirations for resolved understanding. They indicate the possibility that immersion in the maze may not be



solely or finally a negative one, but the basis of a richer and more mysterious experience of literature, other people, and the world.

Finally, these books do not employ maze-imagery solely in a self-reflexive manner. The variety of experiences that mazes can provoke makes them a crucial and complex element in the selected literature's treatment of the epistemological struggles we face while living in the world. The authors draw on that diversity when characterizing our relation to the world, one another, and the places we inhabit. In particular, the authors appeal to labyrinthine structures to characterize and represent our epistemological relation to such realities as identity, other people, eroticism, death, fame, violence, the city, history, and God. By engaging readers overtly in a labyrinthine process, the books become an intellectual exercise that permits readers to reflect on comparable processes of exploration and choice that they might assume as they go about their lives making sense (or failing to make sense) of these realities. In summation, the mazes represented in the literature and the mazes formed by the literature allow us to reflect on the ways we relate to complex mysteries.

In the first chapter, I examine how maze-like structures contribute to St. Augustine's treatise on biblical interpretation *De doctrina christiana*. The treatise presents both signs and the world as labyrinthine fields through which we can choose to move in a number of ways. Augustine appeals to theological doctrines concerning the Fall and Incarnation when reflecting on our relation to the labyrinths he finds in books and the world. In particular, he ponders how the choices we make can lead us toward snares or from them. While that theology gives his reading and living direction, I argue that he complicates the apparent clarity of orientation. For Augustine, both sin and

redemption are mysteries that exceed understanding. As a result, he employs maze imagery not only to promote a certain course, but also to explore how to proceed when the routes open to us do not yield to systematic comprehension. This chapter sets up later discussions by examining a key point in his theological framing of this challenge: no comprehensive or determinate plan charts the routes opened by divine love. As a result, Augustine posits that our efforts to make sense of the world or of the signs we read will lead as much toward mystery as out from it.

In the following chapter, I propose that in the *Confessions* Augustine refashions his theological treatise in order to engage his audience in a labyrinthine search for God. Both the story and Augustine's confessional process model a passage into which he wishes to induct readers. Augustine casts the course of his life as a labyrinthine passage from exile in sin to a fuller life in the mysterious ways of charity. As Augustine recounts this story, he can seem to position himself as if he is in possession of a fully drawn map of the truth. He recounts the events of his life as if he now grasps the thread of providence and can follow it with ease through the various events of his life. In contrast to such a reading, I argue that Augustine employs stories from his past as a means of modeling how we move within the maze even as we lack such overviews and sure threads. His confessional practice does not rest on or anticipate extrication from the maze or a mastery of its layout. Rather, by confessing, Augustine makes a maze-like passage that involves entering into the world and conceding that its complexity exceeds his comprehension. Although he represents that quest as loaded with spiritual consequence, he suggests once again that he cannot articulate a single thread or comprehensive overview with which to understand masterfully the ways opened to him

by God. To make this point, Augustine situates his reader before a book that is itself resistant to such interpretive mastery.

After examining Augustine's books, I turn in the third chapter to Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* in which the maze contributes to a depiction of himself struggling to interpret and recount a dream. In the dream itself, Geoffrey repeatedly attempts to find refuge from maze-like settings that frustrate his desire for understanding. Chaucer repeatedly compromises any basis for declaring what the dream or poem may mean. In the final lines of the poem, Chaucer represents a great authority arriving disruptively within the explicitly labyrinthine structure of the House of Rumor. Rather than draw the dreamer from the maze to a fixed position overhead, the great authority appears within the maze, sets all of its inhabitants astir, and remains beyond any final and conclusive identification. Chaucer's reflexive presentation of the interpretive process discourages efforts to create a totalizing account of the poem. Nevertheless, I contend that the poem's irresolution and its suspension of interpretive closure derive significance from two theological motives: 1) a critique of Fame and her instrument poetry, and 2) an insistence that God is abidingly mysterious.

The fourth chapter takes up a postmodern selection, Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, in which Billy, the lawmen who pursue him, and those who try to recount his life's course all make maze-like passages. Ondaatje associates both errant wandering and the pursuit of a map-like overview with violence and eroticism. The book's heterogeneous collection of poems forms an equally labyrinthine structure. In relation to the maze of the book, Ondaatje links his audience's act of reading with drives for power and delight. By relating the reading audience's act of

analysis to the events of the story, Ondaatje prompts readers to reflect on how they read the text and how their reading strategies may be implicated in the violence and eroticism depicted within the story.

The fifth chapter treats the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*. Therein, Auster consistently raises for consideration how certain ways of relating to maze-like mysteries lead to entrapment and isolation. The story and its graphic rendering repeatedly set readers before a maze-like text and challenge them to find a way through the book that avoids these hazards. The book's featured characters, a theologian and detective, attempt to convert maze-like enigmas into systematically understood realities by acquiring positions of epistemic mastery. This pursuit proves both self-destructive and harmful to others. Other characters model alternate modes of living within and with maze-like mysteries. The various characters present the reader with a series of possible guides to the book's passages, but Auster finally compromises each, and necessitates that the reader determine a course independently of the routes they suggest.

In conclusion, I examine how the assembled works from diverse periods have employed the maze in self-reflexive literature to promote reflection on our relation to mystery. Both pre- and post-modern authors utilize the maze consistently to prompt their readers to reflect, sometimes experientially, on the ways we frame our aspirations to understanding and the limitations that constrain us. I have neither subordinated one period to the other's theoretical frameworks nor traced development from one work to another. Rather, the dissertation points to the common way these authors position readers before the maze-like passages of their books, so as to dispose us to reconsider how we make sense of mysteries we find in literature and the world.

## Chapter 1: Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*: Wayfaring in a Labyrinth of Signs

### I Augustine's Theology of Reading

In *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine's treatise on biblical exegesis, imagery proper to labyrinths abounds.<sup>7</sup> Although Augustine never employs the term 'maze', the model of the labyrinth, which necessitates choosing a route even while lacking a cartographic sense of one's direction, captures how Augustine positions readers vis-à-vis books, the world, and God. Augustine begins to correlate reading Scripture with what are recognizably labyrinthine structures and processes by likening the Bible to an open "field [*agrū*]" across which we may move in a variety of ways (*DDC* 1.36.41). The biblical text's signs form a complex network of pathways "with many and varied obscurities and ambiguities [*multis et multiplicibus obscuritatibus et ambiguitatibus*]" (*DDC* 2.6.7). Developing this image, Augustine represents readers as "wanderers [*peregrini*]" (*DDC* 1.4.4). With sinful choices, readers go "rambling from the Lord [*peregrinantes a domino*]" (*DDC* 1.4.4), cutting a course of "wandering error [*uagantis erroris*]" (*DDC* 3.9.13).<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, our reading can be like a long purgative "journey [*ambulationem*]" (*DDC* 1.10.10). This latter mode of proceeding is equally labyrinthine. Love of God does not lead from the maze to a fixed overview, but is itself a "motion of the soul [*motum animi*]" (*DDC* 1.10.16) along a path that "is walked more by faith than by sight [*magis per fidem quam per speciem ambulatur*]" (*DDC* 2.7.11).

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<sup>7</sup> In 396 C.E., Augustine wrote the first three of four books in his *De doctrina christiana*. Augustine identifies specific interpretive strategies to aid the biblical reader that anticipate how he employs signs a year later when writing his *Confessions*.

<sup>8</sup> The Latin term *error* may connote for Augustine both mistaken belief and "straying from the right path" (Doob 145).

Although the reader proceeds without a map-like view of the course, the stakes that Augustine attaches to the reader's labor of interpretive choice are high. Through the passages formed by signs found in books and more generally everywhere in the world, Augustine assumes that a reader can be delayed, ensnared by deviating turns, and pass by other routes toward God.<sup>9</sup> We can direct ourselves and others toward desolation or bliss, isolation or communion, death or life. Choices to proceed one way rather than another are consistently construed in relation to structures that exceed our comprehension. Readers can be caught in the "snares of error [*laqueis erroris*]" (DDC 3.9.13) and lost in the nothingness of sin. Or they may be immersed in that movement of soul called love which we access always, as Paul of Tarsis had written, "in a dark manner [*in aenigmate*]" (DDC 3.7.11). Augustine does not point readers toward a fixed destination or controlling overview, but to a way of living and reading modeled on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, who saw fit to become "our road [*uia nostra*]" (DDC 1.34.38). Situated on that road, we are able to turn in the ways of love and "pass through [*transire*]" the world (DDC 1.34.38). By moving along that way, we are drawn into an ineffable enjoyment of God, all the more pleasurable because "what is sought with difficulty is come upon with more pleasure [*aliqua difficultate quaesita multo gratius inueniri*]" (DDC 2.6.8).

Two recent studies, developed in the light of contemporary literary theory, contest this characterization of Augustine's theology. They claim that Augustine's faith in God

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<sup>9</sup> For Augustine, the limitations we experience as readers are analogous to those that we encounter as we live our lives in the world. No less than biblical exegesis, the lives we live in the world entail the same labyrinthine process. In fact, Augustine parallels his treatments of biblical reading and the human condition by using the same metaphor: an exile's difficult journey involving the interpretation of signs. Eileen Sweeney has indicated that Augustine's choice of reading as the "ruling metaphor or model for understanding and action" is evident much later in Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon* of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (61). Both imagine life as an interpretive journey in exile and the reading of books, especially the *Bible*, as one means of making that passage.

precludes him from accepting textual indeterminacy. Jesse Gellrich argues that through the Middle Ages, the idea of the Book furnished a cultural and mythological “structuring principle” concerned with stabilizing the sign and tracing it back to a fixed origin in the Word of God (39-41). In its role as cultural paradigm, the Book ordered “signifying, organizing and remembering” (248). Like its exemplary instantiations in the Bible and in the Book of Nature, this “structuring principle” was thought of as a totalizing unity within which all meaning was thought to be present, the same, and absolute (39-41). Although Gellrich acknowledges that Augustine recognizes an alterity between language and the divine Word, he characterizes Augustine as a servant of this paradigm, who in the *Confessions* “draws his own word into parallel with the creating *Verbum*” and does so in order to reinforce his text’s meaning (120). Like Gellrich, Robert Sturges claims that Augustine’s Neoplatonic theology resists instability meaning and reference. Sturges proposes that Augustine’s theology necessitates that signs be integrated and determined finally by God. Still, Gellrich and Sturges recognize that Augustine’s theory of signs highlights ambiguity in meaning that necessitates interpretive choice.

In response, they propose we cordon such elements of Augustine’s conception of texts from his theology. For example, Sturges contends “a literature that accepts, and even insists upon, its own indeterminacy” can emerge only if “the divine origin of language, and hence the divine guarantee of signification, were temporarily bracketed or left to one side” (8).<sup>10</sup> Only by working one’s way out of God’s reach are readers truly set

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<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Neoplatonic theory, medieval romances, argues Sturges, manifest a rival theory of language. Romances are situated “purely within the realm of human words, without reference to the singular Word of God. Uncontrolled by divine immanence, such works cannot be read with any certainty of finding the truth. Interpretation under these circumstances cannot be undertaken as confidently as in the

free to appreciate the maze-like passages running through the field of a text.

Support for this conclusion can in fact be found in Augustine's writings. He is often uncomfortable with the possibilities open to readers and appears more anxious to limit interpretive choice than prepared to acknowledge it. In *De doctrina christiana* specifically, recognition that the field of the Bible could be crossed in ways leading into traps of moral and conceptual error tempts him to present his readers a narrow way within the maze. Although he eventually identifies "the double love of God and of our neighbor" as the foremost principle guiding interpretation, he attempts to restrict the biblical reader to discovering authorial intention (*DDC* 1.36.40). It is only as a concession that he notes an exegete may find many meanings that hold to the charity principle "even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended [...]" (*DDC* 1.36.40). As a rule, readers who depart from authorial intention are "deceived in the same way as a man who leaves the road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place toward which the road itself leads [*via illa perducet*]" (*DDC* 1.36.41). Augustine recommends that such a reader "be corrected and shown that it is more useful not to leave the road, lest the habit of deviating [*consuetudine deviandi*] force him to take a crossroad [*trasuersum*] or a perverse way [*peruersum*]" (*DDC* 1.36.41). When guided by this dogmatic spirit, Augustine, a bishop by the time he wrote *De doctrina christiana*, is "primarily concerned with constraining scriptural interpretation to ward heresies away" (Glidden 137). His injunction concerning authorial intention seemingly indicates that theological conviction forecloses interpretive possibilities.

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Neoplatonic tradition, in which the truth can be known" (26). Sturges' theoretical claim echoes that of Patricia Parker in *Inescapable Romance*.



However, I believe Augustine's dogmatism in this passage obfuscates his more fundamental appreciation for polysemy and interpretive choice. Although tempted and frequently willing to confine the reader to a certain course, Augustine actually conceives of our engagement with signs in relation to a richer theological framework despite his anxieties. Even as Augustine urges the reader to follow the path of authorial intention, he presents the biblical text as a site open to a reader's exploration. He acknowledges that charity, "the double love of God and of our neighbor," embraces and exceeds the signifying intentions of Scripture's authors (*DDC* 1.36.40). Authorial intention is a useful guide, but it is not to be followed with the presumption that it either is the only course we might take through a text or the point at which our reading comes to its end. When Augustine wishes to restrict readers, Augustine does so by supplanting love with the lesser principle of authorial intention. Thus, in contrast to what Sturges and Gellrich suggest, Augustine in fact brackets God in order to give greater stability to the passages of the *Bible*.<sup>11</sup>

Insofar as he concedes that authorial intention is not the only valid interpretive course, Augustine remains open to a more theologically sound articulation of the reader's process. That characterization of reading emphasizes the reader's power to choose an interpretive route. Moreover, it posits that those choices can lead to our entrapment in sin and conceptual error or to our immersion in the mystery of love. Finally, Augustine suggests that his faith immerses him in a labyrinthine process that will not lead him to a position of mastery precisely because God is abidingly mysterious. Love does not lead us from the maze nor constitute a fixed position overseeing the text. Although charity is

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<sup>11</sup> When Sturges and Gellrich read Augustine's philosophy, they overemphasize its Neoplatonic elements without appreciating the way Christian concepts concerning such matters as divine transcendence, the Incarnation, and God's creative fecundity alter that framework.

indeed the one end to which Augustine hopes we will direct our reading, this alternative principle—the mystery of love—likens his theory of signs and reading to recent post-structural theory in its openness to what is multiple, non-linear, and indeterminate.<sup>12</sup>

If Christian love is often conceived of in terms of ‘binding’, ‘gathering together’, and ‘making one’, it also serves as a principle of variation, distinction, and individuation within Augustine’s theological framework.<sup>13</sup> Love makes one, but it does not do so at the expense of the many. Charity, in contrast to authorial intention, does not operate as a restrictive interpretive principle resistant to multivalent meaning.<sup>14</sup> Charity gathers together varied readings without compromising their multiplicity and the particularity that distinguishes one from another. The paradox of this love is that it binds together and makes one even as it diversifies and differentiates. In the end, we never have anything more than a limited access to the meaning of what we read and no interpretive principle lifts us from the maze to look down on it with a masterful perception of its design. The promise of faith is not that God will draw us from the maze and enable us to see precisely

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<sup>12</sup> In a manner comparable to the key conceptual tools of post-structural theorists, charity does not reduce a textual “field” to some single, univocal, or obvious pathway. Contrasting Augustine and Derrida on indeterminacy, Brenda Schildgen writes: “For Augustine, [...] this equivocality is the starting point for interpretation, not Derrida’s end of interpretation and beginning of the game” (390). The contrast Schildgen draws misconstrues Augustine by suggesting that interpretation is to bring the game to an end by disclosing some determinate, true meaning. Augustine’s model reader—like Derrida’s—will not cut a course toward a single meaning that may be fixed in word or thought.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine did not read with the modern predisposition to find a single conclusive meaning in the books he read. David Glidden posits that “Scholarship in ancient philosophy operates under the influence of modernity whenever it assumes interpretation is making progress, getting ever closer to some final understanding of the texts. [...] What is not conceded is the possibility of continually shifting, forever differing interpretations, no less insightful, no less true, even though they cannot comport with a favored final view” (135). Glidden proposes that Augustine’s hermeneutical principle of charity could disclose in a text “different truths, sometimes in competition with each other, possibly in competition with the author’s meaning” (136). Augustine explicitly reaffirms such a theory in the *Confessions* (XII.18.246 and XII.31.256).

<sup>14</sup> Augustine repeatedly acknowledges that choices to read in diverse ways are “made at the will of the reader” (3.2.5), some of which are to be preferred because they are congruent with the movement of love in our souls, and others of which are to be eschewed because they deviate from that delight.

where we stand or in what direction we have been moving. Augustine does not suggest that God guarantees the meaning of a sign, nor that turning to God, frees the wayfarer from interpretive dilemma. God does not lead to an exit from our epistemological limitations. Augustine construes the signs of the Bible as a maze of meaning that cannot ever be threaded or charted fully by a reader.

## **II Traversing Signs following the Fall and the Incarnation**

Rather than exclude indeterminacy of meaning from his conception of signs, Augustine develops his consideration of the complex passages formed by signs in relation to two theological resources: the Fall and the Incarnation. The Fall and the Incarnation serve Augustine as frames in relation to which he can articulate what challenges present themselves to us as we read and live in the world. Those theological doctrines illuminate Augustine's construal of meaning's indeterminacy and the wayfarer's interpretive labor.<sup>15</sup> Those doctrines do not eliminate the indeterminacy, but indicate various reasons for its existence and possible ways of responding to it. In the *Confessions* alone, Augustine charts the course that led him personally to envision the whole of his life as an interpretive passage. However, in neither that work nor in *De doctrina christiana* does identifying the Fall and the Incarnation as events framing human existence lead out from

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<sup>15</sup> A number of scholarly studies examine Augustine's appeals to the Fall and Incarnation when formulating how signs function. In the characterizations that follow, I employ these two bodies of scholarship to explain more fully how Augustine situates engagement with signs in relation to a full Christian theology. An additional body of scholarship considers how Augustine's theorization impacted later literature. See Eric Jager's *The Tempter's Voice* for a useful summary of this scholarship. Kevin Hart's *The Trespass of the Sign* explores how Christian theology in general theorizes the operation of signs in relation to both the Fall and the Incarnation and how theorists like Derrida deconstruct this paradigm.

the labyrinth of signs. Instead, those doctrines clarify that there is a journey to be made, that we are not fully up to it, and that we nevertheless have cause for hope.

At no point does Augustine offer a schematic rendering of how the Fall and Incarnation contribute to his thinking on signs and reading. In a succinct analysis of the reader's situation though, Augustine writes: "We were trapped by the wisdom of the serpent; we are freed by the foolishness of God" (*DDC* 1.14.13). Although he does not reference sign analysis directly, this opposition of serpentine wisdom and God's foolishness juxtaposes two theological paradigms impacting the reader's interpretive labor of choice.<sup>16</sup> The paradigms—associated with the Fall and the Incarnation respectively—integrate a key set of principles contributing to the wayfarer's labyrinthine journey. Each paradigm characterizes the status of signs and the interpreter. Additionally, each identifies respective modes of engaging signs that are proper to either the trap of serpentine wisdom or the liberating, foolishness of God.

More importantly still, the juxtaposed paradigms indicate the stakes of the wayfarer's interpretive passage. Augustine identifies the import of our interpretive passages in relation to alternate kinds of death associated with the Fall and Incarnation respectively. Drawing on a traditional metaphor of Christian spirituality, Augustine suggests our interpretive course can be cut in sin toward the spirit's perdition. Certain choices lead us and others toward our undoing. Alternatively, the reader is reborn by a

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<sup>16</sup> Augustine's allusion to Serpentine wisdom and God's foolishness are a kind of biblical shorthand. The line contrasts Satan's deceptive rhetoric to God's revelation. In Eden, Satan beguiled Eve and Adam with a deceptively alluring eloquence. In relation to the myth of the Fall, theologians reflected on language's capacity to divert people from God through seductive speech and writing. In contrast to Satan's eloquence, the Incarnation of the divine Word was considered by theologians to be God's humble self-expression. Christ descends into the world only to be misunderstood, found unpersuasive, and to be rejected when crucified. Paul of Tarsis originally drew the contrast between Satan's wisdom and God's foolishness in order to acknowledge that God's plan for salvation seems like folly when measured by the world's standards of wisdom. In the Incarnation, God chooses foolishly to become a mortal subject to worldly powers, even to the point of death on a cross.

sacramental participation in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection—the paschal mystery. In this latter case, the wayfarer’s journey entails a death-like abandonment of all that destroys us. In either case, our engagement with signs has high stakes. Wayfaring readers either die to God and so succumb to the effects of the Fall or die to an illusory “world” of their own invention, so as to enter into the world and draw delight from God.

The chart below lays out the key features of the paradigms:

<p><u>THE WISDOM OF THE SERPENT</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Riddled eloquence, so that it threatens to mislead and ensnare.</li> <li>■ Muddled the faculties of the interpreter following the Fall.</li> </ul>	<p><u>THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Opens and discloses passages in signs that lead into world and God.</li> <li>■ Renews the wayfaring interpreter by progressively restoring freedom.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Serpentine Modes of Wayfaring:</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Pride:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Presumption to interpretive mastery: a willful determination of meaning.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Cupidity:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Enslavement to the sensual letter.</li> </ul>	<p><u>God’s Foolish Modes of Wayfaring:</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Humility:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Acknowledgment of human limitation and divine transcendence.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Charity:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Gathering and dividing of text with freedom.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Culminates in Spiritual Perdition</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Pride and cupidity estrange wayfarer from God and the world.</li> <li>■ This estrangement is the dissolution of the self.</li> </ul>	<p><u>Culminates in a Personal Pasch</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Wayfarer makes Christ-like <i>pasch</i> that leads into world and God.</li> <li>■ This passage is the bliss of charity: an ecstasy without self-annihilation.</li> </ul>

This spiritual theology underlies Augustine’s attempts to make sense of why signs operate the way they do and of how and why readers respond to them the way they do. Each theological frame contributes a distinctive, religious rationale by which to explore those issues. The two paradigms make concurrent claims on the situation within which

people do their living and their reading. Augustine's evaluation summarizes the basic challenge we meet in life: a weakened will, a clouded intellect, and a need nevertheless to turn and seek the fullness of life in charity. The stakes of those efforts are the loss of oneself either in the nothingness of sin or a life of love.

### **III.A Serpentine Wayfaring After the Fall**

In the first paradigm, Augustine conceives of the interpretive journey in relation to the Fall and the trap of serpentine wisdom. In Eden, Satan made of rhetorical eloquence and the world of signs a deadly snare. Through cupidity and pride, Adam and Eve, mythical forerunners of the interpretive wayfarer, were caught in that snare. Since the Fall, the sensual letter and the pride of the interpreter continue to make signs a maze of detours and dead-ends. The world of signs continues to function as such a trap precisely insofar as sinful inclinations direct the course. In effect, sin is nothing more than the use of our already attenuated freedom to enter more deeply into "the snares of error" (*DDC* 3.9.13). Mortally wounded since the Fall, the wayfarer risks succumbing to the monster of sin and suffering "the death we all owe" (*DDC* 1.19.18). As a result, we are at risk of making of our passage through the maze an entrance into an inextricable tomb. We enter that tomb whenever we choose to obstruct ourselves or fellow wayfarers from moving in a manner congruent with charity.

Augustine treats cupidity and pride as paradigmatic ways interpretive wayfarers can make their reading a passage into that tomb. This point is developed initially in relation to the reading of Scripture. Through cupidity, the biblical reader may fall prey to the seductive letter of a text. When considering the potential of signs to entrap the

wayfarer, Augustine warns that one of the journey's hazards lies in the seductive enjoyment of the road itself. That enjoyment can become a perpetual obstruction. When seduced by the sign, the wayfarer turns endlessly in a circuit of signs, in a passage of perpetual diversion. Because the delight we derive from signs cannot sustain the spirit, reading "in the pursuit of the letter" realizes the "death of the soul" (*DDC* 3.5.9). At the same time, Augustine also criticizes the prideful imposition of meaning on signs as a reckless course. If it is "a servile infirmity to follow the letter," it is a "wandering error" to neglect the text when reading (*DDC* 3.10.14). Both literal servitude and presumption to interpretive mastery led the reader into a trap.<sup>17</sup> To determine when one's reading avoids this trap, Augustine refers to his basic standard of charity: "the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God [...] and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor for the sake of God" (3.10.16). Although Augustine articulates multiple technical guidelines for sorting out where the text is figurative, he ultimately subordinates these considerations to the spiritual and ethical concerns of the Bible. Above all else, Augustine would have us direct our reading so as to enter the ways of sacramental bliss (*DDC* 3.10.14).

To clarify if a reading has been made in a spirit of cupidity or pride Augustine would have readers evaluate it in relation to the broader context of such reading: the reader's interpretive journey through the maze of the world. Thus, to recognize a misreading of Scripture one examines if the reading "shapes" one to love or to sin (*DDC* 3.10.15). The carnal pursuit of the letter and the prideful imposition of meaning yield

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<sup>17</sup> In sum, the valid interpretive course neither simply follows the letter of the *Bible* nor permits readers simply to impose meaning on a text. This pair of points explains very little practically. They necessitate a "method of determining" what kind of attention is to be paid the letter and when a figurative reading is not merely presumptive imposition (*DDC* 3.10.14). Exegetes would employ that method to determine when their pursuit of or departure from the letter leads into the serpent's snare.

two kinds of sinful effects when we move through the maze: “vice (*flagitium*) and then crime (*facinus*), i.e. harm to self and others” (Babcock 155). These paradigmatic sins are ways of insisting upon, following, and persisting in routes by which we become susceptible to or force others into the death-like trap of the maze.

When our sin is vicious, we turn repetitively to things that cannot nourish us as we make our way in the maze. By our choices in the maze, we seek life in realities that cannot in fact sustain it. The wayfarer’s appetite for false sustenance increases through habit. Eventually, this passage in the maze saps our strength until we are not even free to choose. A fully-formed addiction impedes the wayfarer from ever turning and seeking life elsewhere. Too weak to choose an alternate route, the reader is lead through vice into a place of death. Thus, “we construct the sweetnesses which trap us in things” (Cavadini 171). We insist that things in the world bear meanings that they neither do nor can hold. For that reason, “these sweetnesses are really a delight in pride” (Cavadini 171).

When our sin is criminal, we choose a course in the maze that forces others into a tomb. Cavadini explains that Augustine defines cupidity as the deriving of delight from our fellow pilgrims in ways that make them “our personal ends, as subjects to be dominated” (170). Similarly, William Babcock notes that cupidity is love that “reduces self to a state of need in which it can respond to others only as hindrances or as helps to the realization of its own imperious desires” (Babcock 155). The narcissism of this love prevents us from recognizing that others are in fact individuals with lives apart from our own. When one wayfarer suffers this blindness, another may be shuttled into a place of entrapment by the sin of the first.



When readers approach signs with serpentine wisdom, they make of signs and the world a labyrinthine trap for themselves and others. Pride and cupidity name for Augustine ways of moving in the labyrinth of the world and of reading signs that enclose us or others in debilitating traps. Augustine believes either mode of misreading can prohibit the interpretive wayfarer from arriving at the “plenitude and the end” to which our reading would lead us, a full enjoyment of God and of the world in God (*DDC* 1.35.39). Departures from that enjoyment are effectively a passage into exile, into a place of death, where we are alienated from our true selves, others, the world, and God.

### **III.B God’s Foolish Way: Wayfaring Following the Incarnation**

In the second framework, the Incarnation—God’s foolish descent into the labyrinth of the world—alters dramatically what potentialities Augustine perceives for the wayfarer’s engagement with signs. Christ modeled a mode of wayfaring that extricates the wayfarer from the grip of the serpent’s snare. Liberation from the snare, though modeled on Christ’s death on the cross, is not abandonment of the world. Rather, the humble and charitable way of Christ is itself a maze of passageways that lead simultaneously into the world and into God. Such passages are sacramental because they allow us to move through a maze-like world of finite things as a means of accessing the divine mystery. Wayfarers take up those routes not by following a single, fixed thread through the maze, but by losing themselves in a Christ-like passage of love. Augustine suggests that by taking a loving course through the maze of signs, wayfarers are led to a fuller life in and enjoyment of the world and God.

Most scholarly assessments oversimplify how Augustine construes that passage toward God. Frequently, God's love, exercised in the Incarnation, is taken to have made the world a direct and transparent course to God. Marcia Colish has argued that the "doctrine of the Incarnation [is] essential to [...] the redemption of language, which [Augustine] holds, makes theology possible" (22). Clifford Ando writes that the Incarnation furnishes a Mediator to "bridge the metaphysical gap" between finite signs and God (Ando 43). Mark Jordan emphasizes that the Incarnation "grounds and regulates intelligibility" (Jordan 187) and "establishes the possibility of truthfulness and significance" (188). In each analysis, the Incarnation is taken to have "made [God] accessible" in the maze of signs (Jordan 187). This scholarship either minimizes or neglects entirely that the Incarnation also upholds the radical discontinuity between God and the world. Minimizing that discontinuity contributes to the conclusion that the Incarnation is a principle securing "divine immanence" that determines meaning and thus renders possible a reader's interpretive control (Sturges 26).

In fact, though, even as Christ's atonement makes Creator and creation one, it does not make the sacramental route a path of unmediated, divine presence.<sup>18</sup> The Incarnation does not simply fill in the ontological gulf separating Creator and creature. The Incarnation mediates Creator and creation not only by making them one, but also by affirming the discontinuity of the two. For Augustine, even as the Incarnation reconciles God and creation, it "does not violate or reduce [divine] transcendence" (Smith "Between

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<sup>18</sup> If the Incarnation or God determined the order of signs in such a manner as to confer upon them a transparent or direct means of indicating either God or some reality, then Sturges and Gellrich could accurately contend that Christian theology eliminates indeterminacy within the field of signs. But for Augustine, signs remain ambiguous, and are so not only as a result of the Fall, but also because signs as finite realities always remain distinct from and incapable of pointing to the infinite God in whom he would place his faith and trust.

Predication and Silence” 77). As James Smith writes, the Incarnation is an ontological “structure of both presence and absence” (“Between Predication and Silence” 75).

And the significance of this is not only that the Incarnation thereby preserves God’s transcendence, but that this point alters Augustine’s conception of the world in a manner unanticipated by the Neoplatonists and unrecognized in much criticism. An initial chapter in *De doctrina christiana* presents the human condition by lacing together engagement with signs and the experience of journeying in exile. Read in isolation the passage is misleading. It casts Augustine as a Neoplatonist looking for an exit from the maze of the world. Augustine writes:

Suppose we were wanderers who could not live in blessedness except at home, miserable in our wanderings and desiring to end it and to return to our native country. We would need vehicles for land and sea which could be used to help us to reach our homeland, which is to be enjoyed, but if the amenities of the journey and the motion of the vehicles itself delighted us, and we were led to enjoy those things which we should use, we should not wish to end our journey quickly, and, entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country, whose sweetness would make us blessed. Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the ‘invisible things’ of God ‘being understood by the things that are made’ may be seen, that is, so by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual. (*DDC* 1.4.4)

In words recalling the Prodigal Son, Augustine portrays human life as a wandering exile and this world as a difficult maze that threatens to divert wayfarers from returning to their “native country” (*DDC* 1.4.4). That exile results from the metaphysical gulf between Creator and creature, but it is compounded by our residence in the enjoyable world, where “entangled in a perverse sweetness [*peruersa sauviate implicati*]” we become sidetracked and morally wayward as well (*DDC* 1.4.4). Taken on its own, this description of the journey contrasts in Neoplatonic fashion a material world and a heavenly home, an embodied exile and a spirit residing in its “native country” (*DDC* 1.4.4).

Literary theorists have highlighted this formulation of the exile’s life in Western religious traditions and in Augustine specifically. J. Hillis Miller has defined this representation of the exile’s situation as “a basic paradigm of Occidental metaphysics—the picture of an original unity, lost in our present sad dispersal, to be regained at some point in the millennial future” (*qtd. in* Ferguson 843). In an article that attributes this framework to Augustine, Margaret Ferguson views the Incarnation as a sign that “can bridge the absolute gap between sign and signified” and provide a “redemptive escape from the ‘*regio dissimilitudinis*’” (861). In this paradigm, home and exile are differentiated in relation to a classic set of binary oppositions: the one and the many, spirit and matter, eternity and time. This framework casts life in the world as a temporary descent into a maze-like realm of change, multiplicity, and alterity out of which we may hopefully work our way. The exile’s passage to God is an ascent to a disembodied overview of the tortuous realm of time and space.

This account is not entirely true to Augustine's conception of our lives. It neglects that Augustine's theology deconstructs the Neoplatonic opposition of the sweet, invisible homeland and the "miserable" world of exile (*DDC* 1.4.4). Christ introduces to Augustine an alternative conception of his exile and his wayfaring. Like Christ, the exile is a creature made in the image of God, and this places a paradoxical set of demands on the exile's return home. By bearing an image of God within himself, Augustine exceeds the finite and created order and can only find rest in what is One. However, not divine himself, Augustine, in contrast to the Neoplatonists, believes he must live in time, and make his home there as a creature. The wayfaring Augustine is metaphysically an exile from both "places," checked from making a home of the world because his spirit transcends it, barred from access to God as a finite creature. In this lies the challenge as Augustine formulates it: to be at home, he must cut a course that avoids denying either truth about his being.

It is in the person of Jesus Christ, who is both fully human and fully divine, that Augustine believes we have a model of how to live those two truths. His newly imagined approach to the maze is an imitative participation in Christ's incarnational love. Christ says to Augustine: "you are to come through me, to arrive at me, and to remain in me [*per me uenitur, ad me peruentur, in me permanetur*]" (*DDC* 1.34.38). In language recalling the labyrinth, Augustine identifies Christ's *pasch*—his life, death, and resurrection—as having transformed the interpretive journey:

Moreover, since we are on a road which is not a road from place to place but a road of the affections, which was blocked, as if by a thorny hedge, by the malice of our past sins, what more liberal and merciful thing could

He do when He wished to lay down Himself as a means for our return than to forgive all our sins, after we turn to Him, and to tear away the firmly fixed prohibitions preventing our return by being crucified for us? (*DDC* 1.17.16).

After coming to believe that the divine Word entered time as a creature, Augustine ceases to believe that creation is a place from which to flee. Instead, creation, no less than God, is the place from which one is exiled. To be led by serpentine wisdom is to exile oneself from the world as much as from God. Thus, our obstruction from God is not formed by our status as creatures living in the world, but by the “thorny hedge” of sin (*DDC* 1.17.16). Through the sinful choice, Augustine takes himself out of the world and away from God.

The Incarnation enables Augustine to view the world, with its many and varied passages, as a reflection of God’s creative will through which God affirms the multifold ways of finite being. The gospel leads Augustine to re-imagine the maze of the world as a sanctified place of variation and differentiation, rather than as an accursed “region of unlikeness.” Augustine indicates that even as God’s love ontologically unites all things, including signs, that love gives rise to the diversity of things in the world. God’s love—though absolutely One ontologically—takes into itself the otherness of finite being without undermining its particularity, its otherness, its subjection to change. The Incarnation reveals that God has sanctified the mediating otherness of the world and thereby the multiplicity of routes running through it.

In relation to the Incarnation, Augustine affirms that love opens maze-like passageways by which we may make our way at once into the world and into God. The

pathways formed by love do not negate life in the world in order to solve the double-bind of the exile's existence. Sacramental paths do not lead out of the world back to some purely, celestial "native country" (*DDC* 1.4.4). By living lives of love, exiles are able to be at home with God even as they take up residence in the world as creatures. To probe the mysterious maze of God's being Augustine believes he must work his way into the material and temporal world by living love well.

The interpretive journey Augustine proposes to his readers would put them on the way of the cross first opened by Christ. This paschal route involves departing whatever snare-like tombs isolate us off from our true selves, our fellow wayfarers, and God. Exiting those tombs entails a sacrifice. In contrast to the death ensuing the Fall, Augustine explains: "there is a certain death of the soul in the abandonment of former life and habits" (*DDC* 1.19.18). Exilic wayfarers are to die to whatever snares have "entangled" them through a potent though deadly "sweetness" (*DDC* 1.4.9-10). The addictions that underlie the harm we do ourselves and others are to be nailed to the "wood of the cross" (*DDC* 2.7.9). By sacrificing those addictive and disordered desires, we recover the freedom of will by which we can make our passage in the world one of love. In the process of that conversion, the reader must "be cleansed" (*DDC* 1.10.10). As if the reader's ascetical purification were a means of realizing the grace of baptism, Augustine writes, "Let us consider this cleansing to be as a journey [...]" (*DDC* 1.10.10). Augustine, like Paul, conceives of the baptismal journey as a participation in Christ's

death.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the route opened requires the reader to have “observed the Pasch.” (*DDC* 2.41.62).

To characterize this sacrificial way more fully, Augustine links it to the flight of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Augustine explains:

[T]he sacrifice of Christ emphasizes for us nothing more than that which He said as if to those whom He saw laboring under Pharaoh: “Come to me, all you that labour, and are burdened, and I will refresh you. Take up my yoke upon you, and learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls.” (*DDC* 2.41.76)

The interpretive course Augustine entreats his readers to take is a sacrificial abandonment of what enslaves them. Just as a passage to freedom was opened for the Israelites, so the world is a maze-like desert with routes leading from what binds us. And so, even as the world of signs can entrap us, it also presents us with passageways leading to the recovery, preservation, and enjoyment of our freedom. At the heart of Augustine’s theology is hope that we may make our passage in the world such a liberating Passover.

In particular, Augustine associates this Passover with the cultivation of God’s foolish virtues of humility and charity. Augustine writes: “Because man fell through pride, He applied humility as a cure” (*DDC* 1.14.13). Augustine encourages the wayfarer to live a life directed toward God, but discourages the presumption of a God’s eye view of the maze. Our salvation does not lie in extricating ourselves epistemologically from a world of multiplicity. Augustine would not have his readers turn the cross into a symbol of escape and attempt to imitate Christ’s death by making a disembodied flight to a realm

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<sup>19</sup> “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” *Romans* 6:3-4.



of truth. The Incarnation affirms for Augustine in the most radical way possible that the world is not finally a place of death from which to flee. A life of love lived in the world, and not philosophical ascent, is the way and the destination.

John C. Cavadini argues that *De doctrina christiana* involves a “fundamental shift” for Augustine from earlier and more consistently Neoplatonic works within which salvation was gained by philosophical ascent (167). In *De doctrina christiana*, the journey is still “depicted in terms drawn from the Neoplatonic ascent of the soul. But that language is refigured, recontextualized, as soon as the saving eloquence of God—Christ—is presented not only as the way of our ascent but as the goal as well” (Cavadini 169). In his later work, Augustine has come to believe that God’s eloquence, encountered by him in the incarnate life of Jesus Christ, opens a sacramental course through the world. Although the world remains a maze of hardship, its sweet “corporal and temporal things” form a path in Christ that is at once the way and the destination (*DDC* 1.4.4). On that course, “[w]e never leave the temporal because in Christ the temporal becomes sacramentalized; it becomes our enjoyment of God” (Cavadini 172). If the sacramental course through the maze of signs is associated with Christ’s cross, it is nevertheless also a delightful way, a cause for rejoicing, as it immerses the wayfarer in the maze of passages composed by love.

Christ models a route through the maze that entails living a particular, embodied, human life. When we cease to cling to things through an inordinate affective attachment, we mimic Christ’s *kenosis*—his act of self-emptying love on the cross. Like Christ, when we relinquish any claim to God’s glory, we descend into the world and are lifted up in exultation with him.

Making our way in the world according to Christ's way not only positions us in the midst of a labyrinthine world, but also changes our relation to our fellow wayfarers in the maze. In passage through this world, the wayfarer strives to incarnate eternal love in time. This "means that we do not escape the realm of the neighbor, the realm of the temporal, the historical, the contingent, to make an inward ascent to the enjoyment of the eternal" (Cavadini 170). Instead, enjoyment of God derives "from continual acts of charity performed toward whatever neighbor chance or circumstance sends us. This is the *via* that God's eloquence forms in us" (Cavadini 170). Augustine, like most Christian theologians, stresses that love is a bond uniting people. However, charity is a kind of love that respects the difference and particularity of those it unites. When taking the course of love in the world, we cease to move in ways that restrict our freedom or that of others. We must acknowledge that others have their own distinctive passages to make in the world.

In addition to living humbly and charitably, Augustine believes we can bring these virtues to our reading of texts. For this reason, Augustine urges readers to approach the Bible only after recalling the Scriptural injunction that "Knowledge puffs up; but charity edifies" (*DDC* 2.41.76). In effect, serpentine wisdom inflates and exiles the reader into illusory readings; but charity, God's foolishness, builds up the wayfarer in the world. The rhetoric of Scripture, itself a kind of divine foolishness, is directed toward the edification of the wayfarer. When considering the difficulty of certain biblical verses, Augustine proposes "this situation was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds" (*DDC* 2.6.7). Just as Adam must work for his bread following the Fall, so the interpreter must struggle against the difficulty of the text. That

struggle bears fruit when through it the exile learns humility and is grounded in the world.

Augustine would have his readers bring the same evaluative strategies he proposes for biblical reading to the lives they live and the objects they encounter in the world. Augustine drew on the imagery of Exodus to characterize his own engagement with classical culture. Recognizing that classical culture was in possession of its own “gold and silver” Augustine as a reader sought to “take this treasure with him for the just use of teaching the gospel” (*DDC* 3.15.60). He made his reading of the Platonists an observation of Passover. By doing so, he cut a sacramental course through that literature, a passage by which he could enjoy it in God. Thus, Cavadini contends that for Augustine “[w]hat finally renders any cultural artifact “useful” is the sign of the cross, ‘the foolishness of God . . . the foolishness of preaching’ which disassembles the sweetness formed by perverse signs systems, and which turns everything else into a sign—in effect a sacrament of God’s Wisdom” (172). Thus, Augustine hopes his readers will make their reading an observation of the Passover, an interpretive passage that accords with the generative and liberating power of God’s love.

In sum, Augustine hopes, in light of the Incarnation, that love makes possible an interpretive Passover through the maze of signs. Formulating his approach to God and the world as a sacramental *pasch* produces abiding tensions in his theory concerning our engagement with signs and the things of the world. In the second book of *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine describes the exile’s rehabilitation as a “pilgrimage in this world, although ‘our community is in heaven’” (*DDC* 2.7.40). The wayfarer is to “run through” the created things of the world and not exit them by flight to some vantage point

overhead (*DDC* 1.34.38). However, even as the wayfarer is urged to make a way through the world, Augustine directs the exile not to “cling to [...] temporal things,” so as “to reach [...] the right hand of the Father” (*DDC* 1.34.38). The wayfaring exile is to live that love that reconciles God and world, upholds their distinction, and thereby, enables him to probe both simultaneously.

As Augustine conceives of the reading process congruent with Christ’s *pasch*, this commendation does not turn the maze of signs into a single path to be taken by all. To read in a manner that participates in the mystery of the Incarnation is to make of one’s reading an observation of Passover—a liberating passage from false and destructive constraints. Neither our finitude nor our embodiment are counted among those constraints. Augustine hopes that the biblical reader’s passage leads from the death-like snare of sin to turn with divine love in the world.

#### **IV.A Trapped by Sin or Immersed in a Divine Passage**

Convinced of the ultimate inefficacy of the sign alone to convey knowledge, Augustine excuses himself if his treatment of biblical interpretation is also unable to open up Scripture to his readers. Writing in the prologue, Augustine compares his efforts to train readers and preachers to pointing of a finger to some celestial body: “Although I can lift my finger to point something out, I cannot supply the vision by means of which either this gesture or what it indicates can be seen” (*DDC* “Prologue” 3.4). Believing that his text, like his finger, cannot assure anyone that they will see the reality to which he wishes to direct them, he proposes that those who remain unable to see after his explication leave him be and seek the aid of God. That rhetorical gesture does not serve as an exit from the circuitry of the dilemma. His response does

not resolve how to proceed in the least, but rather recoils like a labyrinth's circuit upon the initial question concerning where and how God is to be sought.

At the same time that that prompting fails to undo the problem, it is a response congruent with Augustine's own mode of proceeding as it calls for faith and presumes that no one advances but by God's assistance. Neither that faith nor divine intervention eliminate the bind or tangle in which the wayfarer is at once reliant upon signs and yet unable to be assured of the course to be taken or of the goal to be sought on their basis. Instead, Augustine insists that faith and divine aid make hope in such a tangled journey possible. As he makes his exile's passage, Augustine notes we "walk more by faith than by sight" (*DDC* 2.7.11).

Augustine considers the effect of his initial ignorance in a manner comparable to Plato's representation of the learner's paradox.<sup>20</sup> Prior to writing both *De doctrina christiana* and the *Confessions*, Augustine reformulated Plato's *aporia* in relation to the utility of signs in learning and teaching in *De Magistro* (389 C.E.).<sup>21</sup> In that treatise, the paradox bears upon the specific work of making sense of signs. In the course of the dialogue, Augustine leads his son Adeodatus to recognize a similar pair of points: (1) that all learning and teaching is effected through signs (2.1-10.47), and (2) that nothing can be taught or learned through the use of signs because one must already know the reality to which a sign points for it to be communicative (10.48-11.18).

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<sup>20</sup> In Plato's *Meno*, the paradox arises in the juxtaposition of two points: (1) if I know *x*, then I have no need of making an inquiry; (2) if I don't know *x*, then I won't know either where to look or how to recognize what I want to know if I come upon it. The combination suggests that people do not learn by inquiry (*Meno* 80d-e). Ignorance is a maze-like trap preventing us from either searching for or finding our way into knowledge of what we had previously not known. But, if we have knowledge, then, there is seemingly no inquiry to make. In analyzing the *Meno*, Rosemary Desjardins highlights Plato's own repeated insistence on "the no-exit character of the dilemma" and relates the form of the paradox to the hermeneutic circle (264).

<sup>21</sup> In "Between Predication and Silence," James Smith notes the same correspondence between Plato's *Meno* and Augustine's *De Magistro* (72). Highlighting the labyrinthine character of Augustine's *De Magistro*, M. F. Burnyeat points to the "bewildering sequence of about-turns" resulting from the paradox (294).

Taken together, these points suggest that signs may facilitate even as they are unable to effect either learning or teaching. Louis Mackey sums up the dialogue's paradox succinctly: "nothing is taught without signs, but nothing is learned by means of them. [...] We are at once, it appears, bound to learn of realities by way of signs and incapable of interpreting the signs except by recourse to realities" ("Faith and Reason in Augustine's *De Magistro*" 57-58).

In *De doctrina christiana*, this dilemma concerning the efficacy of signs underlies Augustine's consideration of the enterprises of biblical exegesis and exposition. The signs of Scripture are of themselves incapable of communicating to a reader knowledge of which he or she is ignorant, and the preacher is hampered in rendering the truths of Scripture to a congregation on the same basis. Joseph Pucci contends a hermeneutic circle arises in Augustine's formulation of the Christian reader's "search for wisdom that is centered and controlled by that which is being sought—God" (77). Ignorant of God, the reader attempts to use the Bible's signs to grow in understanding. But, the search is perpetually obstructed: the reader lacks any independent recourse to God, in order to judge if his or her reading is in fact leading progressively toward the truth.

Indeed, if the Bible is understood principally as revelation concerning the nature of charity, Augustine's hermeneutics requires the reader to guide his or her reading by a principle that the reading is itself meant to furnish. Identification of charity as a hermeneutic key even more essential to the interpreter than authorial intention does not eliminate so much as set up an interpretive bind. Access to the meaning of the Bible is attainable only through exercise of and participation in the message. The signs reveal or convey to readers the meaning of charity only insofar as they have seemingly already grasped it, and charity is to be lived and exercised as the

context for such reading. Bound by this situation, Augustine believes he must move forward hoping that God will enter mercifully and lovingly into his process.

Most essentially, Augustine suggests that as we engage signs through the course of our life, we have two options.<sup>22</sup> We can misconstrue signs in ways that exile us from the world and from God. Or we can employ signs as a means of advancing in ways that lead simultaneously into the world and God. Christian doctrine concerning the Fall and the Incarnation illuminates the character of those distinctive passages. The Fall has weakened our ability and desire to choose the latter course, just as the Incarnation has enabled us to make our interpretive passage a sacramental probing of the mysteries of God and the world. In *De doctrina christiana* and in the *Confessions*, the Christian exile suffers the effects of the Fall even as the Incarnation's redemptive cure takes effect. As readers journey in exile, they struggle against the difficulty of the course, ever risk making false turns and expelling themselves from the maze, and also turn in ways that promise mystical delight.

Religious doctrines concerning the Fall of humanity and the Incarnation confer particular significance on our efforts to read. By passing through the labyrinth of a text, readers make a passage through a set of signs that culminates in their sharing either Adam's and Eve's promised death or Christ's paschal death on the cross. In the first case, we are misguided by desires that are ultimately incapable of satisfying our hearts or that impede others from doing the same. We lose our way and risk making of the

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<sup>22</sup> Augustine believes that his theologically informed theory of reading and signs bears upon all the reading we do. Although Augustine writes the treatise in order to comment explicitly on biblical reading, he also associates his project in this book with the uses Christians can make of not only non-biblical but also non-Christian literature (*DDC* 2.40.60). Finally, Augustine inserts all of the reading we do within the broad context of the living we do in the world, wherein he suggests we make a wayfaring passage interpreting not just books, but all things God has created.

labyrinth a death-like snare. At the same time, Augustine also hopes that signs open routes through which we can pursue greater insight and happiness. In fact, he hopes that by engaging signs we can make a contemplative passage toward an encounter with God. The wayfarer's passage to realizing redemption is a labyrinth of interpretive challenge. Within that journey, Augustine represents the wayfarer in exile struggling to interpret the signs and to push forward in the quest for God. Triumph comes only tentatively with periodic moments of gained insight and the renewal of one's heart. In effect, when we work our way out of life's varied snares, we are granted a measured entrance into divine mystery as it may be enjoyed in the world.

Spiritual practices like fasting are intended to dispose one to the delights of that love as one moves through the world.<sup>23</sup> Biblical reading is one such discipline or practice within a complete ascetical program. However, neither that reading nor the other ascetical practices assure that one proceeds in a charitable manner. Accessing the sacramental way in signs is not assured. Although Christian doctrine identifies the Incarnation as having transformed the labyrinth of created signs by opening those signs and the creatures who engage them to that which is uncreated, Augustine insists that we remain hampered by disoriented wills and the limits of the intellect. Although Augustine consistently writes with confidence concerning his grasp of both the nature of our ailment and the necessary medicine to cure it, neither his diagnosis nor the cure he identifies sweep away the challenges. He views the Incarnation and life in the Christian church not

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<sup>23</sup> Augustine spells out very little concretely about such asceticism, but he clearly has it in mind when commending readers to an "abandonment of former life and habits [...] through penance" (*DDC* 1.19.18). Later, Augustine associates reading with such a program when he urges his readers to "affix all our proud motions" to the "wood of the cross" (*DDC* 2.7.8).



as an instantaneous cure so much as a prolonged rehabilitation, made possible also through the unanticipated gifts of grace bestowed by God.<sup>24</sup>

In this life, we never acquire such a totalizing perspective either by means of a retrospective review of the course traversed or by means of mystical “flight” to a transcendent position above the struggle. Believing that an overall pattern exists and hoping for divine assistance does not make loving on a day-by-day basis less of a struggle. Neither the labyrinth of the world nor that of the text allows the wayfarer to acquire a position from which to recognize in particular signs how the overall pattern translates clearly the meaning or direction for one’s next steps. Imagining or conceptualizing those overviews may throw more light on our living and reading, but it does not eliminate the darkness. While Augustine attempts to view moments of his life in relation to overarching principles, he recognizes that those attempts have in the past always been marked by incongruity, so that that source of light obstructed his perception and cast itself as a kind of darkness.

Finding access to that sacramental way by recognizing it and choosing it from among the various possible courses engages the wayfarer in a labyrinthine struggle. Even as Augustine formulates his theory of our process, the challenge in navigating the labyrinth persists. Principles seldom make clear how to distinguish the one course from the other in practice. In fact, it is not a moral principle that governs the distinction, but God’s love, and that love is incalculable and mysterious. If there is truth to be found by reading, its discovery will not function as an epistemological exit from the play of signs. Charity does not serve the reader as a fixed, interpretive position overlooking the maze-

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine writes, for example, that God has “given so much of His spirit as a consolation in this journey” (*DDC* 1.16.15).

like passages of a text. Rather, Augustine urges the reader to work a way into the maze-like game of signification in a manner that is in fact open to meaning's untrammelled dynamism. We do so by responding to signs with the love that opens the diverse routes. To read this way is to exercise one's interpretive will in love. By turning with love as we make our interpretive choices, we share God's creative power and open additional, meaningful passages through signs. Those passages cannot be reduced to any single and uniform meaning. Their significance is in fact always in excess of our ability to name. If readers exercise their interpretive will in this way they participate in the divine mystery.

## Chapter Two: Augustine's *Confessions*: A Passage Into Mystery

### I The *Confessions*: A Labyrinth for Augustine and for the Reader

Although Augustine never explicitly employs the term maze, he represents himself in the *Confessions* as a *spiritus ambulans*—a walking or wayfaring spirit (IV.15.64). In the past, he confesses, “I wandered far from you” [*peregrinabar abs te*]” (X.5.176). For ephemeral pleasures, he explains, “I went searching around [*ambiebam*] [...] in such torturous windings and circuits [*tam aerumnosis anfractibus et circuitibus*]” (VI.6.93). Even following his entrance to the church, he remains a *wayfarer*, and he petitions to be turned by God, praying: “convert us [*converte nos*]” (IV.10.58). As Augustine composes his confessions, the passage he cuts remains labyrinthine. Augustine declares that God is present “in the most secret place of the heart [*intimi cordi*]” (IV.12.60) and in the Bible’s “narrow ways [*angusta foramina*]” (VI.5.92). Yet, turning to God does not yield a position of epistemic mastery. God is discovered with a “shudder of awe, the shudder of love [*horror honoris et tremor amoris*]” (XII.14.242). Augustine depicts himself turning by way of his confession from errant and sinful wandering toward maze-like experience of love that astounds him. Ultimately, such language, suggestive as it is of labyrinthine structure and process, highlights how Augustine makes passageways of the *Confessions* passages. Through this book, he hopes to enter into the mystery of God’s love and to move his readers to follow after him.

First, Augustine represents the life that has led up to his confession in a manner that evokes the challenge of a maze. Augustine chooses a course, wanders in error, encounters moral and intellectual obstructions—bifurcations, wrong-turns, reversals, and

dead-ends—and strives to advance toward God. The stories from his past serve several self-reflexive functions. First, by telling these stories as he does, Augustine situates his confession within an ongoing struggle to bring his heart to rest, and proceeds forward by narrating the events as he does. Secondly, in relation to these stories, Augustine furnishes a self-reflexive commentary on the epistemic and interpretive position of his readers.<sup>25</sup> Finally, he builds into the *Confessions* a series of narratives that evidence the power of conversion stories to move and redirect their audiences.

Ultimately, Augustine’s act of confession is the principal model Augustine offers his readers. Augustine repeatedly foregrounds the ongoing process by which he forms his confession. The confessional act frames all the other lesser models with which he characterizes texts and interpretation. Notably, Augustine remains in pursuit of God even as he makes his confession. He holds neither a fixed position nor a masterful overview from which to survey the truth. As he depicts himself in the process of composing the confession, Augustine suggest that he need not acquire a position of epistemic mastery or omniscient overview. Instead, he casts his confession as a sacrificial passage. In Jesus Christ’s descent into the world, Augustine finds a model for his own confessional passage. Just as Christ descends into the maze of the world, so Augustine uses his

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<sup>25</sup> Lucien Dällenbach, in “Reflexivity and Reading,” proposes that reflexive narratives work to form readers by employing *mise(s) en abyme* or “doublings which function as mirrors or microcosms of the text” (435). By such narrative reflexivity, a text can “condition readings by its use of signals, instructions or orders for decoding” (Dällenbach 436). In some instances, Augustine elaborates his theory of a reader’s search for God by drawing on moments in his life that explicitly feature issues of reading, rhetoric, or sign theory. In other cases, Augustine incorporates into his text a theory of such matters by representing events from his past as if analogous to a reader’s engagement with a text. Most importantly, though, he employs the process of confession to exemplify the strategies with which he prosecutes his quest and to articulate more fully its context. This modeling is not merely didactic illustration. In writing the *Confessions*, Augustine enacts the theory and does what he describes.

confession to enter into the complexities of the world as he progressively embraces his finitude and the limits of his understanding.

Moreover, Augustine utilizes his retrospective review of the course he traversed to make that passage. Although he reviews his life course, he does not do so as if he possessed a fixed position at the end of the journey. He represents his confessional as part of his pursuit, so that the confessional review of his life is a means of moving from the ways of sin toward the hidden and un-searchable ways of God.

Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine suggests that his efforts to discover God's truth will not extricate him from an experience of mystery, so much as lead him into one. Augustine' remains deprived of any fully-drawn map as he strives to draw near to God. While Augustine frequently makes specific declarations concerning the truth, he presents himself moving forward in the dark of a mystery that exceeds his expression or comprehension. Because God is mystery, Augustine is never capable of acquiring an epistemic position that fixes the truth in place. Instead, Augustine makes his confession in pursuit of an elusive mystery, and the dynamic motion of the narrator models a mode of proceeding that does not come to an end, an exit, or a fixed position concerning the truth.

Finally, it is into this pursuit that Augustine attempts to induct the readers of the *Confessions*. Augustine attempts to make God the center and guiding thread of his confession, but even as he does so, he suggests that God is a mystery over whom he can have no mastery. By repeatedly associating the book's principle of composition—the substance of the confession—with the mystery of divine love, Augustine complicates the reading process. We are invited to share Augustine's struggle. The book is an

epistemological and moral exercise for author and reader alike. Just as Augustine struggles to grasp the providential thread integrating the diverse events of his life and the biblical text, so the reader of the *Confessions* is challenged to discern in the signs of the text the mystery of love that integrates the work as a whole. Just as Augustine never acquires a fixed and masterful position concerning who God is, so readers of the book are immersed in an epistemic and interpretive pursuit that Augustine would have focused on a mystery beyond articulation and conceptual formulation. In effect, his confession is a striving after what cannot be put into words, so that what would serve as the principle of his confession—God’s truth—remains a mystery.

In relation to that mystery, the *Confessions* form for the reader a maze that resists interpretive mastery. The passages of the book do not succumb to a sure interpretive mapping, but instead function like a maze into which readers are immersed and by which Augustine aspires to move them to declare with him the profundity of God’s love.

## **II.A The Autobiography: Augustine’s Past as Model for the Wayfarer**

Augustine represents the life that has led up to his confession in a manner that evokes the challenges of a maze. Notably, the first nine books of the *Confessions* draw an analogy between that labyrinthine experience and engagement with texts. Augustine’s confession threads together several narratives explicitly focused on rhetoric and interpretation. These stories serve two self-reflexive functions: 1) they characterize our epistemic and interpretive position, and 2) they prompt readers to follow after him. In relation to his own life, Augustine formulates for his audience what he takes to be our

epistemic position in the world. He casts the whole of his life as an epistemic struggle analogous to an interpretive process. Brian Stock has argued that Augustine “reconfigured his life history as a story of his progress through stages of reading” (Stock “Reading, Ethics and the Literary Imagination” 9). By relating his broader epistemic struggles to his development as a reader, Augustine draws an analogy between general efforts to acquire understanding and the strategies of evaluation employed when reading a text. Consequently, he depicts the pursuit of truth as an effort to read the Book of Creation and the reading of books as an analogue to broader epistemic processes.

He represents the passage he has chosen to take through the Book of Creation as a transition from deadly moral wandering to an alternative mode of wayfaring driven by and toward the mystery of love. Within this story, Augustine is a wayfarer who repeatedly takes turns that trap him in sin and hence exile him from both the world and God. As in *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine construes the choices that lead him into that experience of entrapment in relation to the myth of the Fall, its principle vices, and the promise of death. As the story develops, Augustine also identifies several events that contribute to his extrication from the snare of sin. He views these events in relation to the Incarnation and its promise of redemption.

Initially, Augustine repeatedly correlates sin with errant wandering. Along the routes of sin, he confesses to God, “I departed from You [*ibam longius a te*]” (II.2.23). He goes on to contend that “I wandered further and further from You [*ego ibam porro longe a te*]” into a host of sins (II.2.23). He was set in motion by a “wandering lust [*vagus ardor*]” (II.2.52). Later in his story, he contends that even the search for God can be directed sinfully. He insists “I walked through dark and slippery places, and I went

out of myself in the search for You [*ambulabam per tenebras et lubricum et quaerebam te foris a me*]" (VI.1.87). Even as he writes and reflects on his impulse to sin, he wonders who can "unravel that complex twisted knottedness [*exaperit ipsam tortuosissimam et implicatissimam nodositatem*]" (II.10.31).

He frequently associates any erring he did in the world with the paradigmatic sins of pride and lust and a consequent loss of freedom. He writes: "Thus the soul is guilty of fornication when she turns from You [*advertitur abs te*] and seeks from any other source what she will nowhere find pure and without taint unless she returns to You [*nisi cum redit ad te*]" (II.6.29). Later, he recalls "the fierce dangers among which I wandered [*sum vagatus*] in my arrogance, going even further from You [*ad longe recedendum a te*], loving my ways not Your ways [*amans vias meas non tuas*], in love with my runaway liberty" (III.3.37). The difficult routes of sin formed a labyrinthine trap in which he exercised a freedom which he has come to view as illusory. The ways of sin were in fact a life of imprisonment. As he reflects on the nature of sin, he laments that he found no pleasure in "a life with no snares for my feet [*viam sine muscipulis*]" (III.1.35). In effect, he looks back and believes that though he did not limit his desires for sex, praise, wealth, or power, those very desires dominated and constrained him.

Moreover, the maze-like prison of sin housed its own Minotaur: the death incurred through the Fall. Like a predator, sin threatened Augustine's life and left him "all broken and bleeding" (IV.7.56). Insofar as he continues to be ruled by desire unmeasured by love, Augustine believes his life's course is an experience of self-dissolution. Sin is his "undoing" (II.4.27). As significantly, he realizes that through his choices to sin he has also frequently bound others, limited their freedom, and risked their



remaining enclosed in the traps into which he shuttled them.<sup>26</sup> Living his freedom in these ways he made of his life a death-like passage promised to Adam's descendents. He laments his life of sin as an "abyss of death [*mortis profunditas*]" into which he slowly sinks (II.6.29).

Even after he took up an intentional search for God, he remained in a labyrinthine snare and made his way through it in a manner often compromised by the vices linked to the Fall. In Book IV, when reflecting on the choice to live continently, he writes: "Time was passing and I delayed to turn to the Lord [*tardabam converti ad dominum*]. From day to day I postponed life in You [*differebam de die in diem vivere in te*], but I did not postpone that death that daily I was dying in myself [*et non differebam cotidie in memet ipso mori*]. I was in love with the idea of happiness, yet I feared where it was, and fled away from it in my search for it [*et ab ea fugiens quaerebam eam*]" (VI.11.100). He continues: "I was at once striving towards you and thrust back from You, so that I knew the taste of death: for You resist the proud [*Sed ego conabar ad te et repellebar abs te, ut saperem mortem, quoniam superbis resistis*]" (IV.15.63). He writes that as "a wayfaring spirit [*spiritus ambulans*] I did not return to You [*revertebar ad te*] but in my drifting [*ambulando ambulabam*] was borne on towards imaginings which have no reality either in You or in me. [...] I was drawn out of myself by the voices of my error [*vocibus erroris mei rapiebar foras*] and went falling ever lower through the sheer weight of my own pride" (IV.15.64). He was drawn out of himself to walk in things that have no truth, trapped in errant and labyrinthine wandering.

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<sup>26</sup> Although Augustine does consider how he has harmed others, as he confesses his sins, he does not attend with the same diligence to such consequences. He tends to give much more emphasis to the perceived effect sin has on his relationship with God.

Within this narrative of Augustine's moral degeneration, reading and engagement with signs are repeatedly highlighted. His natural aptitude for the language arts increased his propensity to enter snares. In particular, he employs events of his literary and rhetorical education as platforms for commentary on the misuse of signs by readers. He laments his overall lack of a "will to learn" and an unmeasured appreciation of praise, and he insists that his instructors compounded his deficiencies by immersing him in specific studies—such as reading the *Aeneid*—that made his scholastic aptitude a hazard (I.12.12).

When Augustine writes of the *Aeneid*, he draws a parallel between his own disorientation and the labyrinthine course of Aeneas's life. Recalling his reading, Augustine explains: "I was forced to memorize the wanderings of Aeneas [*cujus errores*]*—*whoever *he* was—while forgetting my own wanderings [*errorum meorum*] and to weep for the death of Dido who killed herself for love, while bearing dry-eyed my own pitiful state, in that among these studies I was becoming dead to You, O God, my life" (I.13.13). In this instance, Augustine criticizes his earlier reading because it distracted him from his own moral wandering. He links that wandering to the threat of "becoming dead" to God. By lamenting his distraction, Augustine not only opposes his former mode of reading, but also warns his reader not to let his wandering become the final focus of attention.

In the same section, Augustine extends the labyrinthine metaphor for his education by commenting on the school's entryway. He writes: "Over the entrance to these grammar schools hangs a curtain: but this should be seen not as lending honor to these mysteries, but as a cloak to the errors [*tegimentum erroris*] taught within" (I.13.13).

The curtain is itself a sign inviting two possible interpretations. Although Augustine may once have assumed with others that it signified the dignity of his studies, he views things differently as he writes his confession. As he writes, he re-interprets the “cloak” by identifying it now as a means of concealing the circuits of a labyrinthine snare. Like the text of the *Aeneid*, Augustine suggests that the threshold of the school was a passageway into errant wandering. The school, like that book, threatened to lull him into self-forgetfulness.<sup>27</sup> Now, as he writes, both the school and the *Aeneid* take on new meanings as he remembers his life in relation to the Christian narrative of salvation. He confesses to God, what he calls “my evil ways [*malarum viarum mearum*], that I may love your holy ways [*ut diligam bonas vias tuas*]” (I.13.14).

Augustine worries about the ways the artful use of language can enclose people in a serpentine snare. In Book III, Augustine positions his engagement with the Manichean sect as a nadir within the course of his interpretive misdirection. He links that experience specifically to their rhetoric. He explains they were “talking high-sounding nonsense, carnal and wordy men” in whose mouths lay “the snares of the devil [*laquei diaboli*]” (III.6.39). In their company, he “straggled far [*longe peregrinabar*]” from God (III.6.39). His confusion was so profound that he writes, “it seemed to me that I was coming to the truth when I was in fact going away from it [*et recedens a veritate ire in eam mihi*”

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<sup>27</sup> Despite insisting that the school cultivated skills he would not want to lack, he castigated his education as an adolescent on numerous grounds. O’Donnell explains that the “habits of misreading implanted here obstructed his approach to scripture for a long time” (Volume II 75). Augustine laments for instance how poetry he read in school promoted the illicit behavior of the pagan gods (*Confessions* I.16.15). In school competitions, he and his classmates “were compelled to follow in the erring footsteps [*vestigia errantes sequi cogebamur*] of poets who had written poetry he now deems lascivious (I.17.16). Colish explains that poetry is such a hazard “since it is used to construct a world of shadows and to make the fantastic morality of that world attractive and convincing” (25). At the close of the first book, Augustine posits: “in this lay my sin: that I sought pleasure, nobility, and truth not in God but in the beings He had created” (I.19.19). The school encouraged those pursuits and so reinforced the attachments that he believes delayed his turning to pursue God.

*videbar]*” (III.7.41). In Book VI, Augustine confesses that he, no less than the Manicheans, made of eloquence a trap for others. On one occasion when Augustine was discussing the single life with his friend Alypius, Augustine writes that “through me the serpent began to speak” (VI.12.101). He writes: “By my tongue the devil wove fascinating snares [*dulces laequeos*] and scattered them in his path [*in via ejus*] for the entangling [*implicarentur*] of his hitherto untrammelled feet” (VI.12.101).

Augustine represents his entrance into the Christian Church and his decision to read the Bible as difficult and maze-like passages. Books and other readers serve him as guides in that transition. For example, Augustine recalls that Cicero’s *Hortensius* directed him from one kind of search to another. When he read Cicero’s book, he claims “it changed the direction of my mind, altered my prayers to you, O Lord, and gave me a new purpose and ambition” (III.4.38). He explains, “The book excited and inflamed me” (III.4.39). In particular, Augustine suggests Cicero redirected him “to make some study of the Sacred Scriptures” (III.5.39). His response to Cicero’s book models the response he hopes to elicit from his own reader. Labyrinthine imagery colors Augustine’s description of what followed. When he first encountered the Bible, “I was not of the nature to enter into it or bend my neck to follow it [...] I had not the mind to penetrate into their depths [*non penetrabat interiora eius*]” (III.5.39). Augustine associates his refusal to read the Bible with prideful obstinacy. He was too “swollen” to enter into the reading of Scripture because it did not compare “with the majesty of Cicero” (III.5.39).

A second guide appeared in his life later and furnished him with the thread that would make possible his entrance into biblical reading. Augustine recalls meeting Ambrose, who served Augustine as an emblematic Christian wayfarer and reader.

Ambrose modeled a mode of interpretive wayfaring that Augustine adopts in life and toward which he attempts to prompt his readers.<sup>28</sup> Most note that Ambrose's reading struck Augustine because he did it in silence, but it is also significant that Augustine describes Ambrose as a reader whose "eyes traveled across the page [as] he sought into the sense [*oculi ducebantur per paginas et cor intellectum rimabatur*]" (VI.3.89).

Ambrose modeled reading as the heart probing or prying open [*rimabatur*] an interpretive route. After encountering Ambrose, Augustine determined that "all those knots of cunning and calumny [*omnes versutarum calumniarum nodos*], which those who deceived me had tangled up against the holy books [*quos illi deceptores nostri adversus divinos libros innectebam*], could be untangled [*posse dissolvi*]" (VI.3.90). The untangling of these knots does not furnish Augustine a masterful possession of the truth.

In a passage that follows, Augustine describes the change in his disposition toward the Bible by associating the rhetoric of Scripture with a labyrinthine structure. The Bible's rhetoric is itself double because "it was at once a book that all could read and read easily, and yet preserved the majesty of its mystery in the deepest part of its meaning [*secreti sui dignitatem in intellectu profundiore servaret*]" (VI.5.92). Biblical rhetoric "receives all within its welcoming arms [*exciperet omnes populari sinu*]" and bears a few more directly to its profundities "by narrow ways [*per angusta foramina*]" (VI.5.92). Augustine recounts having meditated on this feature of the text and explains, "You guided me [*gubernas me*], I was going the broad way of the world and You did not forsake me [*ibam per viam saeculi latam nec deserebas*]" (VI.5.92). He declares that

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<sup>28</sup> Ambrose, as Bishop of Milan, preached to his congregation that reading the Bible necessitated distinguishing between the letter that kills and the spirit. That principle was eventually fundamental to Augustine's critical theory in *De doctrina christiana*.

during the roughly ten intervening years since he had first been repelled by the Bible's lowly rhetoric, he came to believe both in God's existence and God's beneficent care: "even if I did not know what way leads to You—or leads back to You [*etiamsi ignorabam...quae via duceret aut reduceret ad te*]" (VI.5.92). The conviction that God was benevolent augmented Augustine's confidence in the Scriptures and led him ultimately to conclude that "by them men should believe in You and in them seek You [*per ipsam tibi credi et per ipsam te quaeri*]" (VI.5.92). At first, he finds the text obstructs the reader because it seems full of "absurdities" (VI.5.92), but then he insists that these obstructions give way "to the profundity of mystery [*ad sacramentorum altitudinem*]" (VI.5.92).<sup>29</sup> In either case, the text resists a reader's full-probing by barring access to the human mind, refusing admittance to those who do not believe, and remaining impenetrable even to those who attempt to determine its significance.

Ultimately, though, it is reductive to assess Augustine's conversion in terms of what books he read. Nor is the transition simply a passage from one community of readers such as he found among the Manicheans to the community of the Christian Church. Augustine presents his personal history as the story of a man who strives to construe not only the books he reads, but also his life and the world in relation to charity. The character of that aspiration was very much entwined with his reading of the Bible, but it finally had to do more with how he lived in the world than with what books he happened to read. He anticipates that the fullness of love is to be found in union with God.

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<sup>29</sup> O'Donnell notes in his commentary that no "attempt to distinguish rigorously between *sacramentum* as 'mysterious signification within a text' and as 'religious ritual, e.g. baptism' will succeed in dealing with A.'s texts" (354).

As a result, the quest to live a life of charity entails making a passage that always exceeds understanding. In fact, Augustine insists that the mystery of God's love opens any passage he might make in life. Despite believing that he has long been alienated from God, he insists that God is an inextricable maze from which no one can truly depart. Even when wandering from God, Augustine insists "there is nowhere to go where You are not [*ideo non esse quo a te omni modo recedatur*]" (II.6.29). Augustine declares to God: "Thou art everywhere whom no place compasses in [*ubique sis, quem nullus circumscreibt locus*], and that Thou alone art ever present even to those that go furthest from Thee [*et solus es praesens etiam his qui longe fiunt a te*]" (V.2.69). This conception of God as an inextricable maze complicates how Augustine views the trapping routes of sin. Because he conceives of God as limitless, Augustine asserts that any choice he makes in life will lead him down a path housed in the labyrinth of God's being. Augustine notes that the pleasures in which he has been ensnared "would not have been at all" had they not had some existence in God (X.27.192). Thus, God even makes possible Augustine's departure although he remains paradoxically "fenced about on all sides [*undique circumvallabar abs te*]" by God (VIII.1.129). Augustine suggests that God walls him not by keeping him from moving in certain ways, but because divine love alone opens the routes available to him as a *spiritus ambulans*.

Augustine's autobiography not only tells this story of his entrapment in sin, but also of his passage toward a life of love. His efforts to abandon his life of serpentine wandering entailed a paschal-like liberation. As a sinner, he was ensnared by false hopes and fruitless desires. He represents his exodus from the ways of sin as a passage into freedom. He passes from the snare of illusion into the labyrinthine mystery he believes

exists when the world is engaged as a sacramental site, that is, as a site in which God may be encountered. In terms of the reading Augustine does, that journey is not so much toward scripture, as it is toward his recognition of the reading principles he identifies in *De doctrina christiana*.

## **II.B Narrative Junctures: Prompting the Reader to Turn with Love**

Just as Augustine's story is more than an account of his life as a reader, so the self-reflexivity of the *Confessions* does more than create an internal commentary on the workings of signs. The *Confessions* repeatedly presents the reader images of people turning from one course to another. These accounts model the determination to undergo a process of moral reformation and intellectual exploration. In the first nine books of the *Confessions*, other books and oral reports figure prominently in the conversion stories of others. By repeatedly returning the reader to such stories Augustine attempts to prompt readers to make such turns in their own lives. The signs used by other people reorient wayfarers either toward or away from a fuller practice of love. In some cases, they ignite hearts and inflame individuals with desire for God. In other cases, signs work just as much to direct the wayfarer toward ends Augustine associates with the loss of happiness, freedom, and the capacity to love. Thus, through the whole of the *Confessions*, Augustine is able to model how his own text is to function for his readers, guide them as they engage it, and make warnings concerning what he deems potentially errant reading. Ultimately, these stories are intended to encourage his audience to undergo a conversion that is comparable to his own.



Augustine's strategy of linking conversion to the use of signs reaches a climactic pitch in Books VII and VIII. In that section, Augustine draws reading and conversion together in a series of narratives in which books and tales of conversion serve as catalysts in the spread of faith. These tales make reading or listening to other tales an incitation to a change of heart. In the second chapter of this book, Augustine notes he met with Simplicianus, who had "begotten Ambrose" in the faith, and "told him all the wanderings of my error [*narravi ei circuitus erroris mei*]" (VIII.2.130). Simplicianus responded by telling Augustine a story of conversion. At its focus was Victorinus, the translator of Augustine's Plato, who had been recognized for his teaching of rhetoric with a statue in the Roman forum. In the confession, Augustine dramatizes his earlier perplexity at this event and asks, "by what means didst Thou find Thy way in to that breast?" (VIII.2.131). Augustine recounts that Simplicianus answered him: "he read...Holy Scripture" (VIII.2.131), and then repeats that Victorinus was won over to the church "by reading" (VIII.2.131). This echoes a bishop's promise to Monica, Augustine's mother, that he would "himself discover by reading what his error is and how great his impiety [*ipse legendo reperiet quis ille sit error et quanta impietas*]" (III.12.47). All of which encourages the reader to similarly experience their reading of the *Confessions* as a prod to set off from errant ways.

Augustine casts Victorinus's conversion story as one man's passage from the snare of serpentine eloquence and pride to the foolish ways of humility and charity. Augustine explains that Simplicianus told him the story so as to draw him similarly "on to the humility of Christ" (VIII.2.130). The honored rhetorician had long been comfortable declaring his faith in "demons of pride whom in his pride he worshipped"

(VIII.2.131). But at the encouragement of Simplicianus he “grew proud towards vanity and humble towards the truth” (VIII.2.131). He chose then to make a public declaration of his faith for “there had been no salvation in the Rhetoric he had taught, yet he had professed it publicly” (VIII.2.132). Augustine’s recollection of the event places the Bible at the center of a story of conversion that will itself motivate his own conversion. He explains that “when this man of yours, Simplicianus, had told me the story of Victorinus, I was on fire to imitate him: which indeed was why he had told me” (VIII. 5.134). At this point, Augustine presents an exemplar of how his confession is to operate in the lives of his readers. Just as he was initially inspired to imitate Victorinus, so he now imitates the story-telling of Simplicianus. He shares with his reader Victorinus’s story of conversion that his audience too might be “on fire to imitate him” (VIII.5.134).

In the following chapter of the same book, Augustine reinforces this connection between reading and conversion by relating the events of a visit from his friend Ponticianus. Augustine recalls how “a book on a gaming table” initiated the conversation between himself, Ponticianus, and a second friend Alypius (VIII.6.137). Ponticianus recognized the book to be a text of the apostle Paul, and as a Christian himself, he grew excited to find the book in Augustine’s possession. Ponticianus immediately recounted the conversion stories of St. Antony and other monks who fled to the desert to live ascetically. Ponticianus continued the conversation by relating an occasion when two friends happened upon the a codex containing Antony’s life during a walk. Augustine writes: “There they found a small book in which was written the life of Antony. One of them began to read it, marveled at it, was inflamed by it. While he was actually reading he had begun to think how he might embrace such a life, and give up his worldly

employment to serve you alone” (VIII.6.137). Reading again figures as an incitation to conversion. The story emphasizes the role of the book in prompting a decisive change of direction. Augustine recounts for his reader, “the man who was doing the reading was filled with a love of holiness and angry at himself with righteous shame” (VIII.6.138). That man wondered at what held him back from following the example of holiness he saw in Antony. Augustine foregrounds the place of the book in their conversion, writing: “he turned back his eyes to the book. He read on and was changed inwardly [*reddidit oculos paginis. Et legebat et mutabatur intus*]” (VIII.6.138). Reading stirs his heart and leaves him wondering at the examples set before him. In response, he “saw the better way and chose it for his own” (VIII.6.138). Ponticianus recounts to Augustine that, like this reader, his companion also resolved to quit his work in the Roman government. No less, Augustine insists that when the women to whom these two state officials were betrothed “heard of it they likewise dedicated their virginity [to God]” (VIII.6.138).

Then, Augustine continues to develop his model by relating the effect these stories had on him. Up to this point, Augustine confesses that he found himself like a groggy man, not fully willing, and so incapable of rising from the bed of his habitual lust. Struck by Ponticianus’s stories, Augustine retreats alone with his intimate friend Alypius to a secluded section of a garden near his home. There, he wrestles interiorly with himself, exposing to himself the presence in his soul of “two wills” (VIII.10.142). Augustine addresses God: “You turned me back towards myself [*retorquebas me ad me ipsam*]” (VIII.7.138), so that Augustine insists, “there was no way to flee from myself [*quo a me fugerem non erat*]” (VIII.7.139). Augustine is to himself an inextricable labyrinth of paths leading him back always to self-confrontation.

At this point in Augustine's account, continence personified appears in the narrative as a guide who incites his conversion by revealing to him models of chastity. Lady Continence extended to him "hands full of multitudes of good examples" (VIII.11.145). These examples are a provocation to Augustine, just as Augustine wishes for his varied models to provoke a conversion in members of his audience. He sees Lady Continence "honourably soliciting me to come to her and not linger [*ut venirem neque dubitare*]" (VIII.11.145). Augustine brings his struggle to a pitch, when she asks: "Can you not do what these men have done, what these women have done?" (VIII.11.145). Like the men and women of Ponticianus's story, those "good examples" confirm for Augustine again that others before him have determined to follow the path that lies before him currently. The questioning of Lady Continence brings Augustine's struggle to a pitch.

Augustine leaves Alypius, throws himself beneath a fig tree, and begins to weep, asking, "How long, how long shall I go on saying tomorrow and again tomorrow? Why not now, why not have an end to my uncleanness this very hour?" (VIII.12.146). Augustine is now prompted to cease with his delay and to follow the models of decisive conversion furnished him by Ponticianus. It is at this point that he hears a child's voice, singing "Take and read, take and read" (VIII.12.146). Immediately before reporting having heard this mysterious chant, Augustine recalls once more the hagiographic *Life of Antony*. In that life, Athanasius recounts how upon hearing the Gospel proclaimed from a book, Antony abandoned all he had and took up his life as a hermit in the deserts of Egypt. In his own story, Augustine now responds to the sung words, "interpreting the incident as quite certainly a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the

passage at which I should open” (VIII.12.146). He returns to the side of Alypius where he finds and snatches up the “Apostle’s book” to read from Paul’s letter to the Romans: “*Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences*” (VIII.12.146). Upon reading these verses, Augustine explains: “I had no wish to read further, and no need. For in that instant, with the very ending of the sentence, it was as though a light of utter confidence shone in all my heart, and all the darkness of uncertainty vanished away” (VIII.12.146).

Resolved to live a life of continence, Augustine, at the request of Alypius, shares with his friend the selection he has just read, and Alypius is figured as the first to follow Augustine’s exemplary conversion when he looks further in the same text and reads, “Now him that is weak in faith, take unto you” (VIII.12.146). Alypius applies this verse to himself. Thus, Augustine repeatedly configures conversion as an eminently social act involving the imitation of a model conversion as encountered in a text or oral report. By representing texts and narratives of conversion as prompts to conversion, Augustine embeds within his narrative models of reading and of response that he hopes will be instructive for his audience.

Augustine accentuates the force of these narratives by writing quite directly and repeatedly concerning the expectations he has for his book. He conceives of his audience as “fellow pilgrims” (X.4.175). He insists on the power of his narrative to move these pilgrims affectively. In Book X, he writes: “When the confessions of my past sins [...] are read and heard, they stir up the heart” (X.3.174). Later, Augustine indicates more precisely how he intends to move his readers: “I excite my own love for You and the love

of those who read what I write, that we all may say: *The Lord is great, and exceedingly to be praised*” (XI.1.211). If he can draw from his audience such a shared declaration, then his confession will be a corporate prayer.<sup>30</sup> He declares that his book will multiply the good of his own confession when “many [...] pray to you for me” (X.4.175). He then petitions God concerning his readers: “let their breath come faster for my good deeds: let them sigh for my ill [...] and let the hymn of praise and the weeping rise up together in Your sight from Your censers which are the hearts of my brethren” (X.4.175). In exhorting his readers to this kind of prayerful and evaluative process, he challenges them to grow in their knowledge of charity, by which they can discriminate when they ought to praise and when weep. By making that call to prayer explicit in the confessions, Augustine affirms that his audience is to find in the *Confessions* an incitation to prayer and conversion.

Finally, Augustine directly challenges his reader to engage in a practice of personal examination and confession. In Book II, when Augustine is busy recalling the events of his past, he interrupts himself:

But to whom am I telling this? Not to Thee [...] but in Thy presence I am telling it to my own kind, to the race of men, or rather to that small part of the human race that may come upon these writings. And to what purpose do I tell it? Simply that I and any other who may read may realize out of what depths we must cry to Thee. For nothing is more surely heard by Thee than a heart that confesses Thee and a life in Thy faith” (II.3.24).

Later, he addresses his audience still more directly. He writes:

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<sup>30</sup> O’Donnell proposes: “This is not a book to be read so much as it is a prayer in which the reader is to share” (*Augustine* 108).

“O sinners, return [*redite*] to your own heart and abide in Him that made you [...] Where are you going to what bleak places [*Quo itis in aspera*]? Where are you going [*Quo itis*]? [...] What goal are you making for, wandering around and about by ways so hard and laborious [*ambulare vias difficiles et laboriosas*]. Rest is not where you seek it. Seek what you seek, but it is not where you seek it. You seek happiness of life in the land of death, and it is not there. For how shall there be happiness of life where there is no life?” (IV.12.60)

He calls his reader by these questions into a prayerful exploration of what it means to love. He urges his readers to undertake an ascetical exercise by which that exploration can be pushed forward. Augustine’s various images of readers, storytellers, and more generally of searching believers lend to his efforts to create a community of readers who share his mode of making a passage through the maze of signs encountered in the world. By doing so, Augustine uses the various models to induct his audience into assuming his confessional mode of wayfaring. In this way, the book can engage readers in an interpretive and compositional pilgrimage similar to the one he makes as he confesses.

### **III.A Christ’s *Pasch*: A Model For Augustine’s Practice of Confession**

In Augustine’s theology, Jesus Christ, as the principle mediator of revelation and salvation, models and opens a route to God that reorients his mode of proceeding.<sup>31</sup> Even prior to his conversion, Augustine explains: “The way, our Saviour himself [*via ipse*

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<sup>31</sup> Marcia Colish claims that the “deliberate juxtaposition of the ideas of Incarnation and expression” in the initial paragraphs is a directive instructing the “reader to pay close attention to these ideas in Augustine’s autobiography” (22). Just as the Incarnation redirects Augustine conceptually when reflecting on the Scriptures in *De doctrina christiana*, this holds also as he examines his life in the *Confessions*.

*salvator*], delighted me; but I still shrank from walking a way so strait [*ire per ejus angustias*]” (VIII.1.129). Augustine represents his confessional search for God as an effort to work his way into the narrow passes [*angustias*] of love opened by Christ’s *pasch*—his life, death, and resurrection. In relation to Christ’s sacrificial way, Augustine suggests that the pursuit of God does not culminate in the acquisition of a position of mastery. In his redemptive mission, Christ does not reign as a master, but descends into the world to gather all things together. Christ empties himself on the cross, taking on the form of a slave, living and dying as a creature. The ways of love that Augustine struggles to find in the world are not an exit from the world. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection—the Christian paschal mystery—open and model the passage that Augustine believes he must make: that *pasch* will lead Augustine not out of the maze of the world but into it. Thus, his efforts to live a life bound by love does not usher him from the world of multiplicity, nor cancel out his status as a finite wayfarer, nor allow him to claim to be the lord of his life.

Taking Christ as his model, Augustine describes his practice of confession in the language of sacrifice.<sup>32</sup> The examination of his memory and the unfolding of it in prayer are understood by him as “the sacrifice of my confessions [*sacrificium confessionum mearum*]” (V.1.69). Likewise, in Book VIII, he writes, quoting *Psalm* 115, “Let me, O my God, remember with thanks to Thee and confess Thy mercies upon me [...] *Thou has broken my bonds, I will sacrifice to Thee the sacrifice of praise.*” (VIII.1.129). He prays

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<sup>32</sup> Eugene Vance contextualizes Augustine’s association of confession and sacrifice historically. After Roman persecution, Vance notes, confessors were “individuals who had internalized the act of dying to the world to better dedicate their outward lives to ‘confessing’ the praise of God in thought backdrop of Christ’s passion that Augustine construed his internalization of the spirit of martyrdom. See also Geoffrey Harpham’s description of Augustine’s ascetics of interpretation as “analogous to martyrdom” (239).



also: “As for me, O my God, Your servant, I have vowed to You the sacrifice of my confession in what I am now writing [*sacrificium confessionis in his letteris*], and I pray that in Your mercy it may be given me to pay my vows to You” (XII.24.250). If the course is associated with a sacrificial laying down of one’s life, Augustine nevertheless represents his wayfaring as a movement into the world and not from it. Augustine’s repeated correlations of confession and sacrifice associate Augustine’s composition and Christ’s humble embrace of human finitude, evidenced in part, by epistemic limitation.

In a still more evocative passage, Augustine begins Book IV with the following petition to God: “Grant me, I beseech Thee, to retrace [*circuire*] now in memory the past ways of my error [*circuitus erroris mei*] and to offer Thee a sacrifice of rejoicing. For without Thee, what am I but a guide [*dux*] to my own destruction” (IV.1.51). He turns back to pass back over the round about ways of his wandering, now with God as his guide, so that he may exit from ways leading to his demise and make a passage in love. This exit is the sacrificial abandonment of what obstructs Augustine from the ways of love.

The sacrificial character of his confessional wayfaring takes on meaning in relation to the purpose of Christ’s death on the cross. For Augustine, Christ’s sacrifice was an act of reconciling love. Christ’s paschal sacrifice reconciled a finite and fallen world with an infinite God. That reconciliation upholds a truth claim of monotheistic religions: God draws all things together and binds them to the divine nature ontologically. In God, Augustine believes he will come to know that love which reconciles all things. He identifies God’s metaphysical role in unifying creation in the first chapters of Book I. While exploring certain puzzling aspects of his quest, he prays: “we are gathered into one

by You (I.3.4). Then, he proceeds to characterize God ontologically in the next chapter as “gathering all things [...] and needing none” (I.4.4). Augustine believes Christ’s sacrifice makes possible that reconciliation after the Fall and models a means of accessing it.

Just as Christ’s sacrifice restored a union of creature and Creator, Augustine represents his own sacrificial passage as he lives and confesses as an act of unifying love.<sup>33</sup> His retrospective confession is an active struggle to bring about this unity in his life. When he articulates the nature of his memory’s operation in Book X, Augustine proposes that the things once learned “must be collected out of dispersion [and that] indeed the verb *to cogitare* is named from this drawing together” (X.11.182). When Augustine reads the text of his memory, his reading is an act of re-membering it, so that it holds together in Christ. By doing so, he attempts to know God’s reconciling love in his own life. Augustine envisions himself as “divided up in time” (XI.29.230), and looks for the hermeneutic key to his life in the unity of God’s being. He writes, “Nor in all these things that my mind traverses [*percurro*] in search of You, do I find any sure place for my mind save in You [*te invenio tutum locum animae meae nisi in te*], in whom all that is scattered in me is brought into one, so that nothing of me may depart from You [*nec a te quicquam recedat ex me*]” (X.40.206).

Thus, his re-collection in Books I to IX is an act of self-gathering. At the start of Book II, Augustine declares:

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<sup>33</sup> Within Augustine’s spiritual theology, ascetical practices in general are a means of accessing that reconciling love. Asceticism aims at the generation of greater personal integrity, at a kind of self-gathering. For example, Augustine contends that “by continence we are collected and bound up into unity within ourself, whereas we had been scattered abroad in multiplicity” (X.29.193). Through the course of his return to God, he understands himself to be in passage toward a more self-gathered condition in which he is progressively more one with himself, others in the world, and God. Confession is one means of realizing this unity.

I propose now to set down my past wickedness and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not for love of them but that I may love Thee, O my God. I do it for love of Thy love, passing again in the bitterness of remembrance over my most evil ways [*vias meas nequissimas*] that Thou mayest thereby grow ever lovelier to me, [...] and I collect myself out of that broken state in which my very being was torn asunder because I was turned away [*sum... aversus*], from Thee the One, and wasted myself upon the many. (II.1.23)

The review of his past leads Augustine to cross over once again “his most evil ways.” In the past, he suggests, he was “broken” and “torn asunder” by love for what was itself many. As he writes, his passage over those routes is made in an effort to turn back from the many to the One.

Later, in the eleventh book’s meditation on time, Augustine draws an analogy between a reader’s relation to a book and God’s relation to the world. He describes his experience of reciting psalms and how the text is divided up across time. He compares this extension of the text through time to the “whole life of man, of which all a man’s actions are parts: and likewise for the whole history of the human race, of which all the lives of all men are parts” (XI.28.230). Just as God draws together all of history, so Augustine attempts to gather together the words of the psalm by formulating a coherent reading. And so also like God, he attempts to draw his personal story together into a coherent whole, the principle of which he discovers in God’s own loving reconciliation of his life.

Both the rhetoric of sacrifice and its association with reconciling love can be misconstrued. By characterizing his confession as a sacrifice, Augustine could be implying that his confession necessitates a death-like exit from the complicated maze of the world. As he acquires a unified self-understanding by making his confession, it seems once again that his retrospective review concedes a comprehensive and coherent perspective on his personal history. He rises above the labyrinth of his life and perceives it as does God. In God, Augustine discovers the one true, fixed, and stable meaning of his life.

However, when Augustine represents his confession as an act of ontological atonement, the route opened is not in fact flight from the limitations of a particular and finite perspective. Augustine believes Christ opened a passageway to God by living and dying a particular, historical, human life. Rather than prompt an attempt to escape temporal constraints, the Incarnation suggests to Augustine that he must embrace his finitude to make his passage to God. What it means to do so is not a clearly defined venture. Nor is there any assurance that he will succeed in doing so. The challenge is a struggle to live his life charitably, and by doing so, to incarnate God's love like Christ in the world.

In contrast to remarks that paint Augustine principally as a Neoplatonist, Flores writes also that Augustine finds a way toward God in "the mediation of Christ, who ministers to opposing needs in being both eternal and temporal, victor and victim, priest and sacrifice. If God's incarnated Word be indicative, we can move beyond time only by moving through it and we move through it (among other ways) by speaking" (9).

Augustine makes of confession, his use of language as he speaks with God, a means of personal passage into the mysterious ways of love.

As such, confession is the composing of a passage that participates in Christ's mysterious descent into the world. In Christ's loving act, the world and God adhere or cleave to one another, but in a manner that is also an affirmation of the absolute ontological distinction that separates the one from the other. In effect, through his confessional passage Augustine attempts to engage the world as it adheres to God and respect by doing so the ontological gulf between created things and God. His hope of working his way into both God and world necessitates that he cut such a passage through the maze of signs he finds in his memory.

### **III.B Confessional Wayfaring: Moving Forward by way of Retrospection**

As Augustine makes his sacrificial confession, he recounts the events of his life and looks retrospectively upon the course he has completed. His retrospective process recalls one means of mastering a maze: a full-threading of the structure that allows one to review the layout by retracing the course traversed. As Augustine looks back on the course of his life, he frequently treats the position he holds while confessing as one from which he can offer a masterful account of what came before. He makes firm declarations concerning his intellectual and moral waywardness in the past. Those declarations seem to suggest Augustine makes his confession as if he has overcome the maze's obstacles and is now in a position to chart the true course he'd taken in life. However, in relation to the rhetorician's memory arts, it is possible to offer a different characterization of the retrospective process. In relation to those arts, we can see how Augustine's retrospective

process is oriented not by a mastery of the truth, but toward a discovery he hopes yet to make. This account of Augustine's confessional strategy is more congruent with his repeated confessions of ignorance and the fact that he depicts himself still in the process of searching for God while he writes.

The memory arts directed classical rhetoricians concerning how to store and recall matter for oratory. The technique relied on a place memory system that positioned material within a flexible web of associations. Both storage and recall were aided by the use of evocative imagery and language. For classical rhetoricians, mnemotechniques did not enable mere rote memorization of an existing speech, but aided in the invention of the speech itself. In *The Craft of Thought*, Mary Carruthers explains that for the orator, memory becomes a “matrix of a reminiscing cogitation, shuffling and collating ‘things’ stored in a random-access memory scheme, or set of schemes—a memory *architecture*” (4). When employing such re-combinatory schemes and the memorial devices that aid storage and recall, the orator could determine the compositional direction of a speech *ex tempore*. More importantly still, the process of mulling over such stored matter was a means of creating new speeches, of generating a new perspective concerning the material situated in the memory.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine reformulates the orator's technique as an ascetical and meditative practice.<sup>34</sup> The goals of his meditation are two-fold and mutually

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<sup>34</sup> Although Augustine was himself a teacher of rhetoric, O'Donnell questions whether he employed the memory arts, explaining that there “is no indication he ever knew the *rhetorica ad Herenium*, the crucial text; he knew the *de oratore*, but never alludes to the section on mnemotechnic” (177). O'Donnell proposes that “the most that may be said is that he drew on a store of imagery congruent with the technique” (177). In addition to that shared imagery, I think the meditative purposes given the rhetorical techniques by medieval monks are discernible in Augustine's own rumination on personal history. Carruthers identifies Augustine as a forerunner of the later practice by monks (*The Craft of Thought* 80).

facilitating. First, he gives new purpose to the rhetorician's memory arts by making of them an ascetical tool contributing to his personal reformation.<sup>35</sup> As he reevaluates his life, he assumes a new subjective position. By claiming that position, he alters his relation to his own past and he brings greater focus to his longing for God. Secondly, he employs the memory arts as a tool of religious exploration. Through the reworking of his memory, Augustine works his way into a new understanding of God and his life. That process is initiated with certain religious and philosophic claims in hand, but Augustine employs them as conceptual guides by which he can seek to encounter a living God beyond their grasp.

The processes of personal reformation and intellectual discovery are mutually facilitating.<sup>36</sup> To discover himself in God, he needs to refine and harness his longing so

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<sup>35</sup> Augustine's interpretive and compositional activities are an extension of his ascetical program as a whole. Other ascetics, living both before and after Augustine, utilized reading and writing as disciplines of self-transformation like fasting and sexual renunciation. Pierre Hadot describes antiquity's practice of philosophy as a way of life in which philosophical discourse operated "not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way" ("Spiritual Exercises" 107). See Derek Krueger's "Hagiography as an Ascetic Practice in the Early Christian East" for an examination of hagiography as a discipline. Brian Stock examines the ascetical use of texts in two articles, and considers this in relation to Augustine in *Augustine the Reader* and *After Augustine*. In the *Confessions*, Augustine develops the ascetical utility of reading and writing in a distinctive manner. They are not merely means to an end. Indeed, to serve as effective tools, Augustine believes his use of language itself has to be transformed. He must refashion his reading and writing in relation to the concept of love that he is even then formulating. Insofar as he succeeds, reading and writing become practices through which Augustine believes he comes to do what he believes God does.

<sup>36</sup> Denys Turner relates these dual functions of the *Confessions* to distinct spiritualities "of self-discovery and of self-making" (71). Distinguishing the two, Turner writes: "For the spirituality of self-discovery, I am what I was in my origins; for the spirituality of self-making, I am what I may hope for" (72). In Turner's commentary and other studies, Augustine's method of self-discovery is represented as the culmination of a retrospective process in which the review is made from a position that seems to afford a determinate reading of the truth. In "Being in the Text: Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject," Paul Jay, for example, writes that Augustine "is trying in the composition of his work to 'unify' himself with an absent, but somehow more 'authentic' past self" (1058). This description of Augustine's process is potentially misleading because it underplays how retrospection contributes to Augustine's continued process of self-making. When Augustine retrospectively unveils to his reader the "secret arrangement" within the text of his life (XI.10.163), it seems that Augustine writes as if from the journey's end—he has arrived at the end of the maze and now charts its layout. Jay better appreciates Augustine's process when he notes that Augustine begins Book X by "affirming the fact that that journey has not ended, and has extended into the very time and activity of writing" (1047).

that it can propel him along his course. In order not to misdirect his desire, though, Augustine has to distinguish God from things of the world. Not to do so would make idols of them. He is in search of a better understanding and practice of love. He struggles against his limited grasp of charity as well as his heart's resistance. Nevertheless, he hopes to move into a more profound understanding by becoming a better practitioner of it insofar as he can. The working out of these two goals is a process of composition, the making of a passage. In this way, the composing of his confession opens a passageway to him. He moves through it from one understanding and one way of living toward another he is only just then discovering.

As an ascetical tool contributing to his personal reformation, the *artes memoriae* facilitate two transformations in Augustine. First, he employs the memory arts to change his relation to his past. Carruthers describes medieval, monastic meditation as an effort to change one's attitude toward the past by re-placing a memory within a new "network of associations, by changing its 'direction' or 'intention' within a cognitive map" (Carruthers 95).<sup>37</sup> When Augustine examines his memories, he reframes them in relation to tenets of his faith, believing those claims to furnish a superior hermeneutic for understanding the life he has lived. By inserting his impressions of the past within that framework, he re-composes the story of his life and assumes a different position vis-à-vis his life's story.

He envisions his memory as a text stamped by his senses with prints of things from his past. He writes:

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<sup>37</sup> David Glidden writes similarly that the memories that make up the text of his memory can be "reworked into different structures by fantasies, and hopes, by reminiscent refashioning" (140).



When we relate the past truly, it is not the things themselves that are brought forth from our memory—for these have passed away: but words conceived from the images of the things: for the things stamped their prints upon the mind as they passed through it by way of the senses. Thus for example my boyhood which no longer exists, is in time past, [...] but the likeness of my boyhood, when I recall it and talk of it, I look upon in time present, because it is still present in my memory. (XI.18.222).

In the process of composing the *Confessions*, he treats these “prints” as signs of what is no longer present. He brings forth not the things themselves or even the images he finds in his memory, but a second set of signs, his confessional testimony. With those signs, he manifests to himself and his readers the significance he now finds in the memories of the life he lived. Even more importantly though, he uses this process of remembering his story to dislodge himself from one narrative of his life and advance toward the discovery of a story he has yet to recognize.

In the brief passage above, Augustine does not say directly how the process of generating his confession actively reshapes the text of his memory. As Augustine writes the *Confessions*, he addresses God in a manner suggestive of an extemporaneous and oral prayer. If he wishes to read aloud the text of his memory with the “voice of [his] pen,” he does not render passively those signs impressed by experience (XI.2.211). Indeed, the process by which he reads his memory is an active one that re-composes the text through selection, recombination, and alteration of the organizational frame.<sup>38</sup> What Augustine

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<sup>38</sup> In this use of memory, reading and composition are inter-animating and comparable processes. Texts are read and stored in the memory. When accessing the material stored away, memory itself operates like a text to be read. But, both the storage process and the use of it make reading more similar to an active practice of composition than to a passive review of signs. When memorizing a text, it is broken into select

does with the text of his memory, readers are to do with the text of the *Confessions*. Just as he resorts his story in search of God, so readers are to recombine the text of the *Confessions* as a means of advancing their own search for love.

As Augustine reframes his memories, he models a process of analysis that is proper to the book's interpretation. Notably, he brings the principles he formulates for biblical reading in *De doctrina christiana* to bear upon the text of his life. Chronology remains a viable and utilized ordering principle, but as Augustine composes, he repositions the events as initially recorded within new theologically informed frames. As he passes through his memory, Augustine relates the events of his life to the Fall and the redemptive passion of Christ. Over-arching metaphors concerning the soul's healing, liberation, and exilic passage from love of the world to love of God serve Augustine as memorial schemata. Distinctions between charity and cupidity, humility and pride, the spirit and the flesh are conceptual guides. With those guides, he attempts to articulate when and how he has been ensnared or freed, injured or healed. Together, these varied theological principles form a dynamic, organizational web by which Augustine attempts to understand his life anew.

By repositioning his memories within this web, he alters his relation to the past. Writing the *Confessions* eleven years after his determination to follow Christ, that alteration has long been underway. But by means of the *Confessions*, Augustine refortifies and continues a transformation of his identity. By re-placing his memories in the Christian schema, he re-positions himself within the world. The literary passage he

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pieces that are then given positions in a place memory, where it is actively re-composed in a meditative engagement with it. Carruthers contends: "It is as though at this point the student of the text, having digested it by re-experiencing it in memory, has become not its interpreter, but its new author, or re-author" (168).

composes forms a passageway by which he makes his passage from one experience of his life, the world, and love to another. That transition is evident as he progressively acquires his new perspective.

Additionally, as an ascetical device, the memory arts serve Augustine as a means of harnessing his longing and directing it toward God. Carruthers indicates that later monastic guides to this practice urged the practitioner to fix memories in place with emotion. Like those later guides, Augustine associates his heart and memory closely with one another and both with what was for him the emerging technology of the codex.<sup>39</sup> Carruthers proposes that latent in this practice was a punning association of the memory's record with the heart and "punctuation, with compunc-tion" (*The Craft of Thought* 101). Compunction for sin punctuates Augustine's confession. By lamenting his moral and intellectual waywardness, he attempts to fix the memories of events from his past within the narrative of salvation. Compunction is complemented by emotionally charged thanksgiving and praise rooted in his experience of forgiveness and love.

The lamentation and fervor Augustine exhibits in his writing is not merely melodrama or rhetorical pretense. He cultivates intense feeling intentionally as a means of fixing the impressions in place. He condemns certain moments in his past as moral and intellectual disorientation. He celebrates others as exhibiting the grace of God or the virtues by which the wayfarer dares to abandon the snares for the ways of love. He is training himself to feel differently about the habitual desires that have grown up within

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<sup>39</sup> Eric Jager's *The Book of the Heart* includes an excellent chapter, "Augustine," devoted to Augustine's integration of heart, memory, and book (27-43). See also Carruthers' *The Book of Memory* 48-49.

him through the course of his life.<sup>40</sup> The process dislodges him from certain attachments and promotes his longing for God. In the process, Augustine works his way into becoming a new man by redirecting the desires of his heart.

The classical orator's memory arts reconcile the firm declarations he makes concerning his past with his continued struggle to discover the truth. In relation to the memory arts, Augustine's use of his past serves his religious exploration and self-reformation. Although the ostensible clarity of Augustine's evaluations implies his having completed his journey to self-discovery, his comments are vehicles of which he makes use along the way. His retrospective evaluations of his life operate as an initial workout within a contemplative exercise that has yet to reach its conclusion. Writing as a wayfaring spirit, he makes provisional assessments concerning his life, but he cannot say finally who God is or what a charitable life involves. As Augustine reflects on his past, the evaluations he makes are not finally declarative concerning the truth so much as they are instrumental in his passage toward it.

Finally, explicating Augustine's confessional practice in relation to the memory arts leads to an altered interpretation of how retrospection contributes to the *Confessions*. Rather than operate as a passive interpretive rendering of Augustine's past, retrospection is an active re-composition of the text of his memory. Although the process of self-discovery is frequently couched in a "language of passivity" as Turner suggests, self-discovery arises through Augustine's active self re-cognition (71). As he struggles to recognize and proclaim the mysteries of redemption, the wayfaring exile enters into that

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<sup>40</sup> Stock writes that Augustine's confession is "a lesson in contemplative practice whose goal is not only the production of a text but also, and more importantly, the realization of a chastened and purified life" ("Reading, Ethics, and the Literary Imagination" 8-9).

narrative. O'Donnell contends that "the literary text, prayer on paper becomes in this way again not a picture of the working out of Augustine's salvation, but the instrument of salvation itself" (*Augustine* 84). It becomes his Passover from the snare of sin to the sacramental way of self-offering.

Thus, Augustine's retrospection is not oriented strictly toward the past. Instead, as he writes, Augustine's self-discovery is still underway, and his review of his past has not been drawn to a close. Rather, retrospection is intended to facilitate an anticipated discovery. He is working to give birth to a new understanding of himself in relation to charity. He is struggling to become a new man in Christ. Thus, the spirituality of self-discovery present in the confessions, no less than its counterpart the spirituality of self-making, is directed toward some future realization. Indeed, in this evaluation, retrospection cannot be cut off from the spirituality of self-making because retrospection serves him as an instrument through which he re-fashions his heart and claims a new relation to his past. In his confessional practice, as if revising a composition, Augustine re-envision the text of his life and employs that process as a means of making himself anew. Through confessional wayfaring, Augustine labors simultaneously to discover himself and to bring that self into being.

### **III.C The Learner's Paradox: A Circuit in the Act of Confession**

Ultimately, Augustine's efforts to bring that self into being are circumscribed by the limits of his understanding and directed toward his immersion in a mystery exceeding his grasp. He does not simply fit his memories of the past into a pre-determined framework constituted and determined by Christian doctrine. If he is convinced that this

search requires him to know himself, he does not seek to do so merely in the thematic cohesion of his life story or in the capacity to fashion an autobiographical chain of causes and effects. Lyotard writes that confession is for Augustine “a journey that goes backward so as to move forward” into the unanticipated and new (72). Similarly, Carruthers writes, “Augustine journeyed through his memory not to find his past but to find God” (*Book of Memory* 193). The various memorial schemata within which Augustine situates particular events of his life are finally to be subordinated to the contemplative drive to know and love God. As a result, Augustine is in the difficult process of seeking to discover the very reality that is to direct him as he makes his search.<sup>41</sup> Ignorant of who God is at the outset of his search, he wonders how he is to direct his course or recognize the home to which his quest would lead him. As in *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine considers the import of this ignorance to his search in a manner that recalls Plato’s learner’s paradox.

In the first and tenth books of the *Confessions*, Augustine proposes that this epistemological dilemma governs his act of confession and the review he makes of his past. In Book I and Book X, he represents the learner’s paradox as a constraint on his memory’s contribution to the search. He indicates that memory is essential to discovering the object of his quest, even though it is finally incapable of bringing the search to completion. The paradox, he suggests in Books I to IX, has been operative in the story of his search to the point in life when he began composing the *Confessions*. But, that paradox bears upon his efforts to push his search forward as he writes the *Confessions* as well.

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<sup>41</sup> Denys Turner comments that Augustine “has a philosophical problem with the nature of ‘searching’ as such,” and that “he cannot keep this conceptual problem from intruding into the text of his narrative” (57).

In the opening chapter of Book I, the epistemological dilemma of the learner's paradox contributes to Augustine's questioning address to God concerning how he is to begin his confession, whether in petition for aid or in praise, not sure of how either is possible given his ignorance of who God is. The two options form the first juncture demanding a choice in Augustine's compositional path, and his limited comprehension of his destination makes choosing either route doubtful. He writes: "Grant me [...] to know which is the soul's first movement to Thee—to implore thee or to utter its praise of Thee; and whether it must know Thee before it can implore. For it would seem clear that no one can call upon Thee without knowing Thee, for if he did he might invoke another than Thee, knowing Thee not" (I.1.3).

In this instance, Augustine wrestles with the difficulty of finding one's way into his search when lacking a full understanding of its object. Recalling the Scriptural injunction that faith comes by hearing, he writes: "My faith, Lord, cries to Thee, the faith that Thou hast given me, that thou hast inbreathed in me, through the humanity of Thy Son and by the ministry of Thy Preacher" (I.1.3). God's inbreathing, which Augustine identifies with the Incarnation and the proclamation of the Church, enables his search by giving him a point from which to direct both his praise and petitions. This launching point, though, does not eliminate the epistemological risk of misconceiving to whom he is to direct his petition or praise. Instead, he entrusts himself to the search without an epistemological assurance of his ability. He proceeds with hope that the Incarnation and the proclamation have rendered such trust potentially fruitful despite his own limitation.

When in Book X Augustine ceases to recount his past experiences and turns to examine, as he says, "what I now am while I am writing my *Confessions*" (X.3.174), he

once again foregrounds the epistemological dilemma of his quest in a manner recalling the learner's paradox.<sup>42</sup> Although this examination follows books devoted to his past, he elaborates still more fully the implicit limitations in his prior quest for God. An exile from himself and God, Augustine positions himself as he writes as if at a bifurcation leading down opposed routes opened by hope and temptation respectively. In the first paragraph he contrasts his hope of knowing God with an attachment to the "other things of this life" (X.1.173). He then acknowledges in his address to God "so long as I go wandering from you, I am more present to myself than to You [*quamdiu peregrinor abs te, mihi sum praesentior quam tibi*];" yet he thinks his self-presence is itself fraudulent because his self-knowledge does not allow him to know, as he says, "which temptations I can resist and which I cannot" (X.5.176). As a result, his ignorance is doubly blinding: he does not know precisely either toward where to direct himself or from where to depart if he wishes to move toward God.

In the *Confessions*, ignorance is not paralyzing, but rather motivates a process of questioning by which Augustine exercises his search for God. In Book X, Augustine employs the text as an instrument in this process of questioning.<sup>43</sup> As he writes, he charts an intellectual ascent. However, little about the passage he composes suggests that his progress is direct or linear. As if circling back to Book I, Augustine's ascent is motivated in this book by a question asked of God: "what is it that I love when I love you?"

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<sup>42</sup> In "The Language of Self-Transformation in Plato and Augustine," Robert Goff notes the relationship between Augustine's reflections on memory and time in *Confessions* Books X and XI to Plato's *Meno* and the learner's paradox. He contends these books share a pattern of questioning search, doubt, a questioning of the search itself that then leads into a sense of futility in the face of paradox. But "the consequence of his inward circling through the labyrinths of memory is a renewed ability to speak, although he has not found anything that can put a final end to his search for himself and God" (Goff 428).

<sup>43</sup> Concerning Book X, O'Donnell explains, "This is no longer an account of something that happened somewhere else some time ago; the text itself becomes the ascent" (Volume III 151). But he also maintains that "what goes on here in Book X is on a smaller scale what goes on in the whole work" (Volume III 190).



(X.6.176). Not surprisingly, God's voice does not boom back a response, and Augustine instead represents himself in conversation with creation.

In that imagined conversation, the dialogue recalls *De doctrina christiana's* characterization of all things in the world as signs. Reflecting on various entities in the world, Augustine runs through a series of exchanges, writing: "My question was my gazing upon them, and their answer was their beauty" (X.6.177). Recalling *De doctrina christiana's* opposition of reading according to charity and cupidity, Augustine contrasts two ways of engaging the world's beauty:

All these things refuse to answer those who ask, unless they ask with the power to judge. If one man merely sees the world, while another not only sees but interrogates it, the world does not change its speech—that is, its outward appearance which speaks—in such a way as to appear differently to the two men; but presenting exactly the same face to each, it says nothing to the one, but gives answer to the other: or rather it gives its answer to all, but only those understand who compare its voice as it comes through their senses, with the truth that is within them. (X.6.177)

Augustine associates the first man with carnal readers who love the things of the world "too much and become subject to them" (X.6.177). In contrast, the interrogator brings rational judgment to bear on that beauty, and as a result, may see "the invisible things of God understood by things which are made" (X.6.177). In the passage, the contrast between the two suggests a clear division and even that the interrogator penetrates the enigma of who God is. Neither of these points in fact holds for Augustine as something he experiences.

Although the above passage suggests a clear division between the two ways of engaging the world, both the whole of Book X and the whole of the *Confessions* make it much more difficult to distinguish the two in practice. In his self-characterization as he writes, Augustine positions himself somewhere in-between: he is driven by a questioning hope and yet concerned that the beauty of the world might tempt him to halt his search or misdirect it. Augustine concludes the book analyzing in what ways the world remains a temptation to him, peppering the final several chapters with admissions of a lack of understanding and assertions that the world is an “immense forest full of snares and perils [*immensa silva plena insidiarum et periculorum*]” (X.35.201). In addition to identifying with both of his hypothetical figures, Augustine moderates the contrast between them by insisting that the interrogating wayfarer’s access to “the invisible things” is principally a matter of hope yet to be realized. In fact, in the tenth book, Augustine’s questioning address of the things in the world does not usher the wayfarer from the maze’s winding circuits into the center of its mystery.

Rather, the process of discovery looks much more like negative theology. Augustine spends much less time affirming who God is than he does noting what God is not. For Augustine, like Plato, the quest to know is an act of recollection. But while Plato posits all learning is a recollection of knowledge possessed during the soul’s existence prior to life in this world, Augustine believes that his recollection is exercised in response to Christ’s guidance.<sup>44</sup> Even before seeking God, Augustine believes God seeks him, and he employs two principal metaphors to explore that initiative: interior illumination and the instruction of the Inner Teacher, Christ. Both metaphors stress that

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<sup>44</sup> Augustine rejects the soul’s pre-existence as he believes God creates each human soul.

God enables the origination of the search as well as its progress by operating within the soul's effort to know. If Augustine distinguishes the carnal and spiritual reader by associating the latter with a turn inward to the illuminating presence of Christ, that illumination aids the wayfarer by focusing the pursuit without curtailing it.

Even though Augustine insists that God illumines and instructs the soul in its epistemic and interpretive inquiries, that aid neither short-circuits the struggle to learn nor elides the ambiguity concerning the truth or the moral course. Denys Turner explains that the illuminative instruction driving Augustine's quest may be understood in relation to the spiritual *via negativa*:

All his life Augustine sought God. But this was no straightforward search as for something once clearly known, but now lost. It was a search along false trails, up blind alleys and into *culs-de-sac*. [...] But as his search met with more and more frustration, and the gap of longing, intellectual and emotional, widened, the longing itself acquired shape and definition and direction, became focused, at least negatively. For as this or that solution to the problem had to be abandoned, the blurred outlines of *what* he was searching for sharpened, and as the form of what he sought hardened into shape, so the dissatisfaction itself intensified." (65-66)<sup>45</sup>

Augustine seeks God not with clarity of vision by which to direct his progress, but out of a yearning that is itself honed by the search and discovery not so much of where God rests as of where God does not rest.

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<sup>45</sup> Hart asserts that Augustine's "conception of language as fallen leads us to see that positive theology requires a supplement of negative theology in order to check that our discourse about God is, in fact, about *God* and not just about human images of God" (6).

Indeed, in Book X, negative theology leads him more profoundly into the epistemological conundrum of the learner's paradox. When he begins his contemplative ascent in chapter six of Book X, he explains that he posed the question with his bodily senses and the things of the world responded, "I am not he, but he made me" (X.6.177). His confession winds back to ask: "What is that I love when I love my God?" (X.7.178). Borne forward in his pilgrimage by longing for knowledge of the divine, he offers a series of hypotheses each of which he then discards as a failed answer. The *via negativa* compels him to pass beyond the vivifying power of his own soul, "rising by degrees" to consider the nature of his memory (X.8.178).

Just as Augustine discovers a field crossed by a multitude of paths in the biblical text, he finds a labyrinthine text in his memory. The intellectual ascent he makes opens on the "fields and vast palaces of memory [*campos et lata praetoria memoriae*], where are the treasuries of innumerable images of all kinds of objects brought in by sense-perception" (X.8.178). Like a few ancient, labyrinthine treasuries, his memory safeguards the riches stored within. Labyrinthine structure may be recognized in these *campos* and *praetoria* because they connote the absence of a clear route, a disorienting and inextricable space, and a complexity of design. The reaches of that faculty seem impenetrable to Augustine as he continues to reflect on "the vast recesses, the hidden and unsearchable caverns, of memory" (X.8.179).

He praises: "Great is the power of memory, exceedingly great, O my God, a spreading limitless room [*penetrabile amplum et infinitum*]" (X.8.180). The word *penetrabile* denotes both an inner chamber and also a place through which one passes. Indeed, Augustine discovers that his memory is an infinite place of passage. Carruthers

notes that Augustine does not merely write of ascent here or passage beyond memory, but characterizes his review of memory as a “going through” (*Book of Memory* 199).

He asks, “Who can reach its uttermost depth? [*Quis ad fundum eius pervenit*]” (X.8.180). And then confesses in praise: “In fact I cannot totally grasp all that I am [*nec ego ipse capio totum quod sum*]” (X.8.180). Ultimately, Augustine declares that although he ranges through his memory’s “innumerable fields and dens and caverns [*campis et antris et cavernis innumerabilis*]” he cannot find that which he seeks (X.17.186). He recalls summarily all that his memory has held up to him and writes: “I move swiftly from one to another and I penetrate them as deeply as I can, but I find no end [*per haec discurre et volito hac illac, penetro etiam quantum possum, et finis nusquam*]” (X.17.186). By way of his discourse, he claims, “I run” [*discurre*] and he struggles also to probe the truth, but an end to his running is found nowhere [*nusquam*].

Failing to bring his quest to its end by a search of the things he has found in the world, Augustine resolves “to mount up beyond [*transibo*] that power of mind called memory” (X.17.186), but he wonders how he will possibly recognize the object of his quest without its aid. This determination to pass beyond memory returns him to the learner’s paradox itself. He asks “where shall I find You [*ubi te inveniam*]”? If I find You beyond my memory then shall I be without memory of You. And how shall I find You if I am without memory of You?” (X.17.186). He explains that in his experience we “do not say that we have found what was lost unless we recognize it, nor can we recognize it unless we remember it” (X.18.187).

Augustine circles back to ask again: “How then do I seek You, O Lord? [*Quomodo ergo te quaero, domine?*]” (X.20.187). He offers himself two possible

answers: (1) “by way of remembrance” as if God were something once known and now forgotten and (2) “by a kind of appetite to learn it as something unknown to me” (X.20.188). At this juncture, only the first of the two options is considered at greater length. In choosing this hypothesis, Augustine takes up a course that recalls Plato, but he tempers the similarity by rejecting the platonic basis for recollection. Augustine asks “In what place then did I find You to learn of You? For You were not in my memory, before I learned of You. Where then did I find You to learn of You, save in Yourself, above myself? [*Ubi ergo te inveni, ut discerem te? Neque enim iam eras in memoria mea priusquam te discerem. Ubi ergo te inveni ut discerem te, nisi in te supra me?*]” (X.26.192). He insists: “Place there is none, we go this way and that, and place there is none [*Et nusquam locus, et recidimus et accedimus, et nusquam locus*]” (X.26.192). Neither as we depart [*recidimus*] nor as we approach [*accedimus*], can we map those movements in relation to a fixed center, entrance, or egress, or controlling overview. Our encounter with God cannot be charted because place there is none [*nusquam locus*] (X.26.192). Augustine coils back to the fact that God’s truth is nowhere, a no place that undermines efforts to acquire a fixed position that he can either identify with the truth or from which he can claim to view the truth. Augustine continues to seek the truth, to ask where he is to seek, and to invite his readers to do the same.

In contrast to the Platonic theory, Augustine notes the initiative of God in his own search. He writes: “Thou didst call and cry to me and break open my deafness: and Thou didst send forth Thy beams and shine upon me and chase away my blindness” (X.27.192). Divine illumination does not eradicate the difficulty of the search for God by furnishing the truth, but discloses instead that God has yet to be found. The light in each

case merely makes clear to him that the answer before him should be negated because it is not itself the truth. Christ simply disrupts Augustine's complacent sense of having arrived, prods him to set off once again, and so leads him to stay on the move. In so doing, illumination excites the wayfarer to proceed along the second route "by a kind of appetite to learn it as something unknown" (X.20.188). Like a lover's passion, his desire for God feeds on the obstructions to its satisfaction. The various failures to find God do not lead to a sense of defeat, but instead cultivate the desire that is propelling Augustine along his course.

The learner's paradox, considered directly in Books I and X, impacts both Augustine's struggle to find his way in life prior to the *Confessions* and his process of recounting those events. Both as he lived in the past and as he struggles currently to evaluate his earlier efforts, Augustine is confronted by the fact that he has no totalizing map. When Augustine identifies Christian charity as an ultimate goal he does so without a definitive sense of what that means in itself or entails of him. As a result, he has no means of evaluating determinatively where he is, from where he has come, or in which direction he is headed. Both as he lives and as he writes, he struggles to discover what it means to love. As he wrestles with this question, he presumes at once that he is in the dark concerning love and somehow capable of recognizing it when he comes upon it.

He prosecutes his search for God without ever escaping the loop of this paradox. As he looks back on his life and makes his confession, it is not as if he has worked his way out of his ignorance. Nor does he even progressively work his way out of its maze-like grip. His confessional efforts do not culminate in self-mastery, but in the abandonment of the self to an unknown God.

Thus, he eventually discovers that the ignorance with which he commences his search has not only impeded his progress but also borne within it some glimmer of the bewildering mystery of God's truth. In Book X, following his autobiographical account, still wandering in the knotted circuits of memory, Augustine acknowledges that he can arrive at "no end [*finis nusquam*]" (X.17.186). He remains a restless wayfarer. He grasps that his search requires him to push beyond memory's reach. Those considerations give his pursuit of God, his true self, and happiness a maze-like structure. He does not write as one having already arrived at a conclusive position from which to judge his past. Indeed, the paradox suggests that whatever epistemic mastery he gains over the maze will not have freed him from his ignorance. For this reason, Turner writes that for Augustine, "remembering is at once a knowing and a not-knowing of God, a knowing, we might say, in the form of a not-knowing" (66).<sup>46</sup>

Religious thinkers have long associated the full enjoyment of God with the failure of the intellect and the exhaustion of language's utility. They assert that neither the mind nor language can grasp who God is. Thus, the passage toward delight in God is a passage into confounding mystery. The spiritual quest culminates in the paradox of a blinding illumination. This mystical theology ultimately furnishes Augustine a solution to the philosophical dilemma framing his pursuit of God. That solution though is hardly extrication from the limitations of his intellect or a arrival at a fixed position. Rather,

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<sup>46</sup> For Augustine, his search is an act of faith, not in the sense that it is a search driven by a given and determinate creed, because as Mackey writes, faith for Augustine "is not a solution but the name of a problem" (Mackey "From Autobiography to Theology" 55). Just as Turner argues that Augustine's theory of recollection avoids suggesting that the wayfarer ever discovers definitively the object of the search, so Mackey contends that faith and illumination do not undo the epistemological difficulty of the paradox concerning signs and their role in disclosing realities.



Augustine makes his confessional passage a means of entering into the complex ways opened by love.

This coincidence of ignorance and knowledge is inherent in the learner's paradox itself. An intellectual inquiry is made presumably for that which one does not know. But to recognize whatever one seeks presumes also that one somehow already possesses the knowledge. Augustine's pursuit of God never moves out of this loop. He works his way into it: his knowledge and ignorance grow concurrently. The paradox determining the nature of Augustine's search is particularly suitable to his search for God. The quest to know God is itself inherently and inescapably paradoxical because God is abidingly mysterious. Thus, Augustine's pursuit of God leads not simply toward understanding, but toward the paradox of revealed mystery, toward the disclosure of a God who is hidden. As Augustine acquires greater understanding of who God is, he does so by coming to know a mystery through the failure of his intellect. The God Augustine discovers by way of his maze-like search is and remains hidden.

#### **IV Love's Passages: The Reader's Way Forward**

In summary, Augustine depicts both his life and his engagement with signs in relation to labyrinthine structure and process. He composes his passage toward God not from a fixed position from which he can assert the truth. Instead, he depicts his life leading up to his confession as a maze-like process by which he moves from entrapment in sin toward freedom. If Augustine writes his confession ignorant of the end toward which he would direct himself, this also contributes to the model he offers his readers. Augustine instructs his audience concerning how he would have them approach his book

and the lives they live by presenting himself still in pursuit of an unknown and mysterious God. He presents his act of confession as a means of pushing forward that effort. He never acquires a fixed position overlooking the complex maze of the world or the signs he engages. Instead, he remains on the way searching restlessly for union with God by making a passage through the maze. Ultimately, he finds God in that passage itself by turning in the varied ways opened by love and remaining on the move.

Augustine crafts that story in general and several particular events of his life as models for his audience. By embedding models of reading in the *Confessions*, Augustine attempts to adumbrate for the audience the context within which his book is read. He works to indicate to readers the possibilities for engagement with the signs of his text. Most especially, he hopes that his book will become a prompt to his audience to make their own passage in the ways he believes are opened by love.

Although Augustine develops a very overt set of models by which to guide the reader, he does not simply urge his audience to take up a reading strategy that will reproduce a single intended meaning. When characterizing narrative self-reflexivity, Dällenbach notes that authors can employ *mise en abyme* “to create the gaps and problematize [...] reading” (444). In certain pieces of literature, a text’s self-reflexivity can repeatedly direct readers to points of indeterminacy, so as to “diffuse the void and permit us to read by exercising negativity” (444).<sup>47</sup> Authors can utilize self-reflexivity to insist on the indeterminate meaning of the signs they employ. By doing so, authors make

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<sup>47</sup> Dällenbach associates such a use of *mise en abyme* with the new novel, giving Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Voyeur* as an exemplary case. He contends that interest in such openness has arisen only very recently in the history of literature. I would argue in contrast that Augustine anticipates such literature by construing God not as a determinate point, but as the enigmatic and unidentifiable center in relation to which he does his reading and writing.

use of the *mise en abyme* narrative strategy to place their reader before a labyrinth without a determinate center, fixed overview, or single narrative thread.

The books that follow Augustine's labyrinthine search of his memory continue to develop the *Confessions* as a text lacking precisely such a determining principle. When Augustine reflects on the biblical verses of *Genesis* in Books XII and XIII, he describes his reading of Scripture as just such a sustained maze-like experience. In Book XII, Augustine puts this most strikingly when he declares: "Marvelous is the profundity of Thy Scriptures [*Mira profunditas eloquiorum tuorum*] [...] To gaze into it is a shuddering, the shudder of awe, the shudder of love" (XII.14.242). Augustine depicts the Bible as a bewildering abyss into which he peers. This declaration of awe echoes the experience he had when exploring his memory in Book X. Neither permits him a masterful comprehension. Instead, in relation to both his memory and the Bible, Augustine presents his audience a model reader who is effectively at a loss intellectually. When he reads, he claims to gaze into the darkness of divine mystery. Encounter with that mystery, what Dällenbach describes as a void, affords Augustine no sure footing nor fixed controlling overview, but sets him awirl, shuddering with awe.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine aspires to write a book by which he can lead himself and his audience into that mystery. Like Scripture and the Book of Creation, he would have the passages of his confession form a labyrinthine abyss. Support for this claim is evident in Books XII and XIII when Augustine reflects on the passages of Scripture. In relation to these models, Augustine does not claim the mystery of love by and toward which he has directed himself can be captured by a single, univocal expression. First, in Book XII, he marvels at the breadth of meanings to be discovered in

the first verse of *Genesis*. He proposes that “different meanings are extracted from these words by different enquirers” (XII.24.250). Augustine wonders that there are “so many meanings—each of them true in itself” whether or not intended by Moses the presumed author of the Torah (XII.24.250). Augustine asserts that readers should not resist that diversity and insist on some single reading. Instead, he associates the biblical text’s richness with the generative principles that are the “two commandments of charity” love of God and neighbor (XII.25.252). Then, in Book XIII, he notes that in *Genesis*, God commends his creation to be fruitful and multiply. Augustine proposes this command has both literal and figurative meanings. He proposes in particular that just as God authors a Book of Creation teeming with multiplicity, so Scripture is a fertile and generative work. He writes, “In all these things we find multitude, and fertility, and increase” (XIII.24.280). Geoffrey Harpham identifies this description of “language in terms of the reproductive processes in the sea on dry land” (249). He suggests that this culminating explication is part of a conversion of Augustine’s experience of reading from one of temptation to a “banquet of desire” (250). He continues: “In this blessing I take it that you granted us the faculty and the power both to express in many ways what we understand by one single idea, and to understand in many ways what we find expressed obscurely in a single way” (XIII.24.280). He admires the complexity of their passages and that they can lead readers in so many fruitful ways. In this, he believes they exhibit an astounding, maze-like profundity.

The world and the Bible are the preeminent models Augustine believes he has when he sets out to create something with words. As he admires the Creator’s authorship of the Book of Creation and the *Genesis* Augustine identifies what kind of book he would

like to write himself. He views both creation and the Bible as models for his own composition. Notably, what he admires in those models is not that they are well-bound, neatly tied together, cohesive, and unified in meaning. He proposes that if he had been in the position of Moses: “I should prefer so to write that my words should mean whatever truth anyone could find upon these matters, rather than express one true meaning so clearly as to exclude all others, though these contain no falsehood to offend me” (XII.31.256). In relation to this internal commentary, Augustine posits in effect that his confession is just such a maze-like text. He repeatedly correlates his process and the end toward which he hopes to direct himself with divine mystery. That mystery does not give the maze of his text a stable center, sure line, or fixed orienting point.

Scholarly readings of the *Confessions* have often been formulated as attempts to identify the book’s principle of coherence. Because the book gathers together such seemingly disparate kinds of material, the discovery of some single thread to follow through its passages has proven a truly labyrinthine challenge. Within the body of scholarship, commentators have sought to specify the unity of the book in terms of genre, declaring, for example, that Augustine’s writing holds together as a confession, or as spiritual autobiography, or simply as written prayer; additionally, the text’s integrity has been formulated thematically in relation to the themes of quest, education, memory, and reading. This challenge that readers face when examining his book are analogous to those contributing to Augustine’s review of his memory, examination of the Scriptures, and writing of the confession. For this reason, it should be no surprise that none of these threads has provided an unfailing answer to the question. It seems to me that Augustine did not intend to compose his book according to such a plan.

The utility of the labyrinth when examining Augustine's confessions does not lie in its ability to furnish such a principle. Maze imagery does not serve as a ruling metaphor to which the whole book can be subordinated. Rather, in relation to the maze, it is possible to see that such principles only go so far for Augustine and that they lead him not out of the maze, but into its mysterious entanglements. For Augustine, the book was meant to serve him as a passageway through which he advanced uncertainly toward God. The various ways in which he depicts that search suggest that his search led him forward in ways he could not anticipate in relation to some single and specifiable principle. This point challenges those who would link Augustine's theological framework to a homogenizing and rigid theory of meaning. Gellrich and Sturges, for example, correctly note that Augustine "draws his own word into parallel with the creating *Verbum*," but in contrast to their claims, Augustine does not attempt to determine the meaning of his text in relation to that Word (Gellrich 120). Rather, Augustine views the divine Word or Logos as unsettling language and making of the Bible, his memory, and his confession dynamic and untamable texts that can be given no fixed and single reading. Instead, the passages of Augustine's *Confessions* form a labyrinth of interpretive challenge in which he would have us make our own passage in search of a God exceeding the reach of language or understanding.

For Augustine, the Book of Creation, the Book of Scripture, and the text of his life all share one mysterious center: the divine mystery of love. Finally, Augustine's efforts to approach God do not lead him toward a fixed position from which he can either look back or down on the maze of his life with a totalizing comprehension of its routes. Instead, charity proves a dynamic force by which he is led out from the traps of sin.

Augustine suggest that God does not lead him to a settled position, a secure point, but instead repeatedly prompts him to set off and remain in pursuit. It is on that way that he finds his rest. Thus, he declares: “Let me enter into my chamber and sing my songs of love to Thee, groaning with inexpressible groaning in my pilgrimage, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart stretching upwards in longing for it: its pure and strong Delight, its Joy unshakable and the sum of all ineffable good” (XII.16.244). As Augustine composes his confession, he presents its literary passages as his passage into the mysterious ways opened by love.

He hopes to present his readers precisely such a text in his *Confessions*. As when he reflects on his memory or the Bible, he aims to set readers before a book that lacks a controlling principle, a sure thread, a fixed point in relation to which we can orient ourselves. Thus, the challenges he finds in his search for God when composing his text are presented as the challenges of his readers when they respond to the text. His answer is not a fixed position, a firm truth, but a passage like Christ’s that involves descending into the maze. If Augustine anticipates finally finding his rest in God, he also represents that promised rest as the movement of his will in love.

**Chapter Three:**  
**Chaucer's *House of Fame*: A Theological Approach**

**I Chaucer's *House of Fame*: A Maze for the Reader**

Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* depicts a rather bumbling poet "Geffrey" who finds himself obstructed again and again in his efforts to discern and share the meaning of a dream he counts among history's most extraordinary visions. In the dream itself, Geffrey journeys from Venus's Temple and its desert setting in Book I, into the heavens in the clutches of an Eagle in Book II, and finally into the houses of Fame and Rumor in Book III. In each segment of the poem, Geffrey struggles to understand his position and in what direction he is headed. In the final lines of the poem, a great authority appears in the House of Rumor which rivals "Domus Dedaly, / That Laboryntus cleped ys" (1920-1). This authority never draws Geffrey from the maze to an overview or a fixed position concerning the truth. Instead, the great authority enters the spinning house, creates a commotion, and remains beyond Geffrey's naming enshrouded in mystery.

The three-part poem forms a labyrinth for the poem's audience in which we not only encounter representations of mazes but also the disorientation, challenge, and exhilaration of moving through a maze. Like so many passageways, the passages of the poem lead the reader into a complicated structure that resists any full probing or complete charting. No single perch allows a reader to survey its multiple meanings or to map their varied intersections. Chaucer repeatedly makes obvious that the poem is full of gaps, ambiguities, and other corridors that he and readers might have explored. Then, in the final book, the poem comes to an inconclusive end, so as to ensure that no one exit it with a sense of having mastered the poem. Yet the poem is not designed simply to frustrate



attempts to comprehend its meaning. Chaucer utilizes a labyrinthine structure and engages his readers in a maze-like reading process purposefully.

My reading of the poem extends a body of scholarship that approaches Chaucer as a writer steeped in Christian theology and its tradition of biblical exegesis.<sup>48</sup> This scholarship does not simply apply medieval biblical reading strategies to Chaucer's poem, but brings the philosophical and theological resources of Chaucer's culture in general to the analysis of his works.<sup>49</sup> Although these readings are not made strictly in relation to St. Augustine's treatise *De doctrina christiana*, much of this scholarship, and this chapter as well, echoes Augustine's theoretical distinction between serpentine wisdom and divine folly.<sup>50</sup> The scholarship on *House of Fame* reflects this distinction: with some assessments emphasizing the poem's critique of worldly fame and others its

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<sup>48</sup> Ruth Ames asserts that in general "Chaucer's Catholicism was an integral part of his outlook, an operative force in his thinking about his fellowman, the world, and the universe" (xi). Some scholars do apply the allegorical tradition of biblical exegesis to Chaucer's poetry, but readings of Chaucer as a Christian humanist often emphasize his broader religious concerns rather than contending that his texts necessitate a biblical deciphering.

For example, Jeffrey contends: "The poem follows a traditional pattern of design—a three-stage ascent toward understanding. It invites careful reading according to that traditional framework, and in almost every respect encourages the reader to anticipate an intellectual journey as he or she might find in Augustine, Bonaventure, Dante, or Chaucer's own *Book of Duchess*" (207). Koonce argues similarly that a "spiritual education underlies the central action of the *House of Fame*" (72). In particular, Koonce identifies several parallels between Chaucer and Dante and argues that "the *House of Fame*, at least in its ultimate intent, is not a parody of the *Comedy*" (Koonce 9). Instead, Koonce proposes that the book's humor is a "surface manifestation" that "gives unity of mood to all three books of the poem" without contributing to or detracting from its "sentence" (279). Like Jeffrey and Koonce, Frank Whitman proposes that we follow the dreamer from spiritual crisis toward contemplative vision by way of "a meditative" practice of reading and writing (Whitman 237). Like Chaucer's other dream visions, the *House of Fame*, Whitman claims, is constructed around a "moral impulse" (Whitman 238), the end of which "seems to be salvation" (Whitman 237). Ames proposes that once "the layers of irony and indirection [...] are finally cut through, what is revealed at the core is a Christian attitude towards God and man" (12).

<sup>49</sup> This scholarship presents Chaucer as an orthodox Christian. Scholarly consideration has been given to Chaucer's relationship with the pre-reformation Lollard movement. My reading of the *House of Fame* maintains his Catholic orthodoxy.

<sup>50</sup> B.G. Koonce, for example, associates his reading with these two theological resources. He approaches the poem in relation to "a contrast between earthly and heavenly fame, a contrast derived from Scripture and elaborated by St. Augustine [...] as part of the Christian contrast between two kinds of love, charity and cupidity" (4).

mystical witness to divine mystery. I propose that appeal to each of these concerns allows for the best appreciation of what motivates Chaucer's use of labyrinthine imagery and structure in *House of Fame*.

Thus, I argue that two theological rationales underlie Chaucer's exhibition of meaning's maze-like indeterminacy: (1) the instability and uncertainty of worldly fame, and (2) God's indomitable complexity. In the first case, Chaucer reinforces his satiric representation of worldly fame by making obvious that the poetic records preserving a person's renown are unable to do so. In effect, fame offers no certain alternative to Christian salvation because the 'afterlife' we might seek in the poetic and historical record is insecure. Poetry, Lady Fame's instrument, is presented to the reader as a labyrinth of intertwined truth and falsehood. No systematic or controlling logic governs or determines how one will be positioned in her maze-like record. In the second case, the poem's labyrinthine structure contributes to a satire of efforts to capture the truth about God in word or thought. By denying its readers any controlling overview of the truth, Chaucer's dream vision insists on the finitude of our understanding. The poem leads readers to reject the notion that faith yields a controlling grasp of where one stands or where truth is to be found. Instead, in the final lines of the poem, Chaucer utilizes the labyrinthine imagery and form of his poem to invite readers to experience the truth as a mysterious "man of gret auctorite" who enters into the maze to meet us there (2158).

This theological approach diverges from Penelope Reed Doob's thorough and very helpful analysis of the maze as a "controlling image" in *House of Fame* (310). In the culminating chapter of her book on pre-modern labyrinths, Doob focuses on Chaucer's departure from earlier tradition. In summary, she proposes that Chaucer's

chief literary precedents—Virgil, Boethius, and Dante—featured mazes governed by “labyrinthine convertibility: what seemed inextricable when experienced from inside becomes a symmetrical, beautiful, teleological arrangement of concentric circles when seen from above [...]” (313). In these narratives, the protagonist moves through the maze, undergoes a conversion, and comes “to see as God sees” (Doob 313).

Doob contends that Chaucer’s *House of Fame* challenges this tradition in two key ways. First, she argues that for Chaucer the labyrinth is an emblem of the persistent “limitations of knowledge in this world” (Doob 313). As Chaucer understands the maze, no final or conclusive understanding can be attained that will give the signs a fixed meaning. Doob concludes her essay writing that Chaucer rejects the “ordered overview that converts confusion to clarity [and] substitutes [...] the vibrant, chaotic, fertile, ambiguous, multiplicitous poetry of the labyrinth” (Doob 337). Secondly, Doob links that first shift to Chaucer’s relinquishing of a theological framework for a secular one. She contends that Chaucer deviated from the “moral tradition [...] in which choosing the right path is a matter of life and death” in order to treat “issues raised by labyrinths of *words*, of texts, of complex and sometimes misleading artistry: the labyrinth every writer and reader necessarily inhabits as writer and reader” (312). Put more simply, she argues that Chaucer employs the labyrinth to represent “epistemological problems” shaping our engagement with signs rather than “moral” and “spiritual” concerns (312). As a consequence, The *House of Fame*’s allusions to the *Aeneid*, the *Consolation*, and the *Comedy* contribute to what is essentially a “parody, if not a perversion, of its predecessors” (Doob 311).

Doob's reading of the maze imagery in *House of Fame* is best paired with a body of Chaucerian scholarship that contends the *House of Fame* exhibits a postmodern literary aesthetic *avant la lettre*.<sup>51</sup> This scholarship links Chaucer's subversive impulse, celebration of linguistic play, and acceptance of irresolution to a secular inclination. These readings echo two points made by Doob in her assessment of the maze imagery in *House of Fame*: 1) the poem presents signs as a labyrinth that perpetually resists a conceptual conversion into a chartable order, and 2) that indeterminacy arises from Chaucer's abandonment of his predecessor's morally and theologically invested conception of signs. Chaucer's *House of Fame* is a labyrinth of passages, indeterminate in meaning, precisely because he rejects a theological framework. This criticism implies and attributes to Chaucer what much contemporary literary theory claims outright: the world and the texts we read can be encountered as the irrepressibly multiple, heterogeneous, and flexible spaces that they are only after the rejection of metaphysics. In the absence of a theological framework, narratives and interpretations cease to be organized as passages toward or away from a homogenizing divine Law.

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<sup>51</sup> Scholars have noted considerable similarities between Chaucer's poetry in general and postmodern theory. Ruth Evans insists that Chaucer "will jolt us out of our expectations that the past is radically other" (69). Boitani proposes that a "comparably 'modern' image of literature is not to be found elsewhere in the English and European fourteenth century" (211). M. Keith Booker claims that "both Chaucer and the postmodernists tend to transgress boundaries, destabilize hierarchies, and question authority of all kinds [...] Chaucer's texts share with postmodernism a highly critical attitude toward all systems of hierarchy and taxonomy, whether those systems be social, political, literary, or linguistic" (566). Robert Jordan claims that Chaucer and postmodern writers do not share the "realist's assumption that truth is unambiguously accessible through language" (26). Frank Grady characterizes Chaucer's dream vision as "a poem dedicated to deconstructing authoritative texts from literary and philosophical tradition" (16). Jesse Gellrich contrasts Chaucer's poetic theory and Augustine's and proposes that Chaucer's *House of Fame* achieves a "dislocation of authority from the voice of the past to the play of signifying in the text" (199). Stephen Russell asserts that the *House of Fame*'s purpose is "the deconstruction of [...] discourse itself" (175). He writes that the poem leads progressively to the conclusion "that truth in this world is either unavailable or indeterminate" (Russell 178). Clifford writes that Chaucer "deconstructs any sense of textual authority" (164). See also Faye Walker's annotated bibliography of postmodern approaches to Chaucer's works.

Chaucer's poem is a more sophisticated exploration of the relation between God, signs, and readers and writers than is recognized within this scholarship. I contend the poem may be read as a challenging theological exploration of meaning's maze-like character precisely because it contests any exhaustive or conclusive charting of the maze. In relation to the maze-like indeterminacy of signs, Chaucer makes two theological points noted above: 1) a critique of fame and the texts that furnish and preserve it and 2) an affirmation that the truth is a dynamic authority appearing within the maze. We can try to live, read, and write in relationship to the truth, but those efforts will not be evidenced by our laying claim to a fixed position vis-à-vis the truth. Instead, concluding the poem with the epiphany of the great authority, Chaucer indicates that the truth is best engaged as a living reality who meets us in the midst of a complex world. In this account, the promise of faith is not extraction from the maze or an epistemic overview, but enjoyment of God's mysterious presence even as one moves within the maze.

In order to make these points, Chaucer draws on and challenges elements of a maze-like genre of the middle ages: the dream vision. Like conventional detective fiction today, the medieval dream vision was a popular genre constructed around issues of epistemology and interpretation.<sup>52</sup> Conventional dream visions are generally understood to have represented the interpretive process as a linear passage to some fixed insight. We meet the protagonists in some form of labyrinthine "dark wood" or epistemological trap. They then meet a guide. We follow the protagonists as they undergo an educative process that conjoins moral and intellectual reformation. That conversion is cast as a

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen J. Russell notes that medieval dream visions all take up "questions of epistemology, of perspective, of ways of knowing, and of the relationship between words and the truth these words seek to express" (139).

change in perspective by which the protagonists either re-discover the straight way or gain an overview of the cosmos, love, or some other complex reality.<sup>53</sup> Thus, these stories are structured like linear labyrinths that lead to a point of narrative and interpretive closure that determines and reveals the significance of all that precedes it.

Again like conventional detective fiction, the dream vision not only represents this passage, but encourages readers to share the protagonist's process. The genre's authors invite readers to construe the act of reading the poem as analogous to the narrator's interpretation of the dream. Piehler notes that the visions are "offered to their readers for spiritual participation, so that in undergoing the imaginative experience of the vision they may avail themselves of the same process of healing and transcendence" (5). The protagonist's passage to a point of epistemic or moral mastery models the reader's interpretive act because the dreamer's passage from confusion to understanding carries over from the occurrence of the dream to the event of its interpretation and recounting. Like the protagonist who submits the dream to interpretation, readers can work a way through the maze of signs formed by the poem to discover a lesson or organizing principle that gives coherence to the dream and poem. When they discover that principle, they will have found their way through the labyrinth into the healing insight of the poem.

Chaucer's *House of Fame* draws upon these conventions, but utilizes them in a poem that frequently seems a comedic and entirely subversive rendering of the dream vision. In contrast to the conventional dream vision, Chaucer does not bring his poem to a point of narrative closure, but leads his readers instead to experience meaning as a

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Piehler describes the basic plot of the visionary allegory as follows: "the dreamer is disturbed by some spiritual crisis; he has a vision of mysterious import which is interpreted by persons in spiritual authority, and the effect of the vision and its interpretation is to resolve the crises, often by raising him to a higher spiritual state" (4).

maze-like structure that cannot be charted. We remain in the midst of meaning's labyrinthine complexity, gripped by a mysterious structure that we can neither rise above nor claim to have threaded fully.

If the poem playfully challenges the expectation that God promises a mastery of the truth in such visions, Chaucer's poem is still thoroughly theological in its representation of the human condition. Ultimately, Chaucer attempts to lead his audience toward a theological model that emphasizes human finitude, our susceptibility to misdirection, and the truth's capacity to set us in motion. Chaucer suggests that truth, like an infinite labyrinth, resists reduction to a systematic and map-like survey. Neither our minds nor the words we have at our disposal can grasp that mystery. However, even as Chaucer affirms that our understanding is perpetually finite, he insists that choices within the maze have personal, communal, and historic consequences all of which can be submitted to moral scrutiny. Certain decisions lead us into a maze-like trap of falsehood. Finally, Chaucer insists that the truth is a most potent force that frees us from those traps. The great authority that appears in the third book of the poem breaks into the House of Rumor, disrupts those set there, and sets them in motion. Thus, Chaucer suggests that divine revelation does not lift us from the world. Rather, the truth enters into it, demands our attention, and leaves us free to respond as we choose.

## **II.A Geoffrey and the Mazes of Dream Theory, Dreams, and Poetry**

Chaucer begins to dismantle the expectation that this dream will offer its reader a resolute vision of some truth in the prologue to the first book. In that prologue, Chaucer presents medieval dream theory, dreams, and poetry as maze-like structures. First,

Chaucer depicts his narrator reading and sorting his way through the authorities on dreams. Secondly, the summary of dream lore that Geoffrey offers his reader suggests that dreams, like the authoritative texts concerning them, are mazes that necessitate interpretive choice. Finally, the narrator concludes the prologue with a series of invocations all of which comment on the import of his poem and suggest its labyrinthine character. This three-fold internal commentary on poetry and interpretation begins to establish that Geoffrey, his dream, and this poem will not furnish readers a straightforward route to a point of understanding. Only in the third book of the poem does this challenge to epistemic mastery contribute to his critique of fame, but subtle gestures of the prologue already hint at Chaucer's intention to affirm a Christian conception of truth and recognition that truth is a mystery and not a reality subject to full comprehension.

First, as the narrator summarizes medieval dream theory, he reveals that the authoritative writings on dreams form a complex maze for anyone reading them. Jacqueline Miller notes that in the narrator's initial survey of dream lore, Geoffrey gives an account of the varying and conflicting medieval authorities on dreams. Dream lore, seemingly a map to the interpretation of dreams, is multiple, incongruent, and resistant to epistemic mastery. As a result, the narrator makes his own selective passage through the existing and divergent authorities. The narrator switches back and forth between two authorities: the first, dream lore, is external to him and his dream but incapable of presenting a unified position, and the latter is "his own individual authority that is never enough to control, explain, and interpret itself or the world that challenges it" (Miller 105).



Geffrey's reading of the authorities suggests that dreams are themselves mazes of multiple and incongruous meanings that cannot be reduced to any fixed interpretive charting. Terrell asserts that while many dream visions open with "arguments in support of the veracity of dreams, [Chaucer] opens his poem with fifty-eight lines devoted to discrediting dreams as sources of valid information" (280). Geffrey makes quite plain that the kinds, causes, and import of dreams are difficult to grasp. He asserts that he is unable to explain "Why that is an avision / And why this a revelacion, Why this a drem, why that a sweven" (7-9). At the same time, Chaucer's narrator admits that he is incapable of determining "what causeth swevenes" (3). Chaucer's prologue amplifies this dilemma by giving a humorously extensive list of the potential causes of dreams: "folkys complexions" (21), "febleness of her brayn" (24), "abstinence" (25), and "contemplacion" (34). The list of potential causes undermines any assurance that a dream is divine communication. As a result, the challenge for the dreamer does not lie simply in interpreting the dream but in identifying its source. Whether God, the devil, or indigestion conjured a particular dream might determine whether the dream had any revelatory significance or not.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately though, Geffrey confesses that why only some dreams prove prophetic seems is something to be left to "whoso of these miracles / The causes knoweth bet then I" (12-3). Chaucer's narrator denies that he can account for "why th'effect folweth somme, / And of somme hit shal never come" (6-7). In summary, Geffrey characterizes dreams as complex realities difficult to subordinate to a particular interpretation precisely because there are so many interpretive choices to make. Chaucer depicts his narrator as lacking a sure sense of how to proceed with his own dream so as to

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<sup>54</sup> Russell claims that "the enigma of dreams in the Middle Ages (as in the Bible) generally lay not in what God was saying, but in whether or not it was God that was talking; that is, in whether the dream had earthly or divine origins" (30).

put into question the expectations readers have that the dream vision can and will furnish them a controlling insight with which to master the truth.

Finally, the various invocations of the prologue compound the reader's sense that the poem is unlikely to offer a clear and determinate lesson. In conventional dream poetry, the muses or God are invoked for aid in communicating a difficult or inexpressible truth. Geoffrey's appeals for aid are so exaggerated and cast in so many directions that divine intervention seems both absolutely requisite and unlikely to meet the need. Three distinct prayers are included in the prologue. These petitions reinforce that readers of the poem are situated before a text that will obstruct their understanding no less than the dream lore has the narrator. But at the same time, they situate Geoffrey's dream and the audience's reception of it, however subtly, in a theological context.

Geoffrey commences the poem with a request of God that overtly recalls the labyrinthine challenge before him and the reader. He prays: "God turne us every drem to good" (1). The prologue recoils upon that exact petition shortly afterward when Geoffrey prays that "the holy roode / Turne us every drem to goode" (56). Concerning this prayer, Doob writes: "The line hints at the labyrinths to come, for it suggests the endless turnings of mazes and indicates the need for supernatural guidance if one is to escape: if God can't turn things to good, no one can" (314). Ultimately, Geoffrey's repetitive use of the word "turne" is still more instructive. The word can mean to turn, to return, and to change or to transform, as in to turn into something new and different. These connotations are all suggestive of what it means to read for Chaucer, who returned again and again to old stories in order to turn them into things they never had been before. Geoffrey's prayer is not for a means of escape. He does not pray God open an exit to him or readers nor that

God furnish a controlling grasp of what the dream and poem really mean. Instead, Chaucer has his narrator pray simply that the poem be turned, and turned, in particular, toward the good. And Chaucer will never open a route of escape from the labyrinthine turnings of his poem. No fixed interpretive position will ever be acquired or established in the narrative. Readers will be left to turn the poem, changing it as they will, and to turn in the poem from one reading to another, but hopefully, also to be turned by the poem toward the good.

The second invocation to a second deity Morpheus, the god of sleep, gives unusual emphasis to Geoffrey's felt need for aid. But this invocation complicates matters. He prays to Morpheus "that he wol me spede / My sweven for to telle aright" (78-9).<sup>55</sup> This particular invocation highlights that the dream is one thing and his account of it another. Geoffrey stresses that he hopes to do the dream justice but that his ability to do so is contingent on his reception of direction from the gods. We sense though that the dream will be transformed by Geoffrey no matter how faithful he aspires to be. Readers are warned that any conclusive understanding of the dream is unlikely because access to it is mediated by a poem written by a narrator with little confidence concerning either dream interpretation or his capacity to recount the dream. If visionary dreams are ambiguous in their epistemological value, then Geoffrey's petition suggests that the poetry presenting them is certainly no more assured.

Kiser explains that the "invocation to Morpheus is fraught with irony, since Morpheus's realm, that of fantasy, delusion, and forgetfulness [...] could hardly be viewed as the source of an authoritative—or even a perfectly remembered—dream" (26).

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<sup>55</sup> Geoffrey addresses this same petition to his "Thought" or mind in the prologue to the second book of the poem. The recurrence of the request for aid in expression stresses the difficulty of putting the truth into words.

Indeed, although Morpheus may seem a reasonable choice for aid in recounting a dream, dream visions typically associate their protagonist's sleepy state with a spiritual condition of moral and intellectual confusion. As Geoffrey prays both "be the roode" and also to Morpheus (2), Chaucer puts into question to whom Geoffrey is a devotee, so that readers are invited to ask to what end he is turning his dream as he recounts it.

Finally, the third invocation addressed to God who is "he that mover ys of al" focuses attention on the role of readers and their power to turn the text (81). Initially, the invocation evidences Geoffrey's anxiety that readers may "mysdemen" his dream (92). The list of possible ways that the audience may go astray in their interpretation are numerous: "thorgh malicious entencion. / [...] presumcion, / Or hate, or skorn, or throg envye, / Dispit, or jape, or vilanye" (93-6). Geoffrey anticipates not being misconstrued, but a malevolent twisting of his words. In doing so, Chaucer reiterates that poetry does not convey with assurance any lesson it may bear, and the poet has no way of securing how what he writes will be taken when audiences choose to read one way rather than another. As if to encourage his audience to read the poem as he would like, Geoffrey prays that God will requite his readers based on their interpretive choices. He asks God to reward with joy and all pleasure whoever "take hit wel and skorne hyt noght, / Ne hyt mysdemen in her thought" (92). Geoffrey goes on to request that misreading entail an absurdly severe penalty: "Mysdeme hyt, pray I Jesus God / [...] That every harm that any man / Hath had syth the world began / Befalle him therof or he sterve" (97-101).

The prayer parodies Dante's own presumption to associate the reading of his *Comedy* with the risks of damnation and the hope of salvation. In his epistle to his patron, Dante posits that the aim of his book is to remove those in a state of misery and

move them toward happiness. In Canto V of the *Inferno*, he builds into the text a warning that misreading can entail severe punishment when he places Paolo and Francesca in the first ring of hell after their reading led them to bed. Chaucer pokes fun of such presumption at the expense of his alter-ego the narrator. Geoffrey, like Dante, attempts to load the reading of his poem with similar retributive consequence. But Geoffrey's petition undercuts trust that he in fact gives voice to the realistic, reasonable, or divinely sanctioned repercussions of choices to read one way rather than another. If those who misread the poem don't suffer every possible harm ever endured through the course of history, Geoffrey asks that God make them die! At the close of the petition, Geoffrey insists: "This prayer shal he have of me; / I am no bet in charyte!" (107-8). The declaration is an ironic confession that something may be lacking in the narrator's petition—a true spirit of love.

This detail evidences Chaucer's complicated debt to Dante. In Dante's poem, the pilgrim eventually discovers that Love, who sets the stars turning, is finally an impenetrable mystery.<sup>56</sup> Chaucer's poem reflects a careful reading of Dante that subordinates all else to this point—that God's love, charity, the love that Boethius and Dante associate with the movement of the stars and God's very being, exceeds our understanding. So where Dante presumes to deal out particular assignments in hell, Chaucer depicts such determinations as exceeding his narrator's purview. Chaucer's critique of such epistemological presumption does not reflect a rejection of Dante's theological framework. Rather, Chaucer parodies presumption to make final judgments because the mystery of charity cannot be probed by the human mind. It is God who sets

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<sup>56</sup> Commenting on Dante, Doob asserts: "The final labyrinth of divine mystery remains impenetrable and unchartable [...]" (293).

all things in motion, and Chaucer hints that human beings overreach when they attempt to fix things in place through a final judgment. Thus, the narrator serves as a counter model for the reader in this case. His prayer betrays that he presumes to fix in place, to commend to death, what he has already confessed has been set in motion by God. In contrast to the narrator, readers are invited by Chaucer the author to set the poem in motion as “he that mover ys of al” does the world (81).

As a whole, the material preceding the dream account in book one suggests Geoffrey is very unlikely to convert his dream into a comprehensible and resolved meaning. His comments on dreams and his prayers concerning his writing and the reader’s reception of his poem highlight that the epistemological value of such visions is by no means assured. Instead, everything he writes seems to indicate that there is no means of extrication from the complex mazes of signs we find in authoritative texts, dreams, and the poems written about them. Thus, the poem opens by situating the reader before a text that puts in doubt whether it is possible to discover its meaning. As noted, Chaucer does not simply subvert a theological framework when putting into question whether dreams are revelatory and how so. Rather, Chaucer compromises the promise of interpretive closure that dream visions hold out to dreamers and readers in order to make a theological point concerning human finitude. Our ambition, Chaucer seems to say, should not be to acquire a fixed interpretive position but to turn in the labyrinthine ways of divine love. We are not destined to find a way from the maze but to find a way to participate in the mysterious turnings of love as we make our way through the maze. Because the poem resists interpretive closure, Chaucer enables us to exercise our interpretive wills in love by setting a text in motion as God does the complex world.

## II.B Entering the Labyrinth of Geoffrey's Dream

The challenges that structure what kind of access one may have to the truth remains at the core of the poem when Chaucer turns to Geoffrey's dream itself. As he recounts his dream, Geoffrey is engaged in a process entailing concessions that he is constrained by limitation even as he exercises interpretive choice. The challenges circumscribing Geoffrey's poetic rendering of the dream as a narrator are comparable to those he faces within the dream. The settings of the dream in book one and the artwork he encounters are complex and resistant to a masterful or comprehensive understanding. Chaucer situates his poem's dreamer and narrator in an epistemic position that necessitates a search for understanding that lacks any assured course. Still, even as Chaucer questions whether we can access the truth, Geoffrey recognizes that woeful repercussions can follow either misapprehending or manipulating signs. In this way, Chaucer challenges the hope of discovering a systematic rule with which we can proceed even as his poem asserts that decisions bear us in directions with morally significant consequences. That is, although God's love exceeds comprehension, our choices nevertheless can lead us to diverge from or follow the ways in which God would move us.

The initial setting in which Geoffrey finds himself as he dreams is a maze-like "temple ymad of glas" (120). Although certain it was built to honor Venus (120), the dreamer was not so confident concerning either its location or where he stood within it. Geoffrey declares that "I nyste never where that I was" (129-130). Instead, within the temple, he "romed up and doun" (140). Chaucer makes of this temple the setting of his dreamer's encounter with a labyrinthine work of art. Roaming about, he eventually

discovered a “table of bras” depicting Troy’s history and the story of Aeneas’s journey to Rome (142). The images that Geoffrey views in the temple and when looking back on his dream are structurally complex.<sup>57</sup> In relation to that complexity, Chaucer depicts his narrator engaged in a labyrinthine process of choosing one interpretive course among many available to him.

The position that Geoffrey holds as he makes his retrospective examination of the dream is not one of mastery. As he crafts his poem, he is still very much in search of understanding. The complexity of the story and our limited access to the truth are evidenced in part simply because the text’s record of what happened is obviously partial. As Geoffrey describes what he sees of Aeneas’s adventures, he makes obvious that there are gaps in his account that obstruct any full probing of the story. For example, Geoffrey notes that as Aeneas fled Troy he lost his wife Creusa, but he confesses that “How Creusa was ylost, allas, / That ded, not I how” (183-4). All that remains clear is that she was lost “in a forest / at a turnynge of a wente” (180-1). If Creusa was lost at a particular “turnynge” in the woods, we know also that the story’s focus turns from her. As a result, her ultimate demise is hidden and inaccessible. She is left not only in a maze-like forest, but trapped in impenetrable oblivion. And so, no totalizing grasp of the story is possible.

At other points, the narrator presents much more than the images could have plausibly represented. Indeed, Geoffrey repeatedly refers not to the images he encountered

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<sup>57</sup> Chaucer’s use of *ecphrasis* within the dream allows him to draw an analogy between Geoffrey’s dual roles as dreamer and narrator. In both roles, Geoffrey is presented with a set of visual signs that he submits to an interpretive process. Within the dream, he submits the images on the temple’s walls to an evaluative process. Afterward, when narrating the dream, he reviews the elements of his dream vision, the visual signs of which are analogous to those of the brass murals. As he strives to offer an account of his dream’s images, he is positioned once again in the role he held when in the temple. By presenting himself as a narrator of a dream and then as a viewer of art within the dream, Chaucer builds into his poem two self-reflexive images of the reader.



on the temple's walls, but instead quite openly to the books in which those stories are to be found. For example, even as he sums up Aeneas's descent into hell, he notes that it "is longe to telle" and urges those who want to know more to read either Virgil, Claudian, or Dante (446). Geoffrey shifts with ease between the murals and the literary sources making ambiguous the distinction between the two even as it is clear that multiple sources—some visual and some verbal—are in play. Diluting the distinction between viewing images and reading texts makes the poem's narrator and dreamer more forceful mirrors of the reader. The dreamer looks upon the artwork in the temple, but the mural's images include at least some writing. The narrator looks back on the elements of his dream vision, but also considers the texts to which they allude. As a result, the analogy between dreamer, narrator, and reader are made more explicit and exact.

In fact, the narrator's address to the reader invites them to share his activity of interpretation and manifests that it includes choosing a course among various options. As he relates the dream, Geoffrey stitches together the accounts of Virgil and Ovid, and then encourages readers curious to know more to "Rede Virgile in Eneydow / Or the Epistle of Ovyde" (378-9). The poem flaunts what Jesse Gellrich has called the "conflict of sources" (170). Notably, Geoffrey doesn't choose to follow just one of the two, but weaves his own course through the material. After following Virgil quite closely, beginning with a nearly literal quote of Virgil's first line, Geoffrey follows the lead of Ovid's *Heroides* 7 for a period, before choosing finally to return to the yarn spun by Virgil.

As when summing up the dream lore, Geoffrey's act of recounting the Aeneas and Dido affair foregrounds that there is no single authoritative line he must follow. Chaucer

depicts his narrator selecting a particular interpretive course through a maze of possible routes. The absence of agreement between diverse sources undermines the presumption that what is written must be true, and augments the possibility of a reader's own authority. Miller proposes that the narrator continues to shift back and forth between "claiming and disclaiming his role as author as he tests and rejects all available authorities, including himself" (Miller 112). As he considered the story, "[n]o position of self-effacing dependence or assertive self-reliance, [...] proved satisfactory" (Miller 112). He chooses to follow at times the authorities, but none furnishes him an authoritative reference point. As he reads and works selectively with his two sources, the narrator invents a narrative himself. Miller writes that "his individual perspective and personality emerge to modify—even shape—the story he is retelling" (107).

The power of choice that Chaucer has Geoffrey wield when recounting the dream models a process of reading for the audience. Chaucer effectively encourages readers to know that they too may go back to the sources and explore in them alternate routes. Members of Chaucer's audience may exercise their own authority over the story by making comparable choices to emphasize this or that narrative element. Like Geoffrey, we can evaluate the actions and words of characters. In the process, the audience will multiply what meanings may be discovered in the story, and perhaps even open new routes through the material unanticipated by the author. Like Geoffrey sorting a way through the various sources, the reader must appropriate his or her own authority over the text. Readers are encouraged to acknowledge that the meaning of the poem is not a fixed, authoritatively determined reality, and that they have power to respond diversely.

All the same, the license with which Geoffrey reads and that Chaucer extends to his reader through the narrator's modeling is not absolute. The poem does not simply present the ambiguities of signs as warranting readers to read however they will. Chaucer repeatedly indicates that the way words are turned by their readers can have serious consequences. This is evident in the Dido affair. Despite proposing that Chaucer's poem departs from an earlier moral tradition, Doob concedes: "The motif of difficult choice—in interpreting and following texts, in deciding which is right and which wrong, Virgil's or Ovid's version, this dream theory or that, this reading of Geoffrey's dream or that—is extended into the practical moral realm: whose words or deeds can a poor woman believe in the labyrinth of this world?" (316-7). The practical morals of the story for Geoffrey are in fact multiple.

In the first case, Geoffrey frames the moral as a pointed recommendation to women like Dido to be cautious when entrusting themselves to a man. Geoffrey declares, "Loo, how a woman doth amys / To love hym that unknowen ys" (270). He suggests Dido erred in loving "al to sone a gest" (287). Lamenting that Dido's mistaken trust led to her suicide, he writes: "Allas! What harm doth apparence, / Whan hit is fals in existence!" (266). Chaucer sums up the moral proverbially, and his two chosen proverbs bear self-reflexively on the audience's appropriation of the text. First, his narrator insists: "Hyt is not all gold that glareth" (272). Like Aeneas's amatory declarations, the words employed by poets are in need of discrimination. And he adds shortly afterward that only "he that fully knoweth th'erbe / May saufly leye hyt to his yē" (274-5). But the poem suggests again and again that no one can in fact "fully knoweth" (274). And so, just as in the case

of herbs and men, the poetic dream vision and the proverb may bring about desired ends, but their power to do so is by no means certain.

A second moral Geoffrey draws from the tale of Aeneas and Dido develops when he launches into a rebuke of Aeneas for his false seeming. Geoffrey chooses to make of the story a rebuke of deception and traitorous men. He reports that Dido blasted deceptive men: “O, have ye men such godlyhede / In speche, and never a del of trouthe?” (330-331). Then, Geoffrey notes that of such falsehood “men may ofte in bokes rede / And al day sen hyt yet in dede” (385-386). To support his point, Geoffrey proffers an extensive list of men—Demophon, Achilles, Paris, Jason, Hercules, and finally Theseus—whom he castigates for “how fals and reccheles” they proved to their lovers (397). Doob comments that this list is “short circuited by the poem’s first allusion to the labyrinth myth: Theseus’s betrayal of Ariadne (405-26)” (317). Chaucer recalls pointedly that Theseus would have “ben al devoured” (410) had Ariadne not “made hym fro the deth escape” (414). Freed from the labyrinth by Ariadne, he nevertheless betrayed his oath and left her trapped “in an ile / Desert alone” (416-7). The story of betrayal forms a critique of misrepresentation, even as it puts into question what truth can be discerned in a man’s words and perhaps also in Geoffrey’s poem.

As noted, Geoffrey’s response to the love affair makes truth and falsehood, misinterpretation, and the deceptive use of language predominating issues. Chaucer’s poem presents for consideration the potent and potentially destructive force of language. This concern is raised repeatedly in book one. For example, Geoffrey links the destruction of Troy to the “false forswerynge” that gained the Trojan horse entry to the city. Then, Geoffrey notes that Juno’s appeal to Aeolus nearly drowned Aeneas. Geoffrey writes that

she urged Aeolus “the god of wyndes, / To blowen oute, of alle kyndes, / So lowed that he shulde drenche / [...] al the Troian nacion, / Withoute any savacion” (202-208). This example anticipates the potentially destructive gusts of wind that disseminate Fame’s report in the third book, and her failure to furnish a trustworthy “savacion” (208). After suffering Aeneas’s false promises of love, Dido in fact laments Fame’s gust-like force. She is distraught because she knows she will have no control over how history will remember her. Instead, she is subject to Fame’s swift report by which “every thing ys wyst, Though hit be kevered with the myst” (351-2). Returning again and again to consider the power of words, Chaucer seems to insist that their indeterminacy does not make how we use them a matter of moral indifference.

At the close of Book I, Geoffrey moves on from the brass murals without having acquired any conclusive insight. He leaves amazed by the images, but confessing ignorance: “But not wot I whoo did hem wirche, / Ne where I am, ne in what contree” (474-5). Geoffrey leaves the building in search of “any stiryng man / That may me tell where I am” (478-9). He finds none, but enters instead an expansive desert. The setting, void of orienting landmarks and for the moment of any guide, is a labyrinthine space. Standing in that field of sand, Geoffrey prays: “O Crist [...] that art in blysse, / Fro fantome and illusion / Me save!” (492-4). And so the first book concludes with the dreamer exiting Venus’s temple full of artistic images, praying to be saved from illusion by Christ, just before looking toward heaven and spying a giant eagle shining like “another soone” (506). This conclusion to Book I suspends the narrative just as it builds to a climactic point of tension concerning the power of dreams and dream poetry to reveal truth. Geoffrey expresses most overtly a longing for deliverance, seemingly the

deliverance that his dream and the poem can furnish, but he calls to be delivered from a site of literary illusion and dream-like fantasy, not by them. Thus, the book closes by inviting readers to consider whether Geoffrey will in fact find such deliverance.

### **III The Eagle: No Sure Guide Through the Labyrinth**

In the second book of the *House of Fame*, Chaucer continues to undermine the dream vision's promise of a masterful, epistemic overview in relation to the figure of the guide. The golden Eagle, shining like the sun over Geoffrey in the desert at the close of Book I, does not lead Geoffrey to an experience of illumination. When the Eagle bears Geoffrey up into the sky, Chaucer represents one of the traditional modes by which a maze can be charted: overhead flight. In Geoffrey's dream though, flight will not ever yield him a controlling overview. Instead, the guide characterizes sound, and so speech, with a labyrinthine image—ever-expanding rings of sound. Just as the Eagle will never lift Geoffrey to a comprehensive overview, so Chaucer continues to challenge his readers' claims to a position of interpretive control. Through his depiction of the Eagle and Geoffrey soaring through the air, Chaucer affirms that philosophy and theology, and their poetic vehicles, dream visions, furnish no fixed position from which to survey the truth.

In the *House of Fame's* Eagle, Chaucer creates a guide with all the conventional markings proper to such a figure. Initially, the Eagle sweeps down from the sky and appears appropriately august. John M. Steadman identifies a “widespread medieval tradition which conceived the Eagle as a symbol for contemplation” (153), whose symbolic merits derived from “two characteristics of the species—its keen vision and the altitude of its flight” (153). Those features alone make of the Eagle a metaphor for

extrication from the maze. Such a guide can rise above the structure, acquire an overview from which to gaze upon it, and from there determine its precise layout. Moreover, the Eagle, it is often noted, might well have provoked Chaucer's contemporary audience to recall guides from other popular dream visions. In both Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Dante's *Purgatorio* the flight of a bird is an explicit means of moving dream vision protagonists from snares of moral and intellectual confusion.<sup>58</sup>

Although many readers, including Steadman, view Chaucer's Eagle as "thoroughly in keeping with its traditional significance" (158), Chaucer repeatedly undermines the authority of his guide. Geoffrey's guide will not help him work his way from his limited grasp of the truth. In fact, Chaucer's characterization of the Eagle either makes ambiguous or discredits the power of this guide in nearly every regard. The Eagle's appearance, its effect on Geoffrey, and the mode and content of its message all compromise the guide's status as an authoritative figure capable of lifting Geoffrey to survey the truth. Instead, the Eagle carries Geoffrey from one maze-like setting to another, bearing him from the desert to Fame's house, and then finally in Book III down into the spinning wicker House of Rumor, a "Domus Dedaly, / That Laboryntus cleped ys (1920-1). Representing the guide in this manner, Chaucer challenges expectations of acquiring a comprehensive perspective on the truth and presents an alternative conception of our epistemological powers.

Chaucer undermines the Eagle's status as a sure guide to the truth by way of its physical description. When Geoffrey first sees the bird above him in the sky, it seems

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<sup>58</sup> An eagle aids Dante in the ninth canto of *Purgatorio*, and Lady Philosophy compares her aid to Boethius to lifting him by flight into the heights of philosophical insight.

more like a giant predator than a providential instrument of rescue. The Eagle descends upon Geoffrey like an exposed morsel after keenly spying him “a-roume [in the open] [...] in the feld” (540). Snatched up by the Eagle’s “grymme pawes stronge, / Withyn hys sharpe nayles longe” (541-2), Geoffrey is prey to something potent and perhaps menacing. Before Geoffrey knows what has happened, the Eagle “[...] with hys sours ayen up wente, / Me caryinge in his clawes starke / As lightly as I were a larke” (544-6). Chaucer heightens the suspense of the moment and defers his guide’s reassuring introduction until after Geoffrey is clasped by the Eagle’s talons and borne aloft. Initially, there is nothing about the Eagle’s grip that suggests this guide will furnish the dreamer a masterful control of the truth. Instead, Chaucer presents the Eagle’s approach and aid in ways that stress its force and perhaps even threatening power over Geoffrey.

As in the case of the Eagle’s strength, Chaucer makes ambiguous certain aspects of the Eagle’s physical description that might otherwise seem obvious evidence of its excellence and authority. For example, Geoffrey notes that the Eagle “shon with fethres as of gold” (530). Such characterization could connote wealth and power. But in the first part of the poem, the narrator has already recalled the proverb that “Hyt is not al gold that glareth” (272). In relation to that proverb, gold connotes the very ambiguity of signs. Chaucer exploits that proverbial significance by associating gold with the statues in Venus’s Temple (121-2), the sun, a Platonic symbol of the light of truth (505), the Eagle’s wings (503 and 530), the House of Fame (1342-9), and Lady Fame herself, whose hair “as burned gold [...] shoon to see” (1387). The repetitive appearance of gold to characterize things as diverse as the dream vision’s philosophical guide and the capricious Lady Fame prevent the reader from establishing any fixed interpretive code.



Instead, the recurrent appearances of gold reinforce its ambiguous significance. Chaucer uses the color to stamp diverse elements of the narrative as indeterminate. The golden Eagle may well be a shining source of deliverance for Geoffrey, but it may also only appear to be so. The courts of Lady Fame and Venus may merit the poet's esteem, but Geoffrey's devotion may prove an idolatrous devotion to false gods.

Secondly, Chaucer reverses the effects that the conventional guide immediately has on the dreamer. Dream vision guides typically enter into the snare-like spaces inhabited by the dreamer, offer reassurances, and propose a particular itinerary of extrication from the outset. For example, Lady Philosophy breaks into Boethius's prison cell where he laments that death has not yet taken him and she immediately sends away the muses cultivating his depression and sets to restoring his spirit. In contrast, Geoffrey's rocket-like rise into the heavens is far from consoling. He is "astonyed and asweved" [astonished and fainting] because of his ascent and the altitude to which he is borne (549). In fact, Geoffrey reports that while soaring up, he was so full of dread "That al my felynge gan to dede" (552). The contrast to Dante's experience with Virgil is also stark. Virgil twice rouses Dante from fainting spells, sets him on his feet, and encourages him to continue on the way. The Eagle's appearance is so fearful that Geoffrey faints, and he is only woken after lying for some time in the talons of the Eagle.

Chaucer does not completely subvert the conventional representation of the guide though. After waking Geoffrey, the Eagle does console the dreamer with the words "I am thy frend" (582). The Eagle declares that Geoffrey has nothing to fear because the trip "Is for thy lore and for thy prow" [is for your learning and your profit] (579). At first, the guide's promise fails to calm Geoffrey or clarify the course of their flight. Geoffrey reflects

on the bizarre event and wonders both “what thing may this sygnifye?” and also if Jove has determined to turn him into a star ( 587). He considers in fear: “Shal I noon other weyes dye?” (585). But the Eagle then identifies himself as an aid to Jupiter, sent now to reward Geffrey for the poetic services he renders Cupid. The Eagle claims he is to requite Geffrey by taking him to the House of Fame where he will receive manifold and wondrous “tydinges” of Love’s devotees (675). And later, when guide and dreamer arrive at the House of Fame, the Eagle commends Geffrey to the House of Fame with a petition that “God of heven sende the grace / Some good to lernen in this place” (1087-88). Thus, the Eagle repeatedly assures Geffrey of his beneficent motive.

Nevertheless, the Eagle’s in-flight discourse is a strange combination of philosophic excurses and surprisingly down-to-earth banter. As a guide to contemplative vision, Chaucer’s jocular Eagle is a considerably more earthly figure than the apparitions of Lady Philosophy and Virgil. Throughout the whole of this book, Chaucer’s talking bird proves a very lively philosophical interlocutor. He playfully teases Geffrey that he is “noyous for to carry” (574). Elsewhere, the Eagle tells Geffrey that he is an odd love poet lacking both the intelligence and the experience one might expect necessary (620-6). Even while relating to Geffrey that he is to be rewarded, the Eagle ribs his passenger for so regularly enclosing himself in a study to read:

In stede of reste and newe thynges  
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,  
And, also domb as any stoon,  
Thou sittest at another book  
Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;

And lyvest thus as an heremyte,

Although thyn abstinence ys lyte. (655-660)

The Eagle promises Geoffrey “som disport and game” as recompense for his hermit-like devotion to love (664), but the Eagle is also having his fun with Geoffrey.

Indeed, one of the major conclusions the Eagle draws for Geoffrey is that speech is finally and rather ingloriously nothing more than “eyr ybroken” ( 765). The comparison of speaking and breaking wind puts into question what the guide or the audience is to make of the lengthy discourse. Indeed, the Eagle encourages Geoffrey to “Take yt in earnest or in game” (822). This option to receive what is said in two ways makes of the Eagle’s discourse a labyrinth of intersections opening to serious and delightful readings. It seems fully possible that there is no need to decide simply between the two.

In sum, Chaucer depicts the Eagle’s lesson in a manner that qualifies what access to truth or moral insight seems likely to be afforded by the flight and dream, even as the depiction preserves a sense that some potentially serious intent drives the Eagle. The Eagle claims to demonstrate in a convincing manner a series of philosophical truths. But the Eagle’s rapid succession of points does not evidence comparable sophistication to the arguments employed by Lady Philosophy in the *Consolation*. The Eagle’s excursus includes the identification of where Fame’s palace is set in the cosmos, a metaphysical assertion that everything has its place within the ontological chain of being, and finally a claim concerning the nature of sound. Finally, neither the content of the Eagle’s speech nor its argumentative mode suggest that Geoffrey will have been borne toward mastery of the truth.

Among those points made by the Eagle, the representation of how sound functions stands out because it associates sound and labyrinthine structure. The Eagle compares the effect of sound on air to the throwing of a stone into water. As in the case of the stone, the Eagle contends the initial sound produces an expanding ring-like structure lacking any final, fixed form. He tells Geoffrey that the initial sound sets off a chain reaction in which “Every sercle causynge other / Wydder than hymselfe was” (788-97). This ever-widening series of rings expands “Til hyt be atte Hous of Fame” (821). Later, though, we discover that the halls of Lady Fame’s house expand perpetually as this sound fills the space (1493-6). Thus, no determined circumference or limit exists. Instead, the rings of sound form an inextricable labyrinth from which there is no final exit. This definition of sound given by the Eagle contravenes the power of speech to lift the dreamer toward a comprehensive mastery of meaning.

As the Eagle and Geoffrey soar toward the house, they make their passage through the air, seemingly circumscribed by rippling sound waves set in motion long ago. Indeed, Chaucer’s Eagle, a textual reworking of comparable literary figures, is itself one more ripple extending the development of a particular poetic image that has no fixed interpretive frame. Moreover, no less than other sounds, the Eagle’s words are cast like stones into the pool of the air. The whole of the Eagle’s discourse does not lead Geoffrey out of a linguistic maze to unmediated truth. Instead, the Eagle’s extended discourse—one of the principle tools by which the traditional guide would lead the dreamer to a determined insight—leaves the pupil in the midst of a labyrinth, the continually expanding rings of “eyr ybroken” by poets and audiences alike ( 765).

Chaucer compromises the guide's claim to authority more overtly when the Eagle exaggerates the force of its logic and speech. The Eagle makes a series of claims concerning its mode of discoursing that are contradictory and difficult to reconcile with the speech itself. At the outset of the conversation, the Eagle promises a "worthy demonstracion" (727). Later, the Eagle assumes that Geoffrey has found its argument persuasive and claims that "This mayst thou fele wel I preve" (826). In the lengthy course of rendering its lessons, the Eagle appeals to several metaphors in order to convey various philosophical points. Yet, Geoffrey's guide asks: "Have y not preved thus simply, / Withoute any subtitle / Of speche, or gret prolixite, / Of termes of philosophie, / Of figures of poetrie, Or colours of rethorike?" (853-860). Geoffrey's initial and quick assent that the Eagle's discourse is "a good persuasion" is too readily given (872). The authoritative force of the guide's poetic argument is shaky at best. Geoffrey immediately qualifies his response and proposes that it is only "lyk to be / Ryght so as thou hast preved me" (873-4). Shortly afterward, even the Eagle recognizes no full assent is necessitated, and so promises Geoffrey a "preve by experience" at the House of Fame (879).

Later in the second book, Chaucer directly challenges expectations concerning what kind of intellectual illumination is furnished by the dream vision. This segment of the poem develops in relation to an ambiguity in Boethius's *Consolation*. Boethius compares both his initial, compromised condition and the vision he acquires with Lady Philosophy's aid to cloud-like darkness. Early in the book, he associates his spiritual depression as he languishes in prison to an intellectual fog. Before the conclusion of the work, Boethius's guide has borne him so high that the atmosphere grows impenetrable,

dense, and cloud-like. Chaucer quotes Boethius from the fourth book of the *Consolation*: “[...] A thought may flee so hie / Wyth fetheres of Philosophie, / To passen everych element, / Ad when hath so fer ywent, / Than may be seen behynde hys back / Cloude” (973-8). This second cloud image, signifying entrance into mystery, recalls works of mystical theology like the *Cloud of Unknowing* written more closely to Chaucer’s own day than the *Consolation*. Chaucer exploits the ambiguity of these two uses of cloud imagery within the Christian theological tradition to characterize the ambiguous position of his dreamer.

Ascending with the Eagle, Geoffrey looks back and recounts that “the world, as to myn yē, / No more semed than a prikke” (lms. 906-907). He has been born up above the labyrinth of the world. But as Geoffrey narrates his poem, he is uncertain if that position actually indicated freedom from the world’s maze-like clutch and the acquisition of contemplative vision. Thinking back on the experience, he posits an alternative: “Or elles was the air so thikke / That y ne myghte not discernen” (lms. 908-909). Puzzled, Geoffrey questions whether he should construe his change in position as mystical ecstasy or as immersion in a mental fog.

During the flight, Geoffrey’s attitude is a contradictory mixture of doubt and confidence that lead him to make both claims of profound understanding and confessions of limited comprehension. He asserts that he was gripped by “were” [a state of doubt or perplexity ] (979). Yet, he quotes St. Paul and wonders: “Y wot wel y am here, / But where in body or in gost / I not, y wys, but God, thou wost.” (979-82).<sup>59</sup> Geoffrey’s question associates his flight with Paul’s mystical ascent to the third heaven, but also

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<sup>59</sup> “I know well I am here, / But whether in body or in spirit / I do not know, indeed, but God, you know.”

with Paul's perplexity (II Cor 12.2). Nevertheless, Geoffrey insists that following that moment he never enjoyed a "more clere entendement" (983). He claims that moment of perspicacity confirmed testimony concerning the heavens found in dream visions by Martianus Capella and Alan of Lille (985-990). And yet, he declines his guide's invitation to explore the heaven's more fully, explaining to the Eagle that the stars "shynen here so bryghte" that it could blind him "To loke on hem" (1015-7). In contrast to Lady Philosophy in the *Consolation* and Beatrice in *Paradiso* who lead their dreamers to contemplate the celestial music of the spheres, the Eagle consents "That may wel be" (1017).

One further point raised by the Eagle during the flight contributes to Chaucer's humorous representation of efforts to gain a philosophical mastery of the world. As Geoffrey is borne into the heavens, the Eagle identifies the Milky Way and recounts its mythical origins: Phaeton presumed to drive his father's chariot, but lost control of the horses, and streaked through the sky leaving it scorched, until he was "fro the carte caste" (956). The Eagle proposes:

Loo, ys it not a gret myschaunce  
To lete a fool han governaunce  
Of thing that he cannot demeyne? (957-60)

By affirming so plainly that misappropriations of control are destructive, the Eagle warns Geoffrey that significant hazard lies in presumption to power. The Eagle's comments on the myth raise for consideration the poem's theme of epistemic mastery and interpretive judgment. The word 'demeyne' meaning 'control' here, is used by Chaucer elsewhere in a manner closer to its modern usage 'to deem,' and also to mean 'to determine,' 'to

judge,' and 'to perceive'. His use of the term here recalls most especially his petition that readers not "mysdemen" his poem (92) "thorgh presumpcion" (94). Thus, the Eagle warns readers who would attempt to master either the unwieldy text or truth itself to be cautious.

In summary, Chaucer continues in Book II to diverge from the dream vision's conventional narrative passage to a point of revelation. The guide is the center piece to the second book's undermining of the dream vision's promise of closure. The Eagle appears to be a guide with all the conventional attributes necessary to lift Geoffrey to an overview of the truth. But under the tutelage of this guide, whether Geoffrey is in fact drawing toward some discovery seems highly questionable. Like Geoffrey, the reader remains, at the end of this book, wondering what kind of lesson will be furnished by this most curious of dream visions.

#### **IV Immersion in the Labyrinth: The (Anti)-Revelation**

The third and final book of *House of Fame* comes to its conclusion without furnishing a vision that resolves the meaning of the dream. Instead, shortly after Geoffrey witnesses capricious Lady Fame, the poem concludes with Geoffrey noting the dramatic appearance of a mysterious man of "gret auctorite" in the explicitly labyrinthine House of Rumor. The suspension of the narrative at this point deprives the dreamer and narrator of a controlling understanding of the dream. The poem subverts the dream vision's conventional promise of narrative closure, and as a result, readers of the poem are left immersed in a maze-like text without any sure interpretive footing. It is in these final scenes, though, that the labyrinthine structure of the poem most clearly contributes to two



theological points identified at the outset of this chapter: a critique of worldly fame and affirmation of the indomitable mystery of God. By subverting the genre's promise of closure, Chaucer does not challenge these theological points, but attempts to confirm their truth. For Chaucer, exhausting the power of language and interpretive analysis do not compromise so much as serve a revelatory end.

In the first case, the poem's indeterminacy and lack of closure contribute to Chaucer's satiric treatment of worldly fame. Immediately following the record of his flight, Geoffrey launches into a marveling description of his visit to Fame's house. Although the narrator regularly praises fame, Chaucer uses his narrating self to deliver a pointed satire. Chaucer's representation of fame holds true to the medieval Christian treatment of it. Chaucer suggests that fame is subject to the same criticisms Boethius levels against wealth, honor, and power in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, that it is finally governed by chance, acquired only ephemerally, and never sufficient to satisfy the human heart. The setting at Fame's House, Lady Fame herself, and Geoffrey's efforts to praise her all contribute to Chaucer's critique of the salvation afforded by fame.

But Chaucer's poem does more than merely recapitulate existing challenges to the merits of fame. Two distinctive features can be noted. First, Geoffrey not only receives testimony concerning fame's untrustworthy nature, as Boethius does in the *Consolation*, but also visits Lady Fame's very house. Within the house, Geoffrey acquires a "preve by experience" as promised by the Eagle (879). The house is a complex and bewildering structure. Within it, one can be lost to history no less than acquire a distinguished position within it. Secondly, Chaucer utilizes the structure of his poem to afford his readers a comparable proof. He makes obvious the instability of his own poem's

meaning to reinforce his poetic critique of Lady Fame's power. By highlighting the indeterminacy of his writing, Chaucer confirms experientially for the reader that poets cannot furnish a lasting reputation. The renown that is seemingly established and preserved in the writings of poets is no more certain or secure than is this poem's praise of Fame.

When Geoffrey eventually enters the house, he encounters a space that resists intellectual and narrative mastery.<sup>60</sup> Looking back on his experience, he contends, "[...] hit astonyeth yit my thought, / And maketh al my wyt to swynke [labor], / On this castel to bethynke" (1174-6). Perplexed by its marvelous design, he confesses "Ne kan I not to yow devyse; / My wit ne may me not suffise" (1179-80). No comprehensive chart of the house will be offered readers. This is in part because, as he discovers during his visit, the space "was waxon on highte, length, and brede, / wel more be a thousand del / Than hyt was erst [...]" (1494-5). Ever-expanding and wondrously complex, the house necessitates that Geoffrey choose a particular way through the dream he recounts.

The narrator's confession that the house left him bewildered seems to acclaim the grandeur of fame, but similar admissions progressively introduce a compromising note to the narrator's praise. For example, when Geoffrey eventually encounters Lady Fame he cannot account for the way in which she wields her authority. Nine distinct groups approach Fame with petitions to be remembered in various ways or else for the right to remain anonymous figures in history. Geoffrey reports:

"And somme of hem she graunted sone,

And somme she werned wel and faire,

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<sup>60</sup> To capture poetically the character of Fame's House and the gusts of sound that burst from within it, Geoffrey would seem to need all the power of the magician whom he reports having seen cover an entire "wynde-melle" with a walnut shell (1280).

And some she graunted the contraire  
Of her axing outterly.  
But thus I seye yow, trewely,  
What her cause was, y nyste (1538-43).

Nothing certain secures whether one will be held in favor, contempt, or simply forgotten altogether. Lady Fame responds to everyone who makes a request of her “right as her suster, dame Fortune” (1547). Like the gate through which one enters, the house is borne of “aventure / [...] as often as be cure” (1297-8). We see that her house permits no masterful charting not only because of its ineffable beauty, but because no coherent principle contributes to its construction.

Chaucer begins to develop the third book’s critique of worldly fame even before having Geoffrey witness Fame’s caprice. Making his way toward Fame’s house, the poet-narrator discovers that the house stands on a “roche of yse” (1130) and comments that it is a “feble fundmanet” (1132). Geoffrey describes that on that ice he found inscribed many “famous folkes names” (1137). Although “writen full of names” (1153), only some are “conserved with the shade” (1160). Elsewhere, the impermanence and instability of fame’s record is evidenced by the disappearance of lettering, which “was molte away [...] / So unfamous was woxe hir fame” (1145-6). And so Geoffrey exclaims within the midst of this account that “he ought him lytel glorifye / That hereon bilt, God so me save” (1134-5).

Ultimately, the ice is a metaphor for the poet’s parchment which proves itself to be a similarly “feble fundmanet” (1132). Much of book three is devoted to demonstrating the limited power of that parchment. But this point is developed ironically

as Geoffrey proceeds to describe with great admiration the wonders of Fame's house and those whose fame is preserved there. Most notably, within the expansive house of fame, Geoffrey finds numerous statues resting atop tall columns honoring particular poets and historians. They receive this privileged recognition in Fame's halls because they are her great servants through whose writing her report goes forth into the world.<sup>61</sup> Among the statues, Geoffrey reports seeing: "The Latyn poete Virgile, / That bore hath up a longe while / The fame of Pius Eneas" (1483-5), Ovid who "[...] hath ysowen wonder wide / The greate god of Loves name" (1488-9), and Lucan who bore "on hys shoulders [...] / The fame of Julius and Pompe" (1500-3). Finally, Geoffrey cuts himself short, and asks, "What shulde y more telle of this? / The halle was al ful, ywys, / Of hem that written olde gestes / As ben on treës rokes nestes" (1513-6).

This segment stresses the preeminent role of poets in creating fame, but Chaucer deliberately has his narrator Geoffrey unintentionally subvert the praise he would offer these poets. Initially, Geoffrey's account suggests that Lady Fame's house is the honorific home of innumerable authorities, including, in addition to those named above: Josephus (1433), "the gret Omer" (1466), Geoffrey of Monmouth (1470), and Claudian (1509). But their numbers tax Geoffrey sufficiently that he finally leaves off his account by capturing their numbers with a comparison to the ultra-mundane: a tree laden with bird nests. Furthermore, Geoffrey's assertion that one poet "seyd that Omer made lyes" makes plain that not all birdsong is harmonious in the tree (1477). Such debates suggest that poets are unable to confer upon anyone a fixed position in the maze-like record of history. Other poets and readers after them can create competing accounts—a fact

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<sup>61</sup> Watts argues that Chaucer represented authors as "the creators of Fame, the blowers of trumpets golden or brazen, responsible for the non-blasts of oblivion" (98).

evidenced already in the first book when Geoffrey considers the story of Dido and Aeneas. And so, readers may well be inclined to alter Chaucer's metaphor and liken the poets to the chattering rooks.<sup>62</sup>

Repeatedly, Geoffrey lays claim to the power of the poet, and dramatizes the limitations on that power even as he does so. This is especially true at a number of points when Geoffrey hurries the story along so as not to be delayed identifying those he sees. He leaves unnamed numerous "mynstrals / And gestiours" depicted in the castle's edifice (1197-8), hosts of musicians (1201-1259), a group of heralds "that crien ryche folks laudes" (1322), "[...] famous folk that han ybeen / In Auffrike, Europe, and Ayse / Syth first began the chevalrie" (1336-40), and writers of Rome's "myghty werkes" (1504). At each point, Chaucer highlights his narrator's interpretive choice to abbreviate the record and speed readers along.

Again and again, the numbers of those whom Geoffrey chooses not to name dwarf those he names specifically. This point is rendered sharply when Geoffrey records some musicians and not others. Geoffrey sees a group including "many thousand tymes twelve" playing wind instruments (1216). He spies a sea of trumpeters, who though "in her tyme famous were" certainly are no longer (1249). Finally, Geoffrey spies a host playing a number of instruments that were themselves more "than sterres ben in hevne" (1254). Such lines emphasize that Geoffrey, like Lady Fame, creates a text that consigns scores to oblivion. Admittance into Lady Fame's house is no assurance of being remembered by name.

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<sup>62</sup> If Chaucer anticipated this alteration, he might have also wanted to suggest similarities between what and how poets and rooks build. Rooks steal from other nests and break branches from other trees to weave them into their own nests. In *House of Fame*, Chaucer depicts poets engaged in a comparable process and then, in the final scene, likens the House of Rumor, a site of rapacious storytelling, to such a nest by suggesting it was "mad of twigges" (1934) and "tymber of no strengthe" (1980),

Notably, at one point, the narrator concludes his encyclopedic act of name dropping by asking: “What shuld I make lenger tale / Of alle the pepil y ther say / Fro hennes into domes day?” (1282-4). The comment foregrounds that Geoffrey has the power to abbreviate the poem’s length by leaving many unidentified, and so consigning them to anonymity. His determination to do so likens the poet to Lady Fame, whose decisions determine that some shall go unremembered. Finally, the lines call to mind the Christian end times, “domes day,” when Christ, not Fame, will be the judge (1284). Mention of which makes for a more stark invitation to ponder what kind of afterlife fame is in fact capable of furnishing and whether salvation by fame really matters.

Geoffrey’s record, like that etched in the castle’s ice foundation, is incomplete. Moreover, it is determined in part by what seem nothing more than Geoffrey’s chance decisions. As a result, the narrator’s admission that he cannot recount all he sees no longer sounds like testimony to the ineffable glory of Fame. Rather than uphold Fame’s majesty, the narrative course that Geoffrey winds through his dream, despite his intention, finally betrays that the record of Fame is “a ful confus matere” (1517), perplexing to him and his readers.

Chaucer makes his most direct allusion to labyrinthine structure and process toward the end of Book III. Directed by an unknown acquaintance, Geoffrey exits the House of Fame and approaches the maze-like House of Rumor. He declares that in the valley beneath the castle of Fame he saw a house more wondrously and elaborately made than “Domus Dedaly, / That Laboryntus cleped ys” (1920-1). Chaucer leaves Geoffrey and his reader immersed in this maze without any narrative or interpretive egress.

Like the labyrinth built by Daedalus to house the Minotaur, this house was “shapen lyk a cage” (1985). But its similarities to a labyrinthine structure are discernible in other regards as well. Its proportions are astounding: the house “was sixty myle of lengthe” (1979). It had entrances as numerous as “leves be in trees” (1945-6). More striking still, this labyrinth does not merely house movement, but is in movement itself. Geoffrey contends the house spun “swift as thought” (1924). He notes “That never mo hyt stille stente” (1926) and “Ne never reste is in that place” (1956). Notably, even as Geoffrey holds a position outside and above this last maze, it is a perpetual whirl and not a cartographically fixed structure.

At this point, Chaucer draws the Eagle back into the story. Geoffrey spies the Eagle perched nearby, and yearning to enter the house, appeals for help. As they look down upon the spinning house, Geoffrey asks to be brought there “for Goddis love” (1994). The Eagle asserts: “That but I bringe the therinne, / Ne shalt thou never kunne gynne / To come into hyt, out of doute, / So faste hit whirleth, lo, aboute” (2003-6).<sup>63</sup> The Eagle explains it is Jove’s “expres commaundement” that Geoffrey be brought within the structure (2021). Like Dante trapped in the dark wood and the souls who have crossed the gate of hell, Geoffrey is “Disesperat of alle blys” (2015). Proposing pointedly to Geoffrey that Fortune “hath made amys / [...] al thyne hertys reste” (1216-7), the Eagle echoes the diagnosis that Lady Philosophy offers Boethius.

In response though, what the Eagle offers Geoffrey is not an elaborate understanding of the workings of Chance, Fate, and Providence like Boethius receives in the *Consolation*. Rather than lift the dreamer to a position of epistemic mastery, the

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<sup>63</sup> In the page glosses of *The Riverside Chaucer* *kunne gynne* is translated ‘know the trick’ (371).

Eagle bears Geoffrey up “betweene hys toon” and then lowers him through a window of the House of Rumor (2028). That is, to cure Geoffrey’s restless heart, Chaucer’s dream vision guide leads the dreamer into the labyrinth, into the moving house. Chaucer suggests at this point that philosophy’s promise is not extrication from the maze, not an epistemic fixed position, but the truth of our finitude and a complexity exceeding our grasp.

Set down on the floor of the House of Rumor, Geoffrey has still one more experience of the dynamic indeterminacy of language. He observes the great “congregacioun” moving hurriedly about spreading bits and pieces of news (2034). Geoffrey is amazed to watch how as each tiding is told it becomes “more than hit ever was” (2067). Now echoing the testimony of the Eagle, Geoffrey describes how the rumors “went [...] from mouth to mouth, And that encresing ever moo” (2076-7). Once again, Chaucer depicts language and narrative as perpetually expanding, growing incessantly, and beyond the control of any particular speaker or writer. Geoffrey marvels at what he sees, calling this phenomena “wondermost” (2059). Standing in the midst of that house “mad of twigges” (1934) and “tymber of no strengthe” (1980), Geoffrey calmly remarks that the stories spread “As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo / Fromn a sparke spronge amys, Til al a cite brent up ys” (2076-80). Once again, Chaucer has his narrator deliver without realizing it a critical view of what he witnesses. Just as his praise of fame often betrays Chaucer’s ambivalence toward it, so here Geoffrey’s remarks suggest that true and false reports roll through the wooden House of Rumor like fire through a city.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Chaucer does not simply celebrate the indeterminacy of meaning. He also repeatedly exposes the ways that such indeterminacy occasionally leads to harmful ends.



Then, at what seems the climactic moment of Geoffrey's dream, a great commotion erupts in the House of Rumor. He recounts:

I herde a gret noyse withalle  
In a corner of the halle,  
Ther men of love-tydinges tolde,  
And I gan thiderward beholde;  
For I saught rennyng every wight  
As faste as that they hadden might  
And everych cried, "What thing is that?"  
And Somme sayde, "I not never what." (2139-48)

Following these others rushing to the corner of the house, Geoffrey explains, "Atte laste y saugh a man, / Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan; / But he semed for to be / A man of gret auctorite" (2155-8).

With the appearance of this man of great authority, the poem comes to an end that resolves and determines nothing. We know simply that this man appears "In a corner of the halle" (2142) where "men of love-tydinges tolde" (2143). Those abiding in the House of Rumor are unable to say what it is they see. Similarly, Geoffrey concludes only that he can neither name nor know precisely what he saw, confessing only what "semed for to be" (2157). And so, the final apparition of Geoffrey's dream vision leaves him and the reader also immersed in the labyrinthine House of Rumor.

If Chaucer suggests that Geoffrey moves through the maze lacking any overarching understanding or any sure justification for his decisions to move in one way rather than another, he ensures that this is true also for readers of the poem. In neither the

prologue nor the dream does any element of the narrative take on such determined significance as to permit a resolved reading of its meaning. Choices to read one way or another never yield an overarching, map-like survey of the poem's meaning. No interpretive approach yields a stable position concerning what the poem may mean. So if one is free to choose to read one way rather than another, those efforts cannot fix its meaning resolutely. Although no interpretive approach can overcome the poem's irresolution and its suspension of interpretive closure, the poem gives significance to that indeterminacy all the same.

In relation to the poem's curious ending, many scholars propose that Chaucer subverts the dream vision's conventional structure in order to refute a religious framework.<sup>65</sup> They argue that Chaucer's depiction of Lady Fame, her house, and the House of Rumor should be construed as a rejection of Christian cosmology. Reflecting on Chaucer's poetic indeterminacy, Doob contends that *House of Fame* is a "parody of that finally impenetrable labyrinth in the Divine *Comedy*, the mystery of God's justice" (325). Similarly, Lisa Kiser proposes that Chaucer employs "mock-religious imagery" in

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<sup>65</sup> Claiming that the poem celebrates language's play rather than its relation to the sacred, Maureen Quilligan excludes the poem from the genre of allegory and contends that it is "an exercise in literary high jinks" that is "profoundly parodic" (247). Contrasting Chaucer's poem with other philosophical dream visions, Boitani contends that while Geoffrey's ascent with the Eagle recalls the philosophical allegories of Dante, Bernardus Silvestris, and Alan of Lille, his journey is directed toward the "decidedly secular" reception of love tidings rather than mystical insight (204). Clifford claims that Chaucer "purposefully destabilizes the dream-vision genre" (160), so as to direct the reader to focus "on the process of the text, to spot and understand its instability and leave with the concept that looking for metaphysical truths in a text is pointless" (161). Thus, Chaucer "destroyed the traditional idea that poetic authority inheres in the historic or sacred truth of the text" (Ruffolo 339).

Other theoretical models have been employed by scholars to characterize and explain Chaucer's indeterminate poetics. Sheila Delany identifies in the *House of Fame* a poetics of "skeptical fideism" (6), which she describes as "a critical and skeptical tradition, rooted in the awareness of coexistent contradictory truths and resulting in the suspension of final rational judgment" (1). Delany's assessment now receives the support of many, including Carl Martin, Lara Ruffolo, and Bernadette Vankeerbergen. In addition, Larry Sklute has identified William of Ockham as a likely philosophical source for Chaucer's insistence on our epistemological limitations and "inclination to avoid drawing conclusions" (19).

order to comment on “the basic theme of art” (34).<sup>66</sup> Like Doob, she argues that Chaucer draws “a complex analogy [...] between the workings of earthly fame and the process of Christian judgment” (Kiser 33), but that his intent is to attend to the “dreamer’s artistic—and quite nonreligious—interests” (33).

In contrast to this proposal, I believe Chaucer does not parody the cosmology of the *Comedy*, but rather draws on one of Dante’s own poetic strategies to characterize Fame’s lawless reign. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante represents the labyrinthine circuits of hell as a parody of the spheres of paradise. The reversal is most precise in Canto XXXIV, when Dante depicts Lucifer at the base of hell as a three-faced monster mocking the Christian Trinity. Chaucer’s depiction of Lady Fame develops comparably. The analogies Chaucer draws between Lady Fame’s house and Christian imagery—whether it be biblical, architectural, or theological—serves the purpose of satirizing Lady Fame’s reign. The absence of a revelatory moment of Chaucer’s poem reinforce his depiction of fame as offering no secure renown. Chaucer has seemingly turned the dream vision on its head, so that rather than lead his dreamer into an experience of celestial wisdom, he depicts Geoffrey’s descent into a confusion that is reminiscent of Babel.

My reading of the poem develops from extant arguments that Chaucer’s poem is a critique of worldly fame.<sup>67</sup> Existing scholarship argues that Chaucer indicates that signs

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<sup>66</sup> Lisa Kiser’s article includes a thorough summary of such connections as they are made by scholars (34-41). She cites articles that consider Chaucer’s use of such imagery in support of both secular and religious readings of Chaucer’s poem.

<sup>67</sup> Koonce contends: “In its simplest reduction, the theme of the *House of Fame* is the vanity of worldly fame” (5). Similarly, Boenig proposes that although the poem inverts Bede’s exegesis of the Apocalypse, the work is “a satire that is directed at those who would follow Fame as a goddess; she is elusive, deceptive, and, in the end, incapable of revealing anything important to her followers, able to give them only the most fragmented of pleasures” (277). Boenig contends that with Fame “someone unlawful is ruling” over the textual records we have and that “Chaucer’s irony is thus directed at people who worship

bear no fixed meaning in order to parody the dominion of Fame as an alternative to God's moral order. As they make their cases, these critics tend to set up a contrast between Fame's persistently indeterminate text and God's own Book which they associate with a fixed, lawful, and chartable order. In this reading, descent into the maze is a consequence of the fall. And Chaucer, so these critics argue, believes the promise of faith is the eventual passage from that maze to a position that discloses the fixed, clear, and divinely sanctioned order of meaning. But nothing in the text supports the claim that Chaucer envisioned the scope of our lives in relation to extrication from the maze's grip or God's bestowal of interpretive and epistemic mastery.

A second body of scholarship that views Chaucer as a Christian humanist opens a potential means of explaining why no such support is to be found in the text. Rather than draw on the myth of the fall, the argument within this body of scholarship proposes that Chaucer flaunts his poem's indeterminacy in order to affirm God's transcendence.<sup>68</sup> These scholars argue that Chaucer intentionally emphasizes that texts are not integral repositories of a unified truth. To attribute such integrity of meaning to signs would be to displace God idolatrously with the signs of poetry. The poem's overt irresolution and indeterminacy does not principally contribute to a critique of Fame, so much as evidence in Chaucer's thinking a mystical disposition. He aims to remain open to the transcendent. However, this scholarship also posits an eventual conversion of the maze, if only

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Fame" (269). Both Boenig and Koonce emphasize that Chaucer ridicules those who seek their salvation in Fame who offers a secular alternative to the Christian afterlife.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Rosemarie McGerr proposes that Chaucer undercut the authority of texts in order to clarify "the distance between human words and the authoritative Logos" (77). David Jeffrey construes Chaucer's emphasis on meaning's indeterminacy to motivate exploration of an alternative and "new hermeneutic horizon" (227).

following death, to a comprehensible order.<sup>69</sup> But, as noted, nothing in Chaucer's text points to such a deferred moment of revelation.

Instead, the conclusion of the poem with the epiphany of the great authority in the maze suggests an alternative and as yet unimagined motive: Chaucer's poem is designed to affirm that God is forever in excess of our understanding and encountered not outside but within the maze. Chaucer never hints that closure is simply deferred. Rather his poem suggests that closure does not befit the truth that God appears to us within the maze as "A man of gret auctorite" (2158). We can try to live, read, and write in relationship to that truth, but those efforts will not be evidenced by our laying claim to a fixed position, an overview, a mastery of the maze. The truth is a dynamic authority, the "stryng man" Geoffrey had sought first when exiting the Temple of Venus (478), a man who sets others in motion. Geoffrey's great authority is an image of the truth actively seeking to encounter us within the maze, refusing even as it does so to succumb to our naming or conceptual containment.

If Chaucer departs from the conventional closure of the dream vision, he does so by following thematic threads within models like Boethius's *Consolation* and Dante's *Comedy*. He amplifies in his own narrative those elements of other dream visions that aim to reveal the worth of fame, the nature of human finitude, the limits of philosophy, and the abidingly mysterious character of God's love. By closing the story as he does, Chaucer creates a dream vision that is entirely consistent with his theological convictions concerning fame and God's abidingly mysterious character. Finally, this mode of

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<sup>69</sup> McGerr contends Chaucer guides his readers to await a resolute reading that is "deferred beyond the realm of temporal vision" (McGerr 64). In Jeffrey's proposal, the new hermeneutic horizon that leaves readers open "to an authoritative conclusion not yet grasped by individual readings, but possibly to be anticipated by them" (227).

employing the genre allows Chaucer to make in a playful manner a very profound point: the divine truth can't be articulated in any fixed and stable manner. Geoffrey's dream vision is an anti-revelation, a declaration that yields no position or overview from which to understand truth, precisely because it discloses our finitude, the limited reach of language, and God-as-mystery. His poem is an attempt to immerse readers in a "preve by experience" of the complexity of our maze-like situation.

**Chapter Four:**  
**Michael Ondaatje's Labyrinth of Love: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid***

**I.A Beginning with an Overview**

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Michael Ondaatje immerses his readers in a labyrinthine piece of literature. In one poem, Ondaatje writes: "Here then is a maze to begin, be in" (20). Current scholarship reflects two modes of making a passage through the maze of the book. Critics part ways concerning whether the book remains a site of abiding mystery or progressively gives way to interpretive mastery. One group stresses that the book is an impenetrable maze. Another group of critics proposes that the collection eventually concedes readers access to an ordered structure. The scholarship duplicates a division in the text itself. *The Collected Works* plays both *with* and *against* a conventional narrative formula. Whether the maze of *The Collected Works* permits readers to master its passages is a recurrent topic in the scholarship precisely because Ondaatje treats self-reflexively the issues of narrative and interpretive closure. Thus, the passages of the book do not form a maze that fits either of the two categories into which scholars have tried to place it. Ondaatje's book in fact undermines the distinction between a literary maze that can be mastered and another that leaves us always in passage from one reading to another. My purpose is to show that Ondaatje's book promotes the two approaches, complicates their distinction, and does so in order to implicate his readers in the world he depicts.

After laying out each way scholars have approached the book's maze, I examine a set of characters who serve as models of those possible responses. In light of Lucien Dällenbach's contention that authors can give readers self-reflexive "instructions or

orders for decoding,” I examine Ondaatje’s depiction of the lawmen, the characters who function as narrators, and Billy the Kid (436). These characters self-reflexively represent efforts either to master the text with a conclusive reading or to range through it without ever moving toward a fixed position. Ondaatje uses his characters to represent and characterize the ways readers can approach the maze of his book. In particular, these models establish analogies between reading practices and the frequently violent and sexually charged passages that the lawmen, Billy’s friends, and the legendary outlaw make through the Wild West. In relation to the events of the story, Ondaatje entraps his readers in and comments on reading practices that are either directed toward interpretive mastery or make of the divergent passages a site of perpetual diversion.

Finally, however, Ondaatje undermines the distinction between the varied models presented to his readers. None is established as the unambiguously authoritative guide. Instead, Ondaatje deconstructs the distinction between the drive for mastery, modeled by the lawmen and biographers, and Billy’s mysterious and errant wandering. Erotic imagery forms a thematic intersection between the two modeled experiences of the maze. A series of erotic scenes repeatedly correlate the legal and biographic manhunts with a lover’s pursuit of a beloved. Like lovers, the lawmen and narrators strive passionately to overcome the obstacles that lie between them and Billy. The imagery of erotic union bears conflicting and dual connotations. Whenever Billy is embraced, whether by the law, by a narrator, or one of his lovers, that embrace is associated both with finding one’s way and with immersion in a mysterious maze. Approached from one direction, erotic union points symbolically to a full-probing and mastery of the labyrinth—the lawmen and biographers get their man. From an alternative approach, however, the book’s



imagery of ecstatic love suggests an experience of labyrinthine disorientation and an inability to place oneself. Billy and those pursuing him are all lost in the dark of the maze. The culmination of the lover's pursuit—because it connotes both conquest and ecstatic dislocation—deconstructs the opposition of the mastered and mysterious maze in *The Collected Works*.

This erotic imagery not only serves as the narrative hinge with which Ondaatje deconstructs the distinction of his models. The imagery of erotic love functions as a self-reflexive commentary on the maze of the book and modes of moving through it. Whether readers attempt to master the book or wander freely through its mysterious passages, the erotic imagery confers meaning on those interpretive courses. By means of these models and the erotic imagery, Ondaatje attempts to position his readers—no matter how they read—as if in a labyrinth of love. Ondaatje's various models implicate diverse reading practices in the erotic framework of the story. The readers' passages through the book are analogous to the drives for power and delight modeled by the lawmen, the narrators, and Billy.

## **II.A First Approach: An Impenetrable and Inextricable Maze**

In the first of two principle readings, *The Collected Works* form a maze that never allows readers to master its puzzling passages. Structurally, the passageways of this maze are irrepressibly multiple. No single way through them is to be found. Their structure cannot be determined in relation to any single entrance, center, or exit. Nor does any comprehensive or final overview of the whole exist. Instead, the book opens to its readers what Roland Barthes called a text, “a multi-dimensional space in which are

married and contested several writings” (“The Death of the Author” 876). In effect, in this reading, *The Collected Works* is not a structurally unified maze, so much as what Barthes describes elsewhere as “an overcrossing” (“From Work to Text” 879). Through such a text, a reader can take a number of divergent routes, but cannot ever subordinate the enigmatic structure to interpretive mastery.

In particular, the book lacks any unified, narrative order.<sup>70</sup> Ondaatje gathers together a set of historical documents, some of which he has redacted, as well as a set of poems presented as if they had been composed by characters of the story. The assembled documents and the assorted poems open to readers a complex set of passages. It is not that the narrative line leading from beginning to end is merely complex, but that the varied documents replace a linear structure with a disjunctive collection. When approaching the book this way, none of the documents or poems is finally privileged as a determinate origin or conclusion. Traversing the labyrinth of the assembled documents, the reader discovers that the book is not fixed in form. Rather, it lacks a determinate center, progresses non-linearly, and obstructs final comprehension.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, this reading emphasizes that *The Collected Works* weaves together the stories of several characters and Michael Ondaatje’s own life as well. The profiles of Pat Garrett, Tom O’Folliard, Angela Dickinson, Sallie and John Chisum, and John

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<sup>70</sup> Kamboureli argues that the text “does not amount to a traditional narrative” (119). He writes that Ondaatje “is not interested, as his ludic use of documents indicates, in narrative as a sequence of actions” (Kamboureli 118).

<sup>71</sup> When Pat Garrett wrote *The Authentic Life of Billy, The Kid*, he promised to give his readers a “true history,” one he is incited to write “by an impulse to correct the thousand false statements which have appeared in the public newspapers and in yellow-covered, cheap novels” (3). However, he also acknowledged that the Kid’s “career was erratic, and it is impossible to follow his adventures consecutively” (22). It is this latter attitude that is exhibited by readers who find in Ondaatje’s book a labyrinth that will not be subordinated to a linear and conclusive analysis.

Livingstone open alternative routes through the book. They do not simply form secondary corridors radiating off from a primary tale featuring Billy as protagonist. Neither Billy's life nor his poems furnish readers a single, narrative thread with which to unify the book. No clear timeline determines either the order of the events or the order in which they are represented. At certain points, the book loops back to scenes already introduced to retell them in part or in whole, and sometimes with only the slightest alterations.<sup>72</sup> These repetitions, like the recurrent forms of a labyrinthine path, thwart those who would read straight through the book. Instead, through the collection we witness "thinking going its own way" (72). Moreover, readers cannot even be sure when individual objects in the collection were produced. The varied documents are "like light wet glasses drifting on polished wood" (72). Their turns are sudden. Some segments come to abrupt ends. No single systematic overview integrates the varied courses taken.

Similarly, the multiple genres that contribute to *The Collected Works* likens the book to a multicursal maze. *The Collected Works* gathers within its pages an invented interview drawn from *The Texas Star*, a redaction of two comic book legends, a series of monologues delivered by diverse figures, scattered photos, and what is apparently a collection of Billy's poems. In his book on Ondaatje's work, Douglas Barbour points out that not unlike Billy or the work's Canadian author in their crossing of national borders, this text "continually crosses genre borders" (40). By crossing the borders of genre, *The Collected Works* manifestly comprises a diverse set of routes for its readers.

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<sup>72</sup> The story of Billy's initial capture by Garrett is presented twice, once on page 22 more or less in full, then again in part on page 48. Well before the death scene's more elaborate development at the end of the book, Billy recalls a few details of the night he was killed as if from "on the roof looking" (46). That poem repeats a single sentence twice as if Billy were stuck thinking over and over again what he needed to know to get out. Other selections break with the chronology of events by focusing on Billy's entombed body well before getting to his death as when Ondaatje has to "think through / the wave of ants on him" (40).

In “The Law of Genre,” Jacques Derrida’s reading of Maurice Blanchot’s *La Folie du jour* suggests how a book without genre necessitates a labyrinthine reading. The narrator of Blanchot’s work is pressed by a pair of investigators to give a full account of his life experience. The questioners expect the narrator to “know how to piece together a story” and “render justice unto the law” with “his faithful account of events” (222).

Derrida strives to articulate how the narrator’s response does not conform to his questioners’ insistent demands. He claims the narrator eludes the conceptual framework informing the interrogation by never offering them the kind of story they want.

To clarify what kind of story the narrator does tell, Derrida assumes a position as critic that is analogous to the narrator’s own. He proposes that the law of genre presses him for a full and accurate account of the narrator’s response to his interrogators. Just as the narrator avoided giving an account of his experience, so Derrida aspires to avoid giving a totalizing account of the text. Derrida refuses to submit the narrator’s responses in a reductive and forced manner to the framework that the narrator subverts. In his response to this challenge, Derrida proposes that the narrator’s response to his questioners is a kind of “inexhaustible writing” (226) that cannot be given an “edge or boundary” (227). Instead, the narrator’s response, and Derrida’s as well, is a kind of writing “that can only turn in circles in an unarrestable [...] and insatiably recurring manner” (224).

Like Blanchot’s book, Ondaatje’s collection of works does not fit into a neat generic category. The generic heterogeneity makes impossible the use of genre as a totalizing, interpretive map for the book. Typically, genre can serve the reader as a kind of overview from which to survey a book’s varied passages. To fit a book within a single

genre would be to extricate oneself from the maze of its passages. The principles defining the genre indicate what routes are true to its various cases. By doing so, genre fixes limits for a book's reading. *The Collected Works* resists reduction of its possible readings to any single set of readings as determined by a unified, generic category. It is no more a long poem than it is a novel, or biography, or photo album. Thus, readers do not find in genre an exit from the maze by which they might hope to master interpretively its passages. As one reads *The Collected Works*, one turns from genre to genre and back again, without coming to any final overarching and terminating definition of the book.

If the book lacks a generic boundary, it also offers no individual or sure narrator as guide. Various figures assume this role. An empty square covers half of the book's first page, and underneath that square, a lengthy caption indicates that this is a frame for a photo. The caption reads:

I send you a picture of Billy made with the Perry shutter as quick as it can be worked — Pyro and soda developer. I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire [...] I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod—please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion.”

This ‘I’ will not remain in place, but is “in motion” through the text as various figures such as Michael Ondaatje, Miss Sallie Chisum, Billy's rumored love Paulita Maxwell, and the lawman John Poe recount events from his life. The various narrators are clearly not working with one cohesive map that charts the single truth of Billy's life and death.

Mounted up, they are “moving across the world on horses” no less than Billy is (11). The outlaw is not observed from a totalizing, overhead position. Neither his course nor the position of any of the narrator’s can be plotted cartographically in relation to an origin, center, or final destination. Their various perspectives are at times in contestation with one another. Thus, the narrators diverge from one another in the accounts they give, and the divergent paths they open make the book a site of interpretive choice. Readers can enter the book at diverse points, return to places already passed through, or skip ahead to a section by choice. This meandering reading does not violate a planned or enforceable structure.

Approached in this way, the book opens flexible reading courses that lack some final, conclusive, and integrating logic. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari draw a distinction, by now well-known, between rhizomatic and arborescent models. They explain that “the rhizome connects any point to any other point [...] It is composed not of units but of dimensions or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows” (21). In contrast, an arborescent construction “plots a point, fixes an order” (7). The rhizome avoids this determined arrangement and the linearity of the arborescent system by dispelling with questions of origin and end. In their place, we find plateaus which are “always in the middle” (21) and lacking coordinates proper to the cartographically mastered landscape. *The Collected Works* is itself a mysterious literary landscape of such plateaus. When readers pick up the book, they are dropped into the middle of a maze-like landscape, immersed in a structure that has no fixed reference points.

Deleuze and Guattari write: “The rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and ...and...and’” (25). A reading that takes seriously the rhizomatic tangles of *The Collected Works*, never finally identifies the narrator, the genre, or Billy. It never imposes the suggestion of full-presence with the verb *is*, but instead continually insists upon the conjunction, by moving along vine-like chains of *and*. And thereby, readers enter into the movement of the text, “a river you could get lost in,” so as *to be* only in passage from one reading to another (26).

When the book is read in this way, the book’s structure remains enigmatic and multiple. At the outset of “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida writes,

“A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception” (63).

As such a text, *The Collected Works* is persistently impenetrable. No interpretive route leads toward a comprehensive or final analysis. The choice to read one way or another does not lead toward a point when all the possible routes will have been explored. Rather a reader can go on from one possibility to another, without ever coming to a point that could necessarily close off or terminate the process.

## **II.B Billy the Kid Cutting an Uncharted Course**

Ondaatje makes of Billy the Kid's errant wandering a model promoting a reading practice that never finds direction in relation to a single, fixed interpretive framework. Billy takes refuge in the Wild West and in legend. He makes of each a labyrinthine site of abiding mystery. Hidden in the desert from the lawmen and in legend from his biographers, Billy avoids the controlling grasp of those who pursue him. In effect, Billy wanders in a site that neither the law nor the truth can chart. In relation to his wandering, Ondaatje depicts a reader's power to choose an interpretive course beyond the reach of a governing principle. Exercising their power to read diversely, readers can delight in the collected works as they make perpetually divergent passages through them.

Within the collected works, Billy is a transient, ceaselessly wandering from place to place and from one identity to another. He has a multiplicity of identities: he is "a bloodthirsty ogre" (52), and a poet (64), and the hero of a comic book (99), as well as a dead man (6 & 104). He is Billy the Kid, William Bonney, and William Antrim, if we recall that he had for a period taken his stepfather's surname. At one point, Billy notes that he "could only be arrested if they had proof, definite proof, not just stories" (81). In the absence of anything more than stories, Billy remains in motion. His free ranging passage through the legendary Wild West model for an interpretive practice that never comes to rest. Just as Billy makes of the Wild West an abidingly mysterious maze, so readers move through the book without holding or seeking a systematic overview of the book. No interpretive rule constrains them as they cut passages through the book.

Insofar as the book is centered on the outlaw Billy the Kid, that center is itself a complicated enigma. If Garrett and the other narrators aspire to speak truly of the Kid,



they find in Billy an enigma resistant to mastery. In one prose section, it is in fact the lawman Pat Garrett who narrates Billy's biography. Despite his detective-like observation, the lawman struggles to understand William Bonney. Garrett writes: "You could never tell how he meant a phrase, whether he was serious or joking. From his eyes you could tell nothing at all." (43). Similarly, Garrett concedes that it "was impossible to study the relationship he had with the large tall Angie" (43). The "black clothes" adorning the Kid not only indicate his stance against the law, but also that he is enshrouded in mystery (43).

When Billy serves as the reader's guide, the book suggests that this literary maze cannot be mastered by exiting to a fixed identity that precedes its textual presentation. The reader wanders in the knotted circuits of the Kid's identities.<sup>73</sup> No key allows us to unlock with finality *The Collected Works* and make some historically or ontologically *real* William Bonney accessible. There is no beginning and no outside to which the readers can return. Jones explains that the reader's passage is "entrance not into a teleological narrative structure that terminates in a single exit, but through and into textual narrative uncertainties" (71-72). Those "narrative uncertainties" make of the book a labyrinth in which Billy and readers can wander without ever acquiring a fixed position. Both Billy and the diverse materials fail to coalesce in a unified and coherent whole, some single image of Billy the Kid, some literary work complete and entire, some true account. In this reading, the book's language is a maze of signs that like a borderless

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<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Kathleen Bethell proposes that Ondaatje's works "emphasize the futility of achieving a faithful rendering of historical persons or events" (73). She insists that "[r]eading and rereading Billy is the point [...], whereas finding a single narrative of his life and times is not" (Bethell 73).

labyrinth opens repeatedly to other corridors of signs.<sup>74</sup> Ondaatje explicitly reminds his audience of “the picture books and [...] the films” (86). He emphasizes that other stories have been told, that one can move from these collected works to still other works without reaching an end or an organizing view of the whole.<sup>75</sup>

In effect, Billy serves Ondaatje as a self-reflexive model urging readers to experience the book as an enduringly mysterious maze. Just as Billy transgresses the law while choosing his course through the Wild West, so readers may choose to move through *The Collected Works* in unexpected and unanticipated directions. The book celebrates the freedom with which Billy makes his passage through the West and encourages readers to relish a comparable lack of restraint. Just as nothing constrains the meandering outlaw, readers can enjoy the book’s open and flexible form by choosing courses through the book that lack any single interpretive principle.

However, even as Ondaatje prompts his audience to assume such a reading practice, he associates free-ranged reading with the deranged movements of a sociopath. Ondaatje’s model of this reading practice is a “man with floating barracuda in the brain” (38), a man with a “mind blasted” by the wind (42). He is “sun drugged” like the horses

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<sup>74</sup> Kamboureli writes that “the narrative figure emerging from this collection has no precise origin, or, to put it another way, has no origin other than in language” (117). That language, Kamboureli notes, by quoting Barbara Hernstein Smith “does not [...] ‘consis[t] of sets of discrete signs which, in some way, *correspond to* (depict, encode, denote, refer to, and so forth) sets of discrete and specific ideas, objects, or events” (119/225). With his book, Ondaatje leads his reader to view Billy’s identity from a perspective advanced by Barthes in which “life merely imitates the book, and this book itself is but a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely postponed” (“The Death of the Author” 877).

<sup>75</sup> In various poems, readers watch as both Billy’s body and mind come undone in the dry heat of the desert. Neither the mind, nor the body, nor anything else holds Billy together through time or at any given moment. Bethell writes that “identity loses diachronic stability with each historical, critical, or reminiscently interpretive reading” (70). This diachronic dissolution of the subject is matched by synchronic incoherence. Van Wart writes that “the poem dramatizes the disintegration of a psyche unable to bring its disparate parts into harmony” (26). Just as Billy comes undone in the book, so many readers discover that nothing can hold together the corpus of the collected works.

(72). Thus, Billy comes to the Wild West “in the same way assassins / come to chaos neutral” as Ondaatje suggests of Garrett (47). Thus, Billy models a mode of reading that is at once celebrated for its freedom from all restraint, and also associated with a violent and madly divergent course. In this way, Ondaatje implicates those readers who make of the book an abidingly mysterious maze in a practice of reading associated with irrationality, destructive force, as much as with a freedom that eludes restraint.

### **III.A Second Approach: *The Collected Works* as a Maze to Be Mastered**

Treading a maze often involves a shift in experience from disorientation to comprehension. The passages of such mazes at first seem chaotic and impenetrable. Slowly, the enigmatic structure can reveal a hidden order. The maze-walker may arrive at the maze’s exit or center. These are regularly organizing points within mazes because they often stand as a labyrinthine path’s destination. As a result, arrival at these points may imply a comprehensive exploration of the maze. That extensive exploration makes it possible to formulate a systematic understanding of the complex structure. Systematizing the passageways cartographically reveals that the early experience of disorder was only apparently true. The wayfarer concludes that the maze is in fact a product of ingenious design. Doob proposes that such a “perspective-mediated conversion from disorder to order [...] from confusion to admiration” is a regular feature of “the normal maze experience” (52). In an alternative reading of *The Collected Works* to that proposed above, the book is just such a convertible maze. The reader probes the book and makes an experiential passage from interpretive obstruction to the discovery of a meaningful order.

Narrative is a prevailing thread that readers use to master a textual maze, and it is commonly employed by readers of *The Collected Works*. Some readers progressively uncover a linear and complete storyline despite the book's overt fragmentation in form. Critical readings of *The Collected Works* are often made in relation to conventional narrative. Commenting on Ondaatje's book, Judith Owens proposes that although the story unfolds "fitfully [it ultimately] moves rapidly and fairly straightforwardly to its conclusion in Billy's death" (119). Similarly, Perry Nodelman claims for himself the capacity to describe how Billy sees the world as "finally revealed after all the works are considered, and the connections between them understood" (69). Alice Van Wart suggests that the various parts of the book come "to coalesce" in a "final vision of the legendary hero" (20). Such commentary suggests that the labyrinthine passages of *The Collected Works* will finally concede to readers a mastery of the text.

Peter Brooks defines plot itself in relation to an "interpretive structuring operation" by which readers thread a book with a storyline (19). Brooks contends that when reading for the plot, readers order a book having assumed that it is a narrative in which "the meanings are developed over temporal succession in suspense of final predication" (Brooks 19). Like the treading of a labyrinth, such reading is a quest for an order that is at first hidden. Drawing on Roland Barthes, Brooks explains that "what animates us as readers of narrative is *la passion du sens*, which I would want to translate as both the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle" (18). Like the exit from a labyrinth, a story's end functions in this interpretive paradigm as a point in

relation to which all that came before may be ordered. To arrive at the narrative's end is to discover the meaning of what came before. By this discovery the book is converted from impenetrable mystery to mastered maze.<sup>76</sup>

Taking Billy's life as its focus, the story discovered in *The Collected Works* leads in a relatively straightforward manner to a definitive ending. Billy flees the law, is captured and sentenced to death, escapes from prison, and is then re-taken and killed by Pat Garrett. By exposing this plot line, readers create a thread with which they can make their way through the book. Although the progress of the story is momentarily interrupted by Billy's escape, his execution at the hands of Garrett gives the narrative a point of closure. After arriving at that point, the reader may look back through the text's passages and order each segment retrospectively in relation to Billy's eventual death. With Billy's death, the structure of the story proves circular. The outlaw is restored, albeit as a dead man, to the social order from which he had initially departed. Billy is brought back to justice by the sheriff who represents law and order.

Treating Billy's death as a point of narrative closure makes it possible for readers to see in the disorienting passages of the book a labyrinth of design. For those who have discovered the circular storyline, every section of the book finally contributes to the telling of one story: Billy's flight from and capture by the law. The photos of Billy's acquaintances and the stories focused on their lives are sorted into this single narrative

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<sup>76</sup> J. Hillis Miller explains that we treat the end of the story as "the retrospective revelation of the law of the whole. That law is an underlying 'truth' that ties all together in an inevitable sequence [...]" (233). Frank Kermode attributed the same kind of interpretive utility to a story's end. In his account, the end of a story not only reveals the sequence, but directs the reader prior to its acquisition. To confer meaning and intelligibility on a sequence of events Kermode contends that we "project ourselves [...] past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). This reading process involves a kind of anticipatory retrospection. Readers look forward to a moment when they will be able to look back and make sense of what preceded the close of the story.

structure. Billy's evasive wandering is now fitted intelligibly into the linear maze governed finally by the law. His peregrinations through that maze are surveyed as if from above in relation to this true story of Billy's life and death. Looking down from the totalizing overview, the maze's passages do not offer Billy any refuge from discovery and arrest. Rather, the linear maze of conventional narrative assures that Billy's wandering will be brought to its end. When each section is fitted into the whole, the reader's transition from disorientation toward recognition of the design is complete.

Reading the book for this coherent narrative transforms the maze of Ondaatje's book from a multicursal structure into a unicursal one. All passages lead to the close of the narrative in Billy's death. Getting to the end of the story repositions the reader vis-à-vis the maze. It is as if readers stand at the story's exit, having mastered its varied passages and found their way into what was its secret order. Their interpretive mastery of the book's passages allows them to map its various literary corridors. They reposition the diverse selections of the book within the storyline they had not at first recognized. Subordinated to the single narrative, no sections of the book lead off in directions that are not mapped in relation to Billy's story and his eventual death.

This reading differs from that presented above in two significant ways. First, it draws forth a less obvious characterization of the book's structure. This approach contends that a systematic order does in fact underlie and unify its various passages. That order may be difficult to discern, but it exists to be recognized. Secondly, this systematic order makes possible a particular experience of the reading process. When the various impediments to comprehension are not experienced as persistent obstructions, the process of reading *The Collected Works* affirms the cognitive powers of a reader. A truly probing

reader may discover a hidden compositional order in the book and triumph over the maze. That discovery incites admiration for the artistry of the book and flatters the reader as a master of the complexity.

Ondaatje writes into the story two models of those who pursue a mastery of the maze-like passages of *The Collected Works*. Both the lawmen and the narrators are figures in the story who find their way through and gain control over certain labyrinthine challenges. First, the lawmen hunt down the outlaws as if each outlaw were the Minotaur in the labyrinthine geography of the Wild West. Similarly, the various narrators struggle to probe the labyrinth of legend and discover the truth. Both make quests along obstructed and circuitous paths. Both do so with the hope of acquiring a masterful grasp of the labyrinths through which they pass. As they do so, Ondaatje presents his readers with images of a potential approach they can take to his book.

A single scene can help illuminate how the lawmen and the narrators reflect a reader's aspiration and attempts to master the book's passages. The particular selection of the book recounts how Charlie Bowdre, one of Billy's close friends, is killed by Garrett. Bowdre's final moments have a linear, circuitous, and circular form. In the scene, Bowdre stumbles from a house into Garrett's arms. At the start of the scene, Charlie is already shot. Billy props him in the doorway and encourages him to "get one" before dying (22). Describing Charlie's passage to Garrett from the vantage point of Billy, Ondaatje writes:

He stood there weaving, not moving. Then began to walk in a perfect, incredible straight line out of the door towards Pat and the others at the ridge of the arroyo about twenty yards away. [...] Moving sideways at

times but always always in a straight line. Dead on Garrett. [...] went straight towards Garrett. The others had ducked down, but not Garrett who just stood there and I didn't shoot again. Charlie he knew was already dead now, had to go somewhere, do something, to get his mind off the pain. Charlie went straight, now closer to them [...] The blood trail he left straight as a knife cut. Getting there getting there. Charlie getting to the arroyo, pitching into Garrett's arms, slobbering his stomach on Garrett's gun belt. Hello Charlie, said Pat quietly. (22)

Charlie's course from the house to Garrett is linear. Despite slight diversions, Charlie's path holds to a line so *straight* that Billy repeats this word four times. The line Charlie walks loops from beginning to end. The origin and end of his path—the doorway and the arms of the lawmen—are both fixed points associated with the stillness of death.

Initially, Charlie stands in the door still like a dead man, “not moving” (22). The course he cuts is “dead on” Garrett (22). Before he sets foot out the door, Charlie's route is determined by its end: Pat Garrett, who enforces the law and executes Charlie. All of Charlie's steps are plotted on the line running between these two fixed points of stillness, so that even as he moved, he “was already dead” (22). Charlie's death scene plays out before the eyes of those with a masterly overview. Garrett, a representative of the law, surveys Charlie's passage and sees the whole of it. He watches from the end of Charlie's path and arrests his passage forward.

Similarly, Billy models a position of mastery as he recounts Charlie's death. Billy represents his friend's death as a sequence of events that is as linear as the stretch of ground walked by Charlie. If his language is at turns repetitive and halting, any delays



obstructing a reader's progress to the story's end are only temporary. In addition, Billy's repetitive emphasis on stillness and death is key to identifying Charlie's setting off point with the point to which he marches. Thus, his language is essential to understanding Charlie's path as a labyrinthine circuit. When he tells the story this way, Billy assumes for himself a cognitive mastery of the events. He tells the story from an omniscient and God-like perspective. His masterful recounting of Charlie's death is analogous to the law's apprehension of the outlaw. He masters Charlie cognitively in his biographical sketch just as the lawmen do physically in their killing of him. In fact, he manifests his omniscience by relating the perspective of the law. As if in Garrett's mind, Billy records that the sheriff knew Charlie was already dead when setting off from the house.

Both the lawmen and Billy as narrator represent within the story one way readers might approach the book itself. These characters model the desire for and acquisition of a totalizing position of control. By modeling mastery, these characters can be taken by readers as guides concerning how to read the book. Just as the lawmen and Billy master Charlie and his story, we can read with the intention of mastering the complexities of the book.

### **III.B The Lawmen as Masters of the Wild West**

As in the scene of Charlie's death, the lawmen through the book are models of those who seek a kind of mastery over the maze of *The Collected Works*. Pat Garrett hunts Billy as if he were a monster hidden in an expansive, labyrinthine lair. In the conventional Western, lawmen work to ensure passage toward the taming of the national frontier. Billy explains that Garrett was made sheriff because he and his compatriots

“were bad for progress in New Mexico” (7). Much of the story suggests that both the land and the outlaw are eventually tamed. The vast landscape and the roaming outlaw seem to be dominated by the purposes of national expansion. At the start of the story, the many possible paths through the West allow Billy to hide from the law. The narrative of progress directing the lawmen in their hunt aims at the conversion of that mysterious landscape. Western expansion is intended to transform the land into a site subordinated to their control. The narrative itself is shaped as linear passage, obstructed at times by obstacles, but directed toward the law’s governance and exploitation of the West.

This narrative of progress finds a symbolic counterpart in the labyrinthine railroad tracks. Those tracks, which crisscross the open landscape, are part of the social system of law and order. Just as Justus Nieland notes in relation to Hollywood Westerns, the chugging wheels of the locomotive are in Ondaatje’s book “shorthand for historical progress and Western expansion” (171).<sup>77</sup> The lawmen both protect and employ the trains in safeguarding progress. They use their long linear tracks to facilitate the taming of the West. When Charlie Bowdre dies, the blood trail he leaves behind him is straight like railroad tracks. Like a locomotive cruising to the depot, Charlie is “[g]etting there getting there” (22). Similarly, after initially capturing Billy, Garrett carts the Kid “straight to the nearest railroad depot” (79). That direct trip to the depot is one segment of the narrative line that brings Billy’s passage to its end. At the depot, Billy explains, they waited “one night for the train that would take us to Mesilla where they would hold the trial” (79). The train’s tracks might constitute a complicated network. However, in the case of the outlaw, the lawmen make that network the direct line along which Billy is

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<sup>77</sup> Nieland makes this remark in his analysis of Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*. That film, like Ondaatje’s book, features a protagonist who is a dead man walking in an exploration of the conventions contributing to the representation of the American westward drive.

brought back to justice. Like the single night spent at the depot, any bends in the track are finally only temporary diversions. They give way to a linear order, determined by points of departure and destinations congruent with and overseen by the law.

The lawmen seek and acquire a systematic control of the maze-like West. As a result, the law functions as a totalizing principle. Agents of the law like Garrett subordinate all things to it. Nothing lies beyond the purview of the law. The law furnishes a cartographic overview of Billy's course. From that overview, the law watches over the whole of the desert through which Billy makes his flight. Even his evasive wandering is plotted in relation to his true home in the social order. The law's overview proves efficacious when Billy's flight comes to its end. He is captured and killed by Garrett and effectively brought back to justice.

When the story closes, the outlaw's transgression is shown to have only been a temporary departure from the established order. In fact, viewed retrospectively from the point of his capture, his flight from the law is simply the route by which he would eventually find his way back. The law is the point from which Billy's flight sets off and the point at which it comes to an end. His story has its origin and end in the overarching principle of justice. No matter how widely the outlaw wanders, he never exits the labyrinth formed in relation to the social order of Western expansion.

Indeed, although Billy is sought by the government as an outlaw obstructing the building of a peaceful social order in the West, he did not ride in opposition to the colonization of an American frontier. His passage west and life there were very much a reflection of the U.S. government's drive to realize its colonial ambitions. He was brought to New Mexico by his mother and stepfather as they migrated with the mining

camps. Later, Billy lived off the established ranching industry by rustling cattle. It was only after the Lincoln County War that the government's hunt for Billy gained steam. In that war, Billy had sided with his ranching friends, John Chisum and John Tunstall, in a battle with other ranchers who had the law on their side.

In the book itself, few details prompt the reader to remember that “Anglo-Americans had to contend with two peoples in particular before they could establish their hegemony in the region” (Billington 33).<sup>78</sup> Native Americans receive no direct mention in the story. The comic book legend that Ondaatje includes in the book presents Billy, a “Yanqui,” as the man chosen by a Spanish princess to reign over a “wild kingdom” (100). Before being chosen, Billy has to fight it out with a “massive brute named Toro Cuneo” (99). In the midst of the fight, as Billy proves himself an American superhero, he calls his Mexican challenger an “animal” (101). By including the comic, Ondaatje recalls how demonizing story-telling has been utilized to reinforce American imperialism. It is only when reading of Boot Hill cemetery that we are informed that some buried there had been “pushed under trains” and made to suffer “a popular / and overlooked form of murder in the West” (9). Indeed, the engines of U.S. progress had overrun many indigenous peoples beginning just before Billy started his career there.

While Ondaatje makes only minimal reference to the history of colonization, he does represent the position that the lawmen seek and finally acquire as one of systematic dominance. Although the lawmen chase Billy across the desert, they are repeatedly

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<sup>78</sup> The existing post-colonial assessments of *The Collected Works* do not examine Ondaatje's representation of the outlaw's life in relation to either the indigenous or Mexican populations that had an earlier claim to the West. Instead, they examine the post-colonial appropriation of an American legend by a Canadian author. Kathleen Bethell notes “a postcolonial presence [...] hinted at in the violently interrupted teatime of the poem” (76). Wolfgang Hochbruck reflects on the “post-colonial Canadian imaginative capacity to give new validity to the worn-out legend of Billy the Kid” (460).

associated with a position of power. When they bring Billy to the judge, their authority seems to be doubly affirmed. In the sentencing process, the judge links secular law to the religious context of divine judgment and mercy. As if in the courtroom, we sit rapt, as Judge Bristol reads out:

It is the order of the court that you  
be taken to Lincoln and confined to  
jail until May 13<sup>th</sup> and that on that  
day between the hours of sunrise and  
noon you be hanged on the gallows  
until you are dead dead dead

And may God have mercy on your soul (80).

The judge sits at the bench as a representative of secular law, but he speaks in anticipation of Billy's Final Judgment. By doing so, the judge aligns the law's survey of the land to God's own overview. The judge's invocation of God echoes other voices that naturalized the secular narrative of the American westward drive. Most notable among these voices is John O' Sullivan's. O'Sullivan first wrote of the nation's "manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (Zinn 151). The judge condemns Billy not for murder but for having obstructed the course of progress. Billy is in the way of the providentially sanctioned push west. In such a framework, to break the law as Billy does is to violate a plan that is finally cosmic in scope. Thus, the judge's affiliation of secular and divine judgment reinforces the law's status as a principle of mastery.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode links his analysis of plot, reading, and a story's ending to an apocalyptic imagination. He draws an analogy between the ordering of a narrative in relation to its conclusion and the ordering of time in relation to an apocalyptic end. In both cases, he explains that it is "by the provision of an end" that we "make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle" (17). The judge models the hope for this totalizing perspective and this practice of acquiring it. He makes his judgment in anticipation of God's own. When the judge draws together secular and divine law, Billy is viewed not only as an outlaw, but also as a religious exile. As the judge sees it, the outlaw Kid is in fact an exile from God. The judge suggests that the narrative of national progress is a minor plot in the linear narrative of salvation history. On the gallows, the exile-outlaw will be brought back home to justice as ordained by men and by God.

Later, just after Billy has been shot, we find Garret "NOW dead centre in the square" (94). The square itself recalls other boxes in the story, and especially several that connote containment by the law and death. As a hobby, Garrett stuffed birds that he had "sent to him frozen in boxes" (88). The link between this hobby and his work solidifies when we read that after killing Charlie he "ordered a box" (79). His position in the square affords him an epistemic overview of the place Billy had attempted to make a hideout. Everything can be determined in relation to the fixed position he holds. He takes this post while at rest in that eternal NOW anticipated by the judge. Stationed there and overseeing all else, he looks down as if he were in fact dead and now observing things with a God's-eye view.

Like lawmen, readers can mount up and follow the Kid. We pursue him along the route running to his eventual sentencing and then on to his execution. The elusive figure is likely to give readers the slip at least once. But if we choose to ride with Garrett and the law, Billy eventually will be caught and his story brought to its end in his death. The various texts found in *The Collected Works* can be approached as if one were to find in them a linear and closed maze-like passage. In this reading, the varied turns of the text ultimately give way to a determinate order. The various obstructions to closure, such as the many disjunctive and non-linear elements in the text, ultimately function like the straight tracks on which Billy is brought back to justice. They may frequently delay our comprehension, but they also make possible our passage toward it. In the end, after acquiring the law's totalizing perspective, the reader acquires a position analogous to Garrett's own and can survey *The Collected Works* from a masterful position.

By means of his characterization of the lawmen, Ondaatje suggests that a reader's passage to interpretive mastery unfolds as a drive for power and control. In relation to Garrett's acquisition of an overview of the West, Ondaatje indicates how claims to totalizing control can be ideologically reinforced and destructive in their exercise. Insistence on a fixed reading of the book may be analogous to Garrett's repressive enforcement of the law. In addition, Ondaatje suggests that the position Garrett seeks is itself deadly. Garrett not only destroys Billy, but his position also boxes him in and leaves him dead still. The analogy is instructive: the foreclosure of possibilities and resistance to alternatives can be self-destructive. The reader's drive for mastery of the book's maze appears to be a hazardous form of self-entrapment.

### III.C The Narrators Mastering Billy's Biography

The narrators of Ondaatje's book serve as a second model of a reader's drive for interpretive mastery. Their efforts to tell the truth about Billy after his death are comparable to the efforts of the lawmen to capture him in life. In *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje does not record the events of Billy's life and death in a linear and closed narrative so much as represent the efforts of others to make this record. In many of the book's assorted stories, Ondaatje shows his readers diverse attempts of various narrators to disclose the truth about Billy the Kid. Although their recollections are partial and incongruous, they are the fruit of a desire to create a conclusive biography. They aim to draw Billy out from his hideout in mystery and to master his story. To create that biography the narrators shape Billy's life in ways that indicate their hope of probing the legends and acquiring an historical overview. Their epistemological quest for the truth models a reading practice set on acquiring an interpretive mastery of Billy's story.

Several books make the writing of a biography a focus of the plot.<sup>79</sup> In these stories, the quest of the character functioning as biographer is often structured in a labyrinthine manner. Frequently, the search for the true life story is compared explicitly to finding one's way through a maze. At the start of their search, the biographers confront an enigma that seems impenetrable. Although the truth may be obscure, the biographer presumes passage toward certainty is nevertheless possible. His or her

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<sup>79</sup> These books include Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Marguerite Duras's *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*, Paul Auster's *Leviathan*, Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*, and A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*. Six years after writing *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje centered the story of *Coming Through Slaughter* on a comparable attempt to piece together a true biography. In that later work, an early jazz musician named Buddy Bolden is the focus of a friend's biographical investigations. Not all of the stories in these books feature fictional authors writing conventional biographies. But they do represent the attempts of one or more characters to discover and recount the events of another's life.



probing quest from mystery to cognitive mastery involves overcoming a series of obstructions that initially make the truth inaccessible. The search unfolds as a partial and progressive disclosure of the true story. As the biographer finds a way past the various obstacles, he or she discloses the true identity of the figure previously hidden and masters the truth.

Billy's biographers seem to assume that they are in the middle of precisely such a passage as they pursue the real William Bonney. Like the lawmen trying to arrest the outlaw, Billy's biographers write with the intention of capturing him in their accounts. They tell Billy's story in terms appropriate to the law. For instance, Paulita Maxwell notes concerning a picture, that it makes Billy "rough and uncouth" and then adds "the expression of his face was really boyish and pleasant" (19). In her evaluation of the photo, she concludes, "I don't think it does Billy justice" (19). If the photo fails to do him justice, her assessment makes clear that she remains bent on ensuring that justice gets done. Whether wearing badges or not, the narrators evaluate their biographical portraits in terms of whether they do the Kid justice by furnishing a full account. Some concede that Billy is an elusive figure, a man difficult to capture, but they nevertheless chart their course in relation to a hypothetical mastery of his biography.

Like his biographers, the Kid is at times concerned with the accuracy of his representation. As he creates his autobiographical poetry, Billy insists: "Not a story about me through their eyes. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, to be in" (20). Bethell notes that many take this maze to be a "metaphor for our quest for some sure truth, for the 'real' Billy the Kid" (Bethell 85). Billy urges his readers to find, dig up, and unlock the truth (20). All of this

language is rooted in a particular conception of the relation between signs and meaning. The implication of Billy's comment is that meaning does exist and is stable. If the truth is not at first obvious or immediately present, it can be discovered eventually. Hidden and buried within signs, meaning simply needs to be drawn to the surface. If readers can find the text's key, they will be able to open its significance. They will be able to decode the signs of his life. Readers could then unravel the mysterious passages of his legends and find the real Billy the Kid. Billy's insistence on this search for the true story shows that he also stands on the side of the law demanding justice. This is the Billy who is an outlaw only temporarily estranged from the law. He yearns to be reconciled with the truth.

Billy's efforts to tell his own story truly, like the efforts of his biographers, model the process he expects his readers to employ. First, he attempts to give a masterfully accurate account. Kathleen Bethell explains that the list Billy makes of the killed "indicates the importance of getting the details of his own life and death right" (79). In support of this point, she notes Billy's practice of self-correction as he recalls and attempts to set down a true "reminiscence of Sallie's routine at the Chisum ranch" (Bethell 79). Secondly, he aims to set the record straight. When Billy exhorts his readers to "[f]ind the beginning," he attempts to furnish a point from which to set off (20). Describing his flight, Billy recounts the following story as a beginning:

Two years ago Charlie Bowdre and I criss-crossed the Canadian border. Ten miles north of it ten miles south. Our horses stepped from country to country, across low rivers, through different colours of tree green. The two of us, our criss-cross like a whip in slow motion, the ridge of action

rising and falling, getting narrower in radius till it ended and we drifted down to Mexico and old heat. That there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning. (20)

Although not in fact the beginning of the story, it is the setting off point he plots for his reader. The description that Billy gives the path that he had cut with his fellow outlaw recalls the linear maze of conventional narrative. Their wandering follows the line of the border. All the crisscrossing is finally straight “like a whip” (20). The landscape’s ridge is a narrative line that rises and falls, circles about until those who follow it get to their destination. Blott writes that “the plot of the poem is that whip in slow motion [...] with the ridges concentrating in the last death scene, where Billy’s works and the process of their collecting end” (200). Billy’s final concession that the image lacks something suggests his expectation that he is himself just beginning to set the truth straight. He is working his way in writing toward something more substantive and true.

When Billy urges his readers to find the key and beginning of the maze, he invites them to wind back through the legends to the historical truth. He wants his readers to get back to the life of the historical Kid from which all of the stories have sprung. They are to recover that origin and effectively bring the truth to light. Bethell explains that many critics have presumed that the “diligent reader can find a sure path through Ondaatje’s maze [...] and emerge with a single, tidy psychological or biographical narrative in hand” (73).

To make getting to the truth possible, Billy and the other narrators expose within the events of his life a linear and determined order. They give his story the labyrinthine form that will permit their mastery of it. Their recounting of events suggests the whole

story is or can be known. Although none of the narrators ever tells more than a few segments of the storyline, the stories they tell attempt to reveal his life's beginning, middle, and end. The various biographers order their isolated accounts as if part of a coherent whole. They do so with the hope that cognitive mastery is possible if not yet realized. The compositional and interpretive process of discovering this order is an active one. The narrators model in the story the "activity" or "structuring operation elicited in the reader trying to make sense of the meanings that develop only through textual and temporal succession" (Kermode 37). Rather than construe such intervention as manipulative, the re-ordering of Billy's story is adopted as a means of reconstructing or recuperating the truth. The biographers are finding their way through the labyrinth, getting to its center, moving past the obstacles, leading us to the real Billy the Kid, and as they do so, they invite the book's audience to share their ambition.

Ondaatje employs the theme of photography to comment on that ambition to gain a masterful and comprehensive grasp of the truth. In relation to photography, Ondaatje sharpens the similarity between the biographic search for Billy and lawmen's pursuit of him. Nodelman notes that wordplay throughout the book reinforces a "similarity between guns and cameras" (71). Huffman's comments on photography beneath the box on the first page make this association acute. Nodelman points out that Huffman describes his photography in relation to a "line of fire" (1). In addition, the photographer claims that he can "take passing horses" (1), the same animal that Garret has a penchant for destroying. When Huffman claims that "men walking are no trick" readers are reassured that getting Billy should be easy even if he is in flight (1). As Billy moves across the desert and through various scenes, he remains vulnerable to being taken by a

good shot. By means of this punning correlation of photography and gun slinging, Ondaatje implicates efforts to tell the true story of Billy in a drive for mastery comparable to that by which the law violently tamed the Wild West.

The assembled documents and the assorted poems of *The Collected Works* open to readers a complex set of passages. By positioning the reader before this assemblage of documents, Ondaatje engages his audience in a reconstruction of the Kid that associates reading with writing. To read the book is compose an account of Billy's story. Readers reposition the various documents in an interpretive order that confers a particular sense on the whole collection. As the reader works a way through the complicated passages of legends, the various events are sorted into a narrative order that concludes in Billy's death. Through that process, the reader generates a composite of the outlaw similar to those employed by the lawmen in their hunt for Billy and those produced by the narrators in their biographic ventures. It is a closed account by which they get a fix on who Billy was and how he died.

The photo of Billy missing from the square on the first page may recall the absent subject for many readers familiar with postmodern theory. But this citation can incite a modern aspiration to get to the truth. The citation can be treated as a part of the historical record. Its inclusion in Ondaatje's book can suggest that his subject is not mere fiction. Just as there once was a photographer named Huffman in the West, so there was indeed a Billy the Kid who preceded the legends. This possibility motivates a drive to recover history from its fragmentation and temporal distance. It incites that passion for sense that

can lead readers to probe a difficult text like Ondaatje's with the hope of getting a good picture of who Billy really was.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, the light with which pictures of Billy are made is associated with the violence that destroys him. Billy frequently responds to light as a threat. At various points in the story, Billy takes refuge in the dark, as when he hides out in a barn and recuperates at the Chisum home. The ominous character of light is most evident in the account of Billy's death. When we get to the "end of it," when "the bullet itch" is "frozen" in Billy's head, we read: "suns coming up everywhere out of the walls and floors / [...] thousands / of lovely perfect sun balls / breaking at each other click / click click click like Saturday morning pistol cleaning" (95). The light of the sun, like a camera and like a gun, flashes as the outlaw dies. Each click and blast of light evokes both a bullet bursting from a gun and the flash of a camera. That light signifies the victory of both the lawmen and the biographers. They have gotten a good shot and brought to an end their pursuit of Billy.

By associating the biographer's pursuit of Billy with the lawmen's quest to capture him, Ondaatje once again comments on the violence that can be done by claiming a mastery of the truth. Ondaatje suggests that when we account for the truth in closed narratives, we risk destroying what we observe. The biographers capture the truth of Billy's life by boxing him into a coherent and fixed representation. Like the biographer's

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<sup>80</sup> The language of the citation recalls other narratives focused on making a passage toward epistemic mastery in addition to those of the historians and biographers. For example, Jones associates the caption with "two other related 'truth-seeking' activities: the detective's investigation and the process of legally trying a criminal" (31). Moreover, Jones notes that the diction of the quotation is that "of photography as scientific experimentation" (31). Huffman's art is one of "experiments," "proofs," and "specimens" (1). He is developing a better photographic process as much as he is developing his photos of the frontier. Thus, his practice of photography aims not only at documenting the West, but also at refining the machinery with which that goal will be reached.

creating their account of Billy, readers that pursue an interpretive mastery of *The Collected Works* fill the empty box on the first page with a particular impression of the outlaw. That impression develops in relation to the end Billy meets when he is shot by Garrett and placed in a box of wood. By way of these interlocking images, Ondaatje suggests that to create a closed reading of the book is to put Billy down on paper, to bring him to rest by creating a fixed impression of the truth.

#### **IV.A All out Searching for Billy in a Labyrinth of Love**

Although we can contrast the passages cut by Billy and those of the lawmen and his biographers, the distinction between Billy's errant wandering and the linear passage of the others to a fixed, masterful position does not hold firmly at every point in the book. The contrasting models that Ondaatje furnishes his readers are woven together in relation to erotic love. A series of scenes charged with eroticism undermine any firm distinction between the two ways the book can be experienced as a maze.<sup>81</sup> These scenes contribute to Ondaatje's self-reflexive narrative strategy and situate the book within a tradition that correlates the labyrinth with erotic love. Craig Wright explains that the maze's "amatory associations are part of a long-standing literary tradition called the 'labyrinth of love,' one extending from Boccaccio's *Corbaccio o Laberinto d'amore* (1354-1355) to Cervantes' *El laberinto de amor* (1615) and beyond" (219). Wright points out that "the

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<sup>81</sup> In *The Collected Works*, several scenes of explicit eroticism contribute to the poetic images and events of the story. Various passages feature Billy in scenes that are either romantic or erotic in kind. The anecdotes include bedroom scenes with two women: Angela Dickinson, a prostitute, and Sallie Chisum, the wife of Billy's friend. Additionally, one of the collected works is the transcription of a comic book legend in which Billy plays the dashing hero who saves a Spanish Princess. Finally, as Dennis Denisoff has argued, Ondaatje's book explores "the inherent homoeroticism in the myth of Billy the Kid" (51). Denisoff points to numerous "allusions made throughout *Billy the Kid* to Billy and Pat's sexual relations" (65). The explicitly erotic scenes and word-play in other poems highlight features of the legal and biographic hunts for Billy that make them comparable to a lover's pursuit of a beloved.

maze symbolizes the ambiguities, difficulties, and reversals associated with love and erotic relationships generally” (215). In addition to suggesting the obstructions and disorientation of erotic love, the labyrinth also stands as the place in which lovers finally meet. The maze, if its challenges can be mastered, becomes a fortified refuge for the lovers.

In Ondaatje’s book, the climactic moment of sexual union has a complex significance in the author’s presentation of the book as a maze. First, the moment of sexual union connotes the end of the chase and the overcoming of the labyrinth’s challenges. In this account, the labyrinth is a circuitous path that leads linearly toward the union of lover and beloved, the lawmen and the outlaw, the biographer and the truth. Additionally, though, Ondaatje gives the event of climactic union a meaning with an alternate, labyrinthine connotation. The erotic fusion of lovers also connotes the overcoming of reason by passion. In this case, the bliss of sexual union is not an experience of rational mastery, but of losing oneself ecstatically.

Other mock biographies have drawn on these possibilities simultaneously when representing their protagonists’ pursuit and capture of their subject.<sup>82</sup> For example, in

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<sup>82</sup> Several mock biographies characterize the effort to discover a true biographic account as an erotic and maze-like pursuit. Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend* presents the biographic project of the narrator Zeitblom in such terms. Having “been called by love” (528), Zeitblom aspires to make a “more probing inquiry” (100) of his “friend’s scarcely explored legacy” (395). Mann’s Zeitblom struggled, both in his friendship with Leverkühn and as he writes, to get past “certain impassable limits [...] set to any intimacy with him” (100). Jens Rieckmann proposes that Zeitblom’s motive for writing stems from an experience of “unrequited love” and compares Mann’s narrator to another fictional biographer, Jeffrey Cartwright in Stephen Millhauser’s *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer (1943-1954)*, by Jeffrey Cartwright (65). In A.S. Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale*, the biographic hunt of Phineas G. Nanson for Scholes Destry-Scholes, himself a biographer, is charged with homoerotic longing. Nanson states the “true delight was to track him through the maze of his [...] reading, and come unexpectedly on a trace of his presence, or even of a mistake he had made” (36). Similarly, Charles Cleasby, the narrator of Barry Unsworth’s *Losing Nelson*, identifies himself as a “Nelson lover” (104). Cleasby works feverishly and futilely to defend his beloved with a celebratory biography. Writing it requires him to probe Nelson’s “maze of personality” (124).



Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the narrator V. longs for the true life story of his half-brother, overcomes a number of obstructions in his way, and eventually loses himself in ecstatic union with Sebastian. Nabokov depicts V.'s full-probing of Sebastian as an erotic fusion of subjects. At the end of his search, V. declares, "I am Sebastian Knight" (203). He asserts that he has gained the most complete access to the life of his brother. But his statement also demonstrates that the narrator is out of his mind. V.'s obsessive longing for the real life of Sebastian has overwhelmed him. Passion has swept him away. And thus, he concludes the tale by writing, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (203). Moments after having suggested that he has found his way to the truth, he turns back and forth, unsure of anything at all. Thus, the erotic connotations of V.'s fusion with Sebastian deconstructs the distinction we might draw between epistemic mastery and immersion in mystery.

The scenes of overt eroticism interspersed through Ondaatje's book develop in a comparable manner. The bed that Billy shares with his lovers is Eros's altar; on it, Billy repeatedly undergoes what Georges Bataille has described as love's sacrificial death. At the heart of erotic experience, Bataille suggests, one finds "an act of violence [that] deprives the creature of its limited particularity" (Bataille 90). By exerting this power to sacrifice Billy, the characters demonstrate that they have mastered the labyrinth. The lawmen and biographers find a way past all the obstructions standing between them and Billy and are fused together as if lover and beloved in a death-like embrace. Denis De Rougemont contends erotic desire culminates in a fusion of lovers so intense that it is "remote from bodies and matter, remote from what divides and distinguishes, and beyond the misfortune of being a self and even in love itself a pair" (De Rougemont 61). Yet, by

eradicating all that distinguishes, erotic fusion deprives both lover and beloved any distinct subjective position. They can no longer be placed in the maze. Thus, the imagery connoting sexual ecstasy also associates the character's erotic union with immersion in a mystery that resists comprehension.

Few selections portray in a direct manner the lover's pursuit itself, but Ondaatje's treatment of sex invites comparison with Billy's capture by the lawmen and the biographers. The sex scenes frequently suggest a physical mastery of Billy. The lovers and the lawmen all get their hands on him just as the biographers hope to get a handle on his story. Billy's lover Angela Dickinson "catches" him "like a butterfly" between her shaved legs (25). Their lovemaking paralyzes his fingers "in love juice" (16). She slays the hand that normally slays. Her interaction with Billy recalls the practices of biography still more explicitly. In one poem, the bedroom is the inside of a camera; the window is an aperture, and the bed, the plate for the image. Angela "lifts the sackcloth" curtain and allows in an "oblong of sun" (21). With that light, the biographer-lover is getting a good shot and putting Billy down like Huffman. She "traces the thin bones" on Bonney (16), who lies "very still" (21). The lover-biographer has found a way past the maze-like obstructions to Billy.

But we know that she is also lost in the dark of their embrace. Angela and the outlaw are "brought back by death into continuity with all being, to the absence of separate individualities" (Bataille 90). In Billy's love scenes with Angela, Kamboureli writes that "the female lover [...] administers the rites of death" (125). She not only gets her hands on Billy, she destroys him. Kamboureli explains that the repeated truncation of her name to Angela D. suggests her status as both an "apostle of Desire" (124) and an

“angel of Death” (125). But her initials suggest that she is also *agnus dei*, the object of sacrifice, no less than is Billy. Through their lovemaking, they are displaced from distinct subject positions. They are lost in the labyrinth of erotic union.

The recurring representations of Billy’s execution by Garrett reinforce and develop still-more obviously the association of erotic fusion with both mastery of and immersion in mystery. As Denisoff has noted, the death scene itself unfolds with Garrett playing the outlaw’s lover.<sup>83</sup> Billy enters his friend Maxwell’s dark room where Garrett has just climbed into bed in an attempt to conceal himself. In bed with Garrett, Maxwell can feel the lawman’s “oiled rifle barrel leaning against his cheek” (93). Both Billy and Garrett are like biographers trying to identify who is in the room. Billy knows that someone is there, but “doesn’t know what to think” (93). Garrett has been watching “the darkness, trying to make out the shape that is moving towards him” (92). He fires his rifle and gets his man. As he dies, Billy hears “Garrett’s voice going Billy Billy / and the other two dancing circles / saying we got him we got him the little shrunk bugger” (95). The lawmen have mastered the obstacles of the labyrinth and reached their beloved.

If the lawmen celebrate by dancing, they do so in circles because they are set in a whirl by passion. After the shooting, they may have gotten their man, but they do not hold fixed positions. They move in the dark of a mystery. Garrett tells his deputy: “It was the Kid who came in there on to me [...] and I think I got him” (103). Poe responds

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<sup>83</sup> Denisoff’s essay offers a very, thorough close-reading of the homoerotic features of the final exchange between Garrett and Billy (65-66). Although he highlights the death scene’s associations with a love affair, he does not consider sufficiently how Garrett enforces a socially prescribed norm. Missing from his account is consideration of how Garrett takes his lover. Garrett chooses to put Billy down by killing him rather than by sleeping with him. He enforces the law through a socially and psychologically repressive murder. Ondaatje not only represents a homoerotic exchange, but also its aberrant repression. For the lawmen, the assassination of Billy deprives him life even as it veils the erotic character of that sacrifice. The lawmen exorcise themselves of their homoerotic longing for Billy by exterminating him.

to Garrett: “I believe you have killed the wrong man” (103). Although Garrett then insists that he “could not have been mistaken” (103), his certainty that they killed the Kid is compromised because after the shooting Billy’s disfigured “head was smaller than a rat” (104). Ondaatje effectively reminds his readers that whether Billy died that night remains a point of debate to this day. The lawmen have prevailed over labyrinthine obstacles separating them from Billy, but they are also lost in the dark of a maze.

In another poem, lines recalling both Billy’s lovemaking with Angela and his death at the hands of Garrett are interlocked. In that poem, Billy, Miss Angela D, and Garrett are all “blurred in the dark” (73). Angela’s eyes, Billy writes, are “like a boat / on fire” (73). He claims, “she swallows your breath” (73). But in the same poem, we find “the man in the bright tin armour star” (73). Billy feels “bullet claws coming / at me like women fingers / part my hair slow / go in slow in slow / leaving skin in a puff” (73). The lines draw together words that connote both his lovemaking with Angela and the moment of his assassination. The interweaving of these events in the single poem are suggestive of the characters’ erotic fusion. Billy, Angela, and Garrett are indeed blurred together, dissolved in an erotic union that has undone all that “divides and distinguishes” (De Rougemont 61). Even as this fusion suggests that Angela and Garret have passed through the maze’s obstacles, the imagery does not allow readers to sort out who is with whom, where, or when. They can no longer be positioned in particular moments, but are lost in erotic love’s ecstatic dissolution of self, immersed in an enigmatic maze.

This erotic imagery is the narrative vehicle with which Ondaatje deconstructs the contrasted experiences of the maze. At the start of this chapter, I proposed that scholarly readings of Ondaatje’s book relate it to two distinctive kinds of labyrinths. The first is a

space of irrepressible puzzlement, multicursal in form, indomitably complex. The second is a space that is progressively mastered by those who tread it. Each of these readings fails to attend to the way that Ondaatje focuses his work self-reflexively on the dismantling of just this opposition. If his book is a “is a maze to [...] be in,” he has built it in such a way as to make it impossible to situate it solely in either category (20). Rather, the book breaks this distinction down and links its breakdown to erotic love.

Roland Barthes’ conjunction of literary theory and erotic love makes possible a schematic analysis of Ondaatje self-reflexive use of erotic imagery. For Barthes, reading is an activity analogous to erotic love. Barthes distinguishes two kinds of literature and the attendant reading practices proper to each. He associates each of those two bodies of literature and modes of reading with a particular, erotic paradigm. In the first such analogy, Barthes focuses on the conventionally linear and closed narrative, what he calls the “readerly” or “classic” work. This type of literature furnishes readers a pleasure analogous to that derived from an eroticism limited by convention. Just as the pleasure of sex has been restricted in relation to conventional goals such as reproduction, Barthes proposes that the pleasure of reading conventional narrative results from its teleological form.<sup>84</sup> The reading of this literature is directed toward a specific narrative or interpretive end that will sum up and disclose what the story means. The principle

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<sup>84</sup> In *S/Z*, Barthes characterizes the progressive cultivation of the reader’s desire for such resolution and the pleasure it furnishes in relation to the hermeneutic code. That code, Barthes explains, establishes an enigma and then “must set up delays” or obstructions to its solution, so as to incite and cultivate the reader’s desire for the satisfying disclosure of the initial secret (75). The various delays to the reader’s eventual discovery of any conclusive meaning constitute a “deliberate, ritual production of pleasure [...] a kind of asceticism” (*S/Z* 125). Just as the intensity of an erotic lover’s passion for the beloved rises as it transgresses obstacles to its satisfaction, so the reader’s longing for resolution is stimulated by those narrative structures contributing to the suspense of the story. In the classic or readerly text, this narrative asceticism intensifies the reader’s desire until it reaches a peak. At that point, the reader’s desire to have a solution to the initial enigma is satisfied with the text’s closure. The text’s power to delight is exhausted or consumed through this discovery.

directing the reading—whether authorial intention, the denotative meaning of the book, or any other principle of coherence—limits in what way pleasure will be derived from the literature. Ultimately, interpretive closure organized in relation to any single principle brings to an end the pleasure of reading.

The linear, narrative maze through which Billy is pursued is structured in precisely this manner. The lawmen's pursuit of Billy, the narrator's efforts to identify him, and the reader's comparable effort all unfold as a passage through a labyrinth of love shaped by a series of delays and an ultimate point of closure. In the first page's empty box, the reader is presented with an enigmatic absence. Just as this initial lack incites longing to see Billy, so narrative and textual obstacles form so many structural delays through which that initial desire is cultivated. In this labyrinth of love, the reader pushes past each successive obstacle in the hope of discovering the beloved. The story's various representations of several moments of erotic union prefigure a future satisfaction of the reader's desire to grasp Billy finally. Threading the literary maze in an effort to convert it from a site of mystery to one of mastery affords that "readerly" pleasure cultivated through suspense and exhausted in the disclosure of the book's design.

In contrast to this first formulation of reading as an erotic exercise, Barthes identifies a second kind of literature and a corresponding reading practice that he associates with an alternative erotic framework. This "writerly" literature is a text free of climactic resolution. This literature and the reading practice with which it is associated rupture the fixed, linear narrative and suspend interpretive closure. Readers range freely through such literary passages, re-writing them without aiming at any particular interpretive end, such as the revelation of the author's design for the book. And so, the

reader's longing and pleasure are also without end or limit.<sup>85</sup> In *Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes associates this reading with the ecstatic and rapturous pleasure of *jouissance*. Like the bliss of erotic union, this pleasure is infinitely plural, lacking any definition or integrity. No limit determines what routes any readers might choose to take through the text in the pursuit of this pleasure. Nor does anything bring the readers' interpretive passages to satisfying points of closure.

If readers probe *The Collected Works* without imposing on it any final arrangement, its passages form just such a labyrinth of love. Readers can move through *The Collected Works* in innumerable ways. The resulting pleasure itself does not function as if it were a unified principle for reading. Instead, it names the absences through which any teleological interpretive framework is ruptured and put in suspense indefinitely. However, because nothing defines this pleasure, Barthes does not distinguish it even from such things as boredom. When readers give themselves over to such dissolute reading, they experience a longing and pleasure that is the loss of oneself in the labyrinth of erotic passion.

*The Collected Works* draws on both of these paradigms. In the *Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes indicates this possibility and discusses it in terms of the reading subject who reads both for a particular and principled pleasure and for the pleasure without limit or bliss. Barthes proclaims that this reader "simultaneously and contradictorily participates in the hedonism of all culture [...] and in the destruction of that culture: he

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<sup>85</sup> The reader approaches this literature as Sarrasine does Zambinella in Balzac's story, and thereby, cultivates an insatiable longing and "a pleasure as rich and varied as he wished it to be" (S/Z 125).

enjoys the consistency of his selfhood (that is his pleasure) and seeks its loss (that is his bliss). He is a subject split twice over, doubly perverse” (14).<sup>86</sup>

With the scenes of lovers dissolved in ecstasy, Ondaatje embeds in his book images of the split-subject that Barthes lauds as his ideal reader. The models, as noted above, invite readers to formulate a masterful interpretation of the story in relation to Billy’s eventual death. Readers plot the varied documents in relation to that narrative end and thereby acquire a position of interpretive closure. Ondaatje’s erotic imagery likens this reading practice to a lover’s overcoming the maze-like impediments obstructing their access to the beloved. Readers can at the same time choose not to bring their reading to this point of closure and follow any number of alternative threads through the book. Once again, the erotic imagery of the book comments self-reflexively on this practice by associating it with the passage of lovers into a mystery wherein they lack any fixed subjective position. To read like Barthes’ thoroughly erotic subject is at once to wield interpretive mastery over the book’s varied passages and to concede that its mystery exceeds comprehension or a fixed interpretive reading.

In effect, when we read the book in this contradictory fashion, Ondaatje suggests that we move through it like Billy, Angela, and Garret do through the Wild West. The models he builds into the text implicate readers in the world of passion and violence that he depicts. The book’s characterization of the figures inhabiting that world is ambivalent. At turns, Ondaatje celebrates and censures the courses cut by these characters. Ondaatje raises for admiration Billy’s bold resistance to the restraints of law.

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<sup>86</sup> Barthes writes similarly that “this subject is never anything but a ‘living contradiction’: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (21). This echoes Nietzsche who celebrated the Dionysian collapse of the subject into unity precisely when this collapse coincided with the subject’s Apollinian individuation in appearance.



Similarly, the book invites readers to share the passage to mastery made by the lawmen and Billy's biographers. Yet, all of the characters' passages through the Wild West are also presented as violent, monstrous, and bound up with death. If the story celebrates Billy, Ondaatje does not avoid depicting the outlaw as a cold-blooded killer who rambles madly through the West. Similarly, Ondaatje suggests that the lawmen not only serve a genocidal drive westward, but are a repressive force of all that differs from the norm. And the biographers too are associated by Ondaatje with comparable drives for power and dominion.

If the book seems incoherent, Ondaatje's appeal to the imagery of erotic love furnishes a motive for the book's ambiguous relation to the world it depicts.<sup>87</sup> Each route cut by a character is associated with the intoxicating pleasures of erotic love. Whether examining Billy's errant passage through mystery or the linear passage of others toward a position of mastery each is correlated by Ondaatje with erotic ecstasy. And the ecstatic loss of oneself in pleasure, as the writings of Bataille, De Rougement, and Barthes would suggest, conjures ambivalence. Erotic passion may culminate in intense and even delirious pleasure. But at its most intense, that passion feeds on boundaries until transgressing all limits, even the limits demarking pleasure and pain, life and death. The height of this passion immerses those it possesses in a death-like embrace "remote from bodies and matter, remote from what divides and distinguishes, and beyond the misfortune of being a self and even in love itself a pair" (De Rougemont 61). Eros, unapologetically fierce and furious, reigns in the Wild West depicted by Ondaatje. As his

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<sup>87</sup> The book's ambivalent relation to the labyrinthine world it depicts is in keeping with the tradition of labyrinths of love: Herman Kern identifies a set of garden labyrinths and book illustrations that were "intended to symbolize the complexity and ambivalence of erotic love" (226).

audience moves through the book, Ondaatje attempts to immerse his readers in maze-like passages wherein they may be driven by the unrestrained passion for power and delight exhibited by his characters.

#### **IV.B *The Collected Works: A Maze Crafted by Eros***

In conclusion, I turn to the tools of analysis Nietzsche developed in *The Birth of Tragedy* to explicate still further what artistic principles inspire the maze-like structure of *The Collected Works*. When Nietzsche sought to lead his reader “through the labyrinth [...] of the *origin of Greek tragedy*,” he did so in relation to two artistic energies associated by him with Apollo and Dionysus (56).<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche’s suggestion that his ideal art was labyrinthine is not superficial. The two artistic energies identified by Nietzsche can be related to distinctive experiences of labyrinthine process and structure. Were the Apollinian impulse to prevail in a particular labyrinth, the structure would exude immobility and a map-like clarity of arrangement. Transparently ordered, every line of a maze built in conformity to Apollinian principle would confirm one’s place within it. In contrast to its counterpart, the Dionysian impulse would give rise to a labyrinth not formed of stone, but of complex and dizzying movement.<sup>89</sup> This maze would recall the

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<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche proposed tragedy had its origin in the interaction of two energies that he ascribed to nature and art. He associated those energies with Apollo and Dionysus. Nietzsche defined the Dionysian tendency as the more primal of the two impulses. The Dionysian energy, an unfettered dynamism, is rooted in the fundamental mystery of the world, an awesome and terrifying inexplicability. Art generated by this enigmatic dynamism breeds intoxication and an ecstatic experience of union in those who make and appreciate it. In contrast to the Dionysian spirit, Nietzsche identified the Apollinian energy with principle and measure, reason’s predominance, and stasis. It produces an art for the sober, recollected, and individuated self.

<sup>89</sup> Nietzsche associated the Dionysian impulse in art with music, and also references its power to stimulate dance. He gives as an example the “singing and dancing crowds [...] of St. John and St. Vitus” (36).

labyrinthine dances of the Greeks.<sup>90</sup> The Dionysian maze would be a place of whirling turns in which one “walks about enchanted, in ecstasy” (Nietzsche 37).

But Nietzsche’s ideal art, an art like tragedy, is “equally Dionysian and Apollinian” (Nietzsche 33). In that art, the Apollinian and Dionysian impulses are not competitors, but are instead “interwoven artistic impulses” (Nietzsche 82). At the close of his treatise, Nietzsche employs labyrinthine imagery to characterize the art generated by this interplay. Dreaming of a return to a culture in which Dionysus and Apollo are wed, he imagines someone “[w]alking under Ionic colonnades, looking up toward a horizon that was cut off by pure and noble lines, finding reflections of his transfigured shape in the shining marble at his side, and all around him solemnly striding or delicately moving human beings, speaking with harmonious voices and in a rhythmic language of gestures” (144). This labyrinth is constituted by a “curious internal bifurcation” (Nietzsche 131). It is a place of song and dance, but also a stone structure with straight lines and surfaces that reflect the individual. In this space, “Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus” (Nietzsche 130). In this maze, the volatile release of passion that Nietzsche identified with the Dionysian spirit of music infuses the restraints of Apollinian form.

*The Collected Works* initially seem to represent the opposition of these two experiences of the maze. In the desert setting of *The Collected Works*—as Nietzsche proposed was true in the history of art—we witness the persistent efforts of the Apollinian impulse to suppress its Dionysian counterpart. The Apollinian drive for order

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<sup>90</sup> Jacques Attali notes that Theseus initiated a dance following his escape from the labyrinth. Greek historians record that it came to be “practiced for centuries on the island of Delos, and at Athens during the Oschophoria festival” (Attali 89).

and mastery battles it out with the mysterious flux of the Dionysian spirit. Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid are emblematic figures of the two sides of this contest. The lawman and the outlaw personify the Apollinian and Dionysian energies respectively. The lawman forces Billy to return to the social order by arresting him.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the biographers impose order and a fixed meaning on Billy's errant legends.<sup>92</sup> Both attempt to tame the wanderer who eludes them. Both strive to convert the labyrinth from a site of mystery into a site over which they have mastery. In seeking systemic control, each one participates in what Nietzsche lamented as the Apollinian subordination and elision of Dionysian mystery. In contrast to these Apollinian figures the outlaw personifies the Dionysian spirit as he weaves a meandering course.<sup>93</sup> Whether loaded with alcohol or high on red dirt marijuana, Billy has Dionysian revelry in his blood as he moves across the desert.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> The characterization of Garrett likens the lawmen to the Apollinian drive. Ondaatje describes Garrett as an "academic murderer" who had "the mind of a doctor," a mind that was "unwarped" (28). With his mental acuity, he "understood" those he sought (28). Garrett "embodies order and control" (Van Wart 8).

<sup>92</sup> Like Garrett in his enforcement of the law, so the narrators model the Apollinian drive as they try to do Billy biographic justice. The narrators strive to fix "the boundaries of the individual" and identify him definitively (Nietzsche 46). The biographers exercise the Apollinian discipline of self-recollection by gathering together and ordering the events of Billy's life.

The Apollinian character of the biographer's efforts is evidenced especially in relation to photography. Nietzsche associated Apollinian art with dream, appearance, and image, all of which suggest to him some stability of form rather than Dionysian flux. Ondaatje's representation of photography is highly suggestive of the preeminent Apollinian art of sculpture. As sculpture molds stone, the photographic and biographic images give shape to Billy's life. The sun, with its course determined by Apollo, is essential to the production of the still, daguerreotype image. As in the case of the Apollinian artist, the photographer's "eye must be 'sunlike'" and fix in place a clear impression (Nietzsche 35).

<sup>93</sup> Billy runs from those who are, as he puts it, "harnessing my face" (85). Even as the lawmen and biographers pursue Billy, he remains in flight, well-hidden in a maze of indissoluble enigma.

<sup>94</sup> Van Wart notes that "[w]here Garrett is a man of the mind, Billy lives in the world of the body" (8). Billy is an animal with a body "going as white horses go" (38). True to the Dionysian spirit, he claims in the interview to be "a pretty good dancer. Fond of music too" (84). While recovering from a fever, Billy recounts that he "began to block my mind of all thought. Just sensed the room and learnt what my body could do" (17). Like the Dionysian, he witnesses an underlying "absurdity of existence" (Nietzsche 60)

Although Billy and Garrett seem emblems for the opposed ways mazes can be formed and traversed, this distinction does not hold. The opposition of the lawman and outlaw does not finally culminate in a duel. Eileen Sarkar notes that “Ondaatje slowly accumulates a series of parallels between Billy and Garrett” (235), so much so that some poems “could refer to either Pat Garrett or Billy” (235). Sallie Chisum reports that she knew “both these men intimately. There was good mixed in with the bad in Billy the Kid and bad mixed in with the good in Pat Garrett” (89). After a trip across the desert, Garrett finds himself “mind blasted” like Billy (42). When Billy surveys his surroundings, he like a lawman has “a range for everything” (72). The struggle to differentiate the two men is evident also in the difficulty that both Billy and Garrett find in distinguishing their friends and enemies.<sup>95</sup> They are all eventually “blurred in the dark” (73).

As in Nietzsche’s ideal art, the maze-like corridors through which the Apollinian lawman and Dionysian outlaw pass are ultimately impossible to disentangle. Nodelman points to one line in particular and contends that “Billy is as much a ‘sane assassin’ as Garrett is” (76). The cited line undermines efforts to distinguish the sane and insane assassin. Like a labyrinth, the phrase “sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin” recoils upon itself so as to read “insane assassin” as well (29). The line’s labyrinthine repetition enfolds within itself a bifurcation between the two, but it also suggests that a choice to

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The outlaw frequently seems a visionary with insight into a world “where bodies are mindless” (11). Billy confides to his reader, “The others, I know, did not see the wounds appearing in the sky” (10).<sup>95</sup> As Kertzer explains in relation to one of Billy’s nightmares, “friend and foe blend indistinguishably” through the book (Kertzer 87). As an example of the blurring of alliances, Kertzer recalls that “Billy’s friend Chisum is one of the cattle politicians who send another friend, Pat Garrett, to hunt Billy down” (87). In another instance, we learn that Billy “killed Jim Carlyle over some mixup, he being a friend” (7). Garrett also leaves his dead deputy in the street as he cares for the body of Tom O’Folliard. In effect, the lawmen and outlaws are unable to treat the law like a line drawn in the sand and take a place on one side.

follow either path leads finally down some route interwoven with its opposite. The neat distinction of the Apollinian lawmen and the Dionysian outlaw dissolves.

In a one segment of the book, Ondaatje presents a self-reflexive image of the creative genius who weds the Apollinian and Dionysian energies. This story draws an analogy between a character named John Livingstone and an author-god. The story focuses on the life of Livingstone who bred “a race of mad dogs,” but it speaks to Ondaatje’s process as a writer (60). A number of parallels exist between Livingstone and God. First, Livingstone makes of experimentation a god-like power. His farm, like Eden, is an enclosed space. And his creations, as suggested by *Genesis* concerning humankind, are all of one line from the “two original” with which he started (60). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, his name recalls a passage in the first epistle of Peter. The biblical author extols his audience: “Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and present in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices” (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Although Livingstone’s name recalls an appellation given to Christ in the *Bible*, that name conjoins two words suggestive of the union of Dionysian animation and Apollinian stability. Livingstone’s creative process and products unite those artistic impulses. He worked with a “perverse logic” that reconciled intoxication and sober rationality (61). His insanity gave birth to his project. But his method unfolded “clinically and scientifically” according to a “secret system” (61). True to the Dionysian energy, Livingstone “liked to sing” (60). Perhaps he did so even as he was sculpting the dogs’ “arched and tangled” forms (60). Their gnarled, Apollinian bodies are fixed near

the fence like “sandbags,” but the dogs have Dionysian tempers, partly “out of liquor,” that drive them to orgiastic and violent self-destruction (61).

Despite the allusions to Christianity, the story presents the book’s audience with an image of an artist who reconciles what Nietzsche deemed nature’s dual impulses. Like Livingstone, Ondaatje himself cross breeds “[e]very combination” (60). Garrett and the Kid are each produced by Ondaatje’s combinatory art. Ondaatje’s characters like Livingstone’s dogs are “out of their minds being pressed out of shape” (62). Ondaatje tightens the analogy between Livingstone’s dogs and his characters by describing the dogs, Billy, and Garrett as all having “hissed through the teeth” (61). In the fictional interview, we learn that Billy made a “hissing noise” when breathing as result of a bar fight (82). Just before Billy is shot, he can hear Garrett in the room hissing (90). Thus, Ondaatje’s depiction of Livingstone is a self-reflexive image of his own creative conjunction of the Dionysian and Apollinian impulses. Those impulses inspire the maze-like form and movement of the poem.

One scene that focuses on Billy’s journey across the desert forms a thematic intersection of the maze, the Dionysian and Apollinian energies, and erotic love. Ondaatje writes that as Billy rode along with Garrett they “moved back and forward, side to side over the country” (76). As they meandered across that landscape, “the sun turned into a pair of hands” (76). Billy recalls that the sun took one hand and “sank it into my head down past the roof of my mouth” (76). He goes on to describe the labyrinthine course that hand took through his body:

Down the long cool hand went [...] breaking through veins like pieces of long glass tubing, touched my heart with his wrist, down he went the

liquid yellow from my busted brain finally vanishing as it passed through soft warm stomach like a luscious blood wet oasis, weaving in and out of the [...] nerves moving uncertainly through wrong fissures ending pausing at cul de sacs of bone then retreating slow [...] then down the proper path through pyramids of bone [...] through grooves the fingers spanning the merging paths of medians of blue matter, the long cool hand going down brushing cobwebs of nerves the horizontal pain pits, lobules gyres notches arcs tracts fissures roots' white insulation of dead seven year cells clinging things rubbing them off on the tracts of spine" (77).

Billy continues to relate that the sun went "down the last hundred miles" before grabbing "my cock" to pull it back "up the path his arm had rested in and widened" (77). After the sun pulled Billy's cock up through his head, he cried out: "I've been fucked. I've been fucked I've been fucked by Christ almighty god I've been good and fucked by Christ" (78). Although the Kid declares that the sun's hands are those of the Son, the god-like hands—"cold as porcelain" yet "burning" Billy "like dry ice"—are those of an altogether different god than he suspects (77).

When Ondaatje has the sun probe Billy's body, the hands move through the outlaw's corpus as if through a maze formed by the wedding of Dionysian and Apollinian impulses. Denisoff proposes that Billy's "agony is presented as a form of ecstasy" (67). He is out of his mind, suffering the Dionysian "bliss of pain" (Nietzsche 47). The sun, now an image of "the very heart of nature," generates this pleasure without limit in Billy (Nietzsche 47). Billy is destroyed by a brutal, erotic release of passion. The hand of the sun tears apart the corpus through which it passes. It leaves Billy's body "fluttering in



tatters before the mysterious primordial unity” as if it had been nothing more than a veil “fixed between man and man” (Nietzsche 37). Even as the sun destroys Billy with a Dionysian splintering of his body, the sun also acquires an Apollinian mastery of it. This sun is not Christ, as Billy suggests, but Dionysius coupled with Apollo. Like the biographers in their Apollinian probing of the truth, Billy senses the sun “unfold my head” (76). He claims the sun is “drawing back each layer” and discovering the very limits of his being (76). It opens, explores, and probes the outlaw’s body exhaustively.

Ondaatje’s depiction of these hands suggest that *The Collected Works* are a maze inspired by the interaction of the Dionysian and Apollinian impulses. However, a Greek god never identified in Nietzsche’s theory or by Billy weds these impulses. Eros is the god that brings about the “coupling” of the Dionysian release of passion with its opposite Apollinian restraint (Nietzsche 33). Dionysus releases passion in an erotic union achieved through ecstasy. Apollo is the erotic suppression of that same passion. Although restraint may seem opposed to eroticism, the Apollinian impulse to bind passion, as Garrett binds Billy to a bed, is an equally erotic drive. Dionysian transgression is possible only where an Apollinian limit is fixed. Eros empowers the impulses of Dionysus and Apollo. The hands that undo Billy in the desert are those of Dionysus and Apollo fused in a union that is no other god than Eros.

In this instance, Billy’s deathlike dissolution beneath the sun is an image of the book’s disintegration in the hands of the reader. The sun’s penetration of Billy’s body is a self-reflexive image of the reader sorting a way through the maze-like corpus of *The Collected Works*. Like the sun, the reader masters the maze that constitutes Billy’s corpus. But as the book is split up, broken through, and reorganized, the reader is lost in

a Dionysian whirl. The varied self-reflexive images draw together opposed experiences of maze-like structure and process, making of the models guides by which readers are led into a labyrinth of love.

**Chapter Five:**  
**Paul Auster's Labyrinthine *City of Glass***

**I.A Paul Auster's *City of Glass*: Entrapping Readers in Maze-like Passages**

In Paul Auster's 1985 novel *City of Glass*, the detective story's promise of closure goes unsatisfied: the enigma of the story's events remains a mystery even on the last page. The protagonist Daniel Quinn is working a "tail job," following Peter Stillman who was recently released from prison after having been enclosed there for having locked his son in a dark room. He is to discover if the elder Stillman still bears malevolent intentions toward his son. Quinn fails not only to close the case, but also to preserve his sanity. Shortly before the last page, by which point Quinn is himself a missing person, he lies naked in an empty, dark room, recording maddened and rambling notes in his case notebook. His failed pursuit of the truth is presented as a futile effort to bring his investigation and interpretation to closure that leads finally to his own enclosure in the dark of a mystery.

As in other recent anti-detective fiction, *City of Glass* associates the enigma and investigatory process of detective fiction with the labyrinth. Auster employs the maze not only to tell a story about a failed detective, but also about the failure of detection and the pursuit of interpretive closure. *City of Glass*, the first story in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, draws analogies between the struggle to solve a crime, an effort to find one's way through a maze, and what we do when we read. While Auster's association of labyrinth and detective fiction is worth examining in its own right, the 1994 graphic adaptation of the novel by David Mazzuchelli capitalizes on its visual form to render the story's association of maze-like wandering and

reading practices in a distinctive and amplified manner.<sup>96</sup> The visual translation of the narrative to the graphic page as realized by Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli complements the storyline and its labyrinthine treatment of interpretation.<sup>97</sup> The graphic novel is a maze to be traversed visually. When viewing the pages of the book, the audience is immersed in an activity that still more closely parallels the action of the story and the labyrinthine traps threatening to capture the characters.

In the maze of *City of Glass*, various characters dramatize a variety of dispositions toward signs, knowledge, and reading. In relation to these characters, Auster represents possible interpretive and epistemological practices. Those practices are defined in part with respect to implied and explicit attitudes concerning signs, meaning, and the world. Stillman and Quinn for instance expect signs to have some final, determinate, and potentially discoverable significance, and they reveal this by their persistent efforts to acquire mastery over the maze of signs they encounter. In contrast to Stillman and Quinn, two other prominent characters, Paul Auster and the narrator, model a disregard for any final unveiling of the true meaning of a sign or event. Like their counterparts, though, they articulate within the story particular attitudes concerning how and to what end we make sense of signs. In every case, the characters model opinions concerning what the stakes of reading are in ways that ultimately evoke varied maze-like structures and experiences.

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<sup>96</sup> All references are to the graphic novel, except when noted otherwise.

<sup>97</sup> The graphic novel develops the maze-theme of the book in a manner consistent with the novel and still more fully through its images. Auster's novel characterizes New York City's streets as a maze just once, but the graphic novel returns to this image on multiple occasions. In addition, the graphic page layout, with its grid-like frames and linear panels, is exploited by Mazzuchelli and Karasik in their development of the maze theme.

Lucien Dällenbach's insight that narrative reflexivity is a means of giving readers "instructions or orders for decoding" indicates that these characters can operate as guides directing readers in their responses to the book itself (436). The characters furnish readers with potential theoretical dispositions toward signs and procedures by which they can make sense of the text. Viewed in this way, the characters are invitations to share the particular approaches to reading and knowing portrayed in the graphic novel. The characters help us find our way through the labyrinth of the book by showing us how we might orient ourselves vis-à-vis its signs.

In an article devoted principally to characters entrapped in mazes, Robert Wilson notes in his conclusion that a "narrative can be a labyrinth if it seeks to capture its reader in the complexities of interpretation" (21). Describing the narrative strategy called entrapment, Carl Kropf writes:

In short, entrapment occurs when an author seems to force his reader into choosing among unacceptable readings, forces him into an unacceptable role, arouses expectations he does not fulfill, or otherwise causes the reader significant discomfort. Entrapment, therefore, is not simply or exclusively a matter of satire, irony, or offensive statement. [...]

Entrapment beguiles the reader into consenting to a proposition or assuming a role that has painful consequences in light of more mature reflection or of later developments in the text" (xiv).

This strategy requires both the promotion of the reader's adoption of a particular stance toward the narrative and the undermining of that position.

The characters of *City of Glass* model and promote the adoption of reading strategies that prove in the events of the story to be unsatisfactory or lacking a foundational justification. Stillman and Quinn's insistence on mastering the truth proves both futile and harmful. Similarly, the reading practices modeled by the character Paul Auster and the narrator are compromised in the story. At the close of the book, Auster, the character, is lambasted by the narrator in a manner that comments on Auster's promotion of reading solely for diversion. The narrator laments that Auster did not look after Quinn when in need. Still, the narrator's own approach to reading Quinn's notebook and retelling his story lacks coherence and a justifying framework. As a result, the story compromises the interpretive practices modeled in the text.

Instead, Auster and the collaborating artists use the characters both to set forth and critique certain interpretive dispositions that can be brought to the text by the audience. Finally, none of the potential models of response is portrayed as unambiguously justifiable or proper. In part, the story interrogates the power of its own signs to furnish its various readers an unassailable interpretive position from which to make claims about what the story means. We read early on that the "question is the story itself ... and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell" (2). Nothing in the story allows a reader to identify which, if any, of the models is the appropriate approach to the text. Thus, rather than authorize a reading strategy, Auster leaves in mutual contestation a variety of possibilities. The visual translation of the narrative to the graphic page as realized by Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli complements the storyline and its labyrinthine treatment of interpretation. The graphic novel is a maze to be traversed visually. The visual rendering of the story engages the book's audience in

an activity that still more closely parallels the action of the story and its labyrinthine traps.

In this way, the text becomes an instrument of reader formation. The reader engages the signs in *The City of Glass* and finds a narrative that characterizes self-reflexively his or her own struggles. The story addresses the difficulty of finding one's way through a maze of ambiguous signs. Like the signs encountered by Stillman and Quinn, those of the book open entangling and multiple passages to the reader. Reading the book involves decisions concerning signs that can be given no secure basis in any totalizing framework whether furnished by religious myth or rationality. The book parodies a drive to have signs function without play in their reference and challenges his readers to abandon reading practices that seek a transcendent assurance of their capacity to reveal the truth determinately. By compromising the various interpretive practices that the characters model as possible reading strategies, Auster entraps his readers in practices that the story suggests either do not merit trust or lack any sure justification or identifiable foundation.

Ultimately, the book has a great deal to say about what and whether it means something, even if it repeatedly subverts the varied models of interpretation it offers. Auster immerses his readers in a maze that resists interpretive mastery, but impedes interpretive closure in order to characterize our epistemic position as we live our lives in the world. By denying its readers a sure-footed interpretive position, the book suggests that we cannot acquire a fixed position from which to survey the truth. The consequences of refusing to accept this constraint on our access to the truth is consequential and significant: people suffer and die because others presume they can or should have a

comprehensive grasp of the truth. In addition, the narrative critiques the choice to treat the diverging passages we find in books and the world simply a means of diverting ourselves. Diversion is depicted in the story as a poor principle by which to orient ourselves even if the maze will not yield a masterful grasp of the truth. Our inability to acquire a masterful overview of the truth does not relieve us of a responsibility to attend to others, but only complicates how we proceed when doing so. Thus, readers are immersed in a maze-like structure, so as to reflect on the rich significance their choices can have even when lacking a masterful and cartographic grasp of the truth.

## **II.A Peter Stillman, Sr.: The Theologian Seeking Mastery of the Labyrinth**

Little about Peter Stillman Sr. makes him an inviting model for the reader. We learn early on that he is an abusive father and maddened criminal suffering delusions of grandeur. Nevertheless, Auster forces his reader into following him almost from the get go. Frequently, the book simply follows his story: we learn of his troubled past, we follow him as he meanders through New York City, and we eventually follow him to the point of his demise. If readers are led to follow the events of his life, they are also caught up in an activity that bears obvious similarities to his own actions in the story. He has dedicated his life to rendering intelligible signs and the world. Like Stillman, readers are engaged in a process of evaluating such signs and making sense of them as they respond to the book's words and images. Getting through the maze of the book itself goes a long way toward implicating the reader in Stillman's attempt at developing a sense of direction.



Employing the maze as a metaphor, Mark Taylor offers a post-structural analysis of the epistemological paradigm informing Stillman's quest. Taylor compares the drive toward epistemic mastery to a kind of exilic passage out of a labyrinth. The Western narrative of exile casts the wanderer's passage as one made in relation to a true home. This home can be construed in broad epistemological and metaphysical terms: the exile sets off from and yearns to return to his true place in the world. Alienated from home, the exile is estranged from himself. The exile's journey is one made toward epistemological closure and metaphysical reconciliation with Truth. Taylor characterizes this narrative's shape and its operation as a paradigm for conceiving of history:

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, which, we have discovered, haunts the historical imagination of the West even when it is not directly acknowledged, history is fundamentally tripartite. Though frequently subdivided in different ways, the historical process is usually described as consisting of three basic stages, roughly corresponding to the 'moments' of creation, fall, and redemption (153).

The plot of this narrative is maze-like. The narrative runs linearly from creation to redemption. Because the origin and end of the line are ultimately the same—moments of metaphysical and epistemological wholeness and presence—this route is also a circle. For the exile, all walking takes place during the period of the fall along that circular line as a march from and toward the truth.

Michel de Certeau, in an exploration of urban pedestrians, identifies a "voyeur" who holds the epistemological position toward which Taylor's exile aspires (127). The exile, who arrives at the end of the journey and successfully passes beyond the moment

of estrangement, no longer walks, but rests. After closing the excursion, this exile is perched above the city streets, “looking down like a god” onto the “endless labyrinths far below” (de Certeau 127). When the exile makes it to this perch and takes up the life of the voyeur, the whole narrative line takes on “coherence as an intelligible pattern, comprising logical and lawful events” (Taylor 153). All the turns of the exile’s migration can be plotted on the voyeur’s map, and identified in relation to the totalizing perspective.

Stillman shuffles along as an exile explicitly in the world that “unfolds between limits set by the garden and the kingdom” (Taylor 153). Stillman’s dissertation *The Garden and the Tower* developed a map-like myth charting why signs don’t work, what it would mean for them to do so, and how their proper functioning can be recovered. Stillman looks back nostalgically to the Garden of Eden when the relations between signs, meaning, and the world were intact and determinate. Noting that God gave Adam the task of naming all things, Stillman contends that “in that state of innocence, his words had revealed the essences of things. A thing and its name were interchangeable” (39). At the same time, he looks toward a moment in the future when the efficacy of language will be restored. Thus, he brackets the current functioning of language between a moment when language was free of ambiguity and an anticipated recovery of that condition.

During that bracketed period, Stillman is estranged from the condition of linguistic mastery with which he associates those mythical moments. He is an exile plotting his steps on the course stretching between creation and redemption. For the exile, signs form a complex and confusing maze. Language juts off in a multitude of directions and frequently fails to line up with its object. Following the Fall, “names became detached from things. Language had been severed from God” (39). Stillman

notes as he reads *Paradise Lost* that following the Fall “each key word has two meanings” (39). In particular, he “dwelled on the word ‘cleave’, which means both ‘to join together’ and ‘to break apart’” (39). Later, after his release from prison, Stillman focused on the fragmentation in the world rather than in a sign’s potential meaning. He proposed that “things have broken apart and our words have not adapted” (70). As a result of the brokenness of things, language fails to correspond to the most common of objects, and so certainly won’t allow us “to speak of things that truly concern us” (70). In either case, the result is the same: language does not function as a determinate route connecting those who would employ it to the world, others, and God.

The relation between the man Peter Stillman and his name dramatizes the existential conundrum of the exile-turned voyeur as Stillman himself theorizes it. As he moves about the city, his name seems very improper. His name fails to grasp who he is in truth. The impropriety of his name suits his exile status. It duplicates linguistically his existential alienation from his true home and so also from his true self. He yearns to return to or recover in the future the integrity of word and essence proper to Adam in the garden. If he can do so, he will have unraveled the maze-like puzzles of signs and brought himself home. Then, he would not be an exile, but a voyeur who views the maze from overhead. He would rest as still as a rock, fully reconciled with his name.

Before this reconciliation can be realized, the challenge, as the exile construes it, is to probe the maze. He must overcome its divergent and bifurcating routes and either discover or restore the hidden order governing the relations between signs and things. If he were to do so, signs would once again form the passages that link him to the truth. He would have converted the maze from a site of mystery into one of systematic

transparency. When he achieves that conversion, he will have acquired the interpretive and linguistic mastery he believes are essential to his own identity as Peter Stillman. He will have made his passage from confusion to mastery, so that signs will themselves be routes that run between him, the world, others, and God.

However, Stillman presumes his mastery of the maze of signs even as he aims at its acquisition. Prior to enclosing his son in a darkened room, he is certain his allegorical reading of the Bible uncovers the true meaning of the texts. Later, following his release from prison and shuffling about Manhattan, Stillman is similarly convinced that the publication of his next book “will be the most important event in the history of mankind” (71). He claims that the task of inventing a “new language” has fallen to him because “he is the only one to understand” (69). He explains to Quinn that he has taken to assigning new and appropriate names to the fractured items he happens upon. When Quinn wonders how he can be sure he’s named these objects correctly, Stillman insists, “I never make a mistake. It’s a function of my genius” (71). Even as he is finding his way through the maze, Stillman imagines that he is in fact already a man at rest overlooking it. Thus, Stillman orients his moves through the maze by appeal to the totalizing perspective of the voyeur that he anticipates acquiring.

Within Stillman’s theological framework, he links the overview of the maze to which he aspires with God’s own position. Stillman explained the intent of his experiment by claiming: “Thus we see the future of human salvation: to become masters of the words we speak” (75). As Stillman formulates it, his destination in the maze is a recovery of how language had functioned for Adam. When he can name essences, he will hold a position that is divine-like in its epistemic and linguistic mastery of the world.

The maze will no longer be formed by darkened paths, but instead be illuminated by his masterful insight into its layout. In this way, Stillman's theory makes God a function of his project for control. This control and the divine-like status of one who holds the authorial overview of the work is the goal assumed by the reader who hopes to chart how the maze of the book itself is arranged.

Stillman repeatedly imagines his way back home—his route to mastery—in ways that make the labyrinth an isolating trap. To make language a corridor between himself and the world and others Stillman develops his various experiments. His plans are themselves meant to form linear routes by which he can pass from the current situation in which language fails to an alternative situation marked by the recovery of Adam's tongue. Every route he tries to take there is an alienating one. When Stillman wrote his dissertation, he proposed that the Tower of Babel narrative prophesized a way to recover language's efficacy: the plan required people to pass forty days enclosed in dark rooms. Stillman attempted to realize his hypothesis in an experiment and closed his son in a room with covered windows. Stillman's efforts to recover the divine tongue all but eliminated the younger Stillman's capacity to speak or function in the world. When a fire reveals his experiment to others, he is himself enclosed in a prison cell. Even after his release, as Quinn tailed him, Stillman Sr. remained trapped in his efforts to align signs and things. He explains to Quinn: "My brilliant stroke has been to confine myself to a small area" (69). Although he insists that his experiment will be "a key [...] that opens locked doors," his routes from the one condition to the other are themselves labyrinthine snares (69). Finally, the snare is deadly. Facing failure in his experiments, he leaps from the Brooklyn Bridge.

The various consequences of Stillman's insistence on mastering the relation between signs and things contribute to the story's efficacy as a labyrinthine trap. Although few readers are likely to construe their interpretive labors as he does, Stillman needn't prompt readers to approach the maze of the book with his own mythology as a map. The trap has a broader reach. The story snares readers whenever they read for interpretive closure. As readers probe *City of Glass* with the hope of trying to bare its inherent and coherent meaning they seek an interpretive mastery comparable to that longed for by Stillman. The story calls this ambition into question. The events of Stillman's story expose as foolish his theory and practice of employing signs. The story links this presumption to mastery to an alienating and destructive way of relating to others.

## **II.B Following Daniel Quinn in The Detective's Labyrinth**

Like Stillman Sr., Daniel Quinn attempts to acquire an interpretive and epistemic mastery of a maze-like set of signs. Quinn's aspiration for a conclusive knowledge of the truth and his method of pursuing it are largely comparable to those of Stillman. Like Stillman, Quinn is an exile who "apprehensively pursues the salvific cure of closure" (Taylor 157). However, in contrast to Stillman Sr. for whom the ambition is grounded in religious myth, Quinn's hope of mastering signs develops in relation to the fictional world of detective fiction. If Stillman lives in relationship to a myth he has invented for himself, Quinn makes his way in the world as if living in a mystery novel. By drawing on the conventions of that genre, Auster sets before his reader a particularly provocative

model for those making a passage through his literary maze. He then goes on to undermine that strategy, entrapping any readers who might have chosen to employ it.

Auster links the genre of detective fiction to the labyrinth explicitly. Quinn, we learn at the start of Auster's novel, isolated himself in order to flee the memory he had of his deceased wife and son. He had two principal means of detaching himself from that experience. First, he put distance between himself and his past by taking long, meandering walks. In the streets surrounding his New York City apartment, he found a "labyrinth of endless steps" by which "he felt he was leaving himself behind" (4). Secondly, he sought a similar soothing escape in detective fiction. Following the accident, he relinquished his past as an author of poetry, plays, and essays, assumed the pseudonym William Wilson, and began to write mysteries. By writing as William Wilson and living vicariously through his detective Max Work, Quinn could find refuge from his life in the world of detective fiction. In that world, he not only adopted a different *persona*, he also hid from the cold world of chance that had stolen his wife and son from him. In the fictional world of detective fiction, he could be assured that little at all is left to chance, that everything has its reason.<sup>98</sup>

In Quinn's life, these two methods of escape are fused together when Quinn answers a call intended for Paul Auster's Detective Agency. When Quinn identifies himself as the detective Paul Auster, he is drawn from writing detective fiction into living as a detective. The younger Peter Stillman and his wife Virginia hire him to track the

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<sup>98</sup> Norma Rowan proposes that Quinn's fascination with the detective genre and later with detection itself is rooted in his desire for "refuge from the metaphysical chaos that he finds around him" (226). The story doesn't specify how Quinn lost his wife and son. By leaving the specific cause of death a mystery, Auster focuses on the experience of that loss as fundamentally inexplicable and without reason. Carl Malmgren proposes that Quinn "has a number of reasons [for taking the case], not the least of which is his feeling that the impersonation enables him to continue his flight from himself" (178).

elder Stillman through Manhattan, in order to discover if he bears malevolent intentions toward them. He takes up a detective's pursuit of a villain and is whirled into the city's streets. In doing so, Quinn draws together the soothing escape from emotion afforded to him by the genre of detective fiction and by walking the labyrinthine city streets. He closes himself off from his past and lives as Paul Auster, the detective in a rational universe, moving anonymously through the maze-like city.

*City of Glass's* utilization of the conventions of the mystery genre contributes to the book's efficacy in entrapping its reader. Through its use of detective fiction, Auster invites his readers to approach *City of Glass* as if it will meet the expectations of that genre. The detective genre to a greater extent than others works in relation to a particular conception of signs and their analysis. Peter Hühn claims that detective fiction, particularly in its classical construction, has an ideological commitment to narrative as a principle that governs the coherence and legibility of events. He contends that "detective novels can profitably be described as stories of writing and reading insofar as they are concerned with authoring and deciphering 'plots'" (451). Within this framework, the criminal and the detective have roles that are analogous to those of author and reader. In writing his crime, the criminal constructs a plot that is then written in the book of the world through its exaction. Its unavoidable traces remain to be read as fragments of the crime's whole text by the detective.

Hühn describes the detective's process of reading the crime as a text in a manner that recalls Walter Iser's reader response theory. He writes:

His task consists in delimitating the text by separating the relevant signs from the mass of nonrelevant facts around it, until he is finally able to reduce the polyvalence to the one true meaning, the true story of the crime. [...] And these various operations are guided by hypotheses about



what might have happened, that is, by trying out various frames of reference, which could confer temporal and causal coherence and meaning on the heterogeneous and contradictory conglomerate of facts confronting the detective. The continual rearrangement and reinterpretation of clues is, of course, the basic method of reading and understanding unfamiliar texts—commonly called the “hermeneutic circle,” which involves devising interpretive patterns to integrate signs and then using new signs to modify and adjust these patterns accordingly (455).

It is this conventional plot that implies that careful scrutiny of signs will ultimately disclose some determinate meaning. The signs themselves can mislead, because they frequently invite alternative interpretations. However, that ambiguity and multiplicity in the significance of the body of evidence may be reduced to its true and determinate meaning. As the detective collects other relevant clues and uses them to exclude possible interpretations, he or she passes from a variety of plausible evaluations to the exclusively true account that identifies who perpetrated the crime and how.

Many works in this genre reinforce this paradigm for sign analysis by following the rule of fair play, which stipulates that no piece of evidence necessary to the solution be denied the reader.<sup>99</sup> This rule fosters the expectation in readers that they can do more than witness the detective’s process of analysis. They can also adopt the genre’s hermeneutic model as a reading strategy. Martín proposes that the “role created for the reader by detective fiction amounts to a strategy of questioning texts. The strategy mirrors the interpretive acts of the detective engaged in the resolution of a case” (6). Thus, detective fiction has traditionally modeled a particular reading practice and invited its readers to employ it as they read.

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<sup>99</sup> S.S. Van Dine’s “Twenty Rules of Writing Detective Stories” and Ronald A. Knox’s “A Detective Story Decalogue” are two essays by authors of detective fiction that lay out rules to ensure a reader will “have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery” (Van Dine 189).

Before *City of Glass*, the fiction of Edgar Allen Poe, Jorge Luís Borges, Georges Perec, and Umberto Eco linked the process of detection to the process of finding one's way through a labyrinth. But even before these writers made explicit possible associations between the labyrinth and detective fiction, the conventions of the genre's plot give it the structure of a convertible maze. Critics of the genre have highlighted the genre's recurrent, narrative transition from enigma to understanding and analyzed the detective's passage from ignorance to comprehension in relation to the maze.<sup>100</sup>

The passage from the enigma of a crime to its unraveling gives a linear, circuitous, and circular shape to the labyrinth of a conventional mystery. Dorothy Sayers commended the classic detective narrative for possessing "an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle, and end" (101). Although dominated by this line, detectives and readers advance circuitously toward the discovery of the criminal. Wrong-turns, dead-end hypotheses, and other delays all contribute to the suspense that motivates the pursuit of the mystery's disclosure. Dennis Porter notes that detective fiction "must be circuitous and preferably strewn with obstacles" (31).<sup>101</sup> Because the narrative line of detective fiction progresses not only through a linear series of delays, but stretches from some prior event back to it in the form of its explanation, the narrative proceeds circularly. Porter explains succinctly that detective fiction "is a genre committed to an act of recovery,

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<sup>100</sup> In an examination of the labyrinth in modern literature, Wendy Faris proposes that "the structure of the detective story is analogous to the labyrinth" (183). In *Readers and Labyrinths*, Jorge Hernández Martín develops a theory of the detective story's reader in relationship to the maze. Their proposals contribute to the claims I put forth here concerning the genre's relation to labyrinthine structure and process.

<sup>101</sup> For a partial list of the devices of deferral employed in detective fiction, see Porter 32-33. Roland Barthes's well-known theorization of the enigma and delaying structures of narrative explicates them as a "hermeneutic code;" see *S/Z* XXXII and XXXVII.

moving forward in order to move back” (29).<sup>102</sup> The detective not only sets off from the crime, but also returns to apprehend the truth to disclose who did what to whom.

Thus, conventional detective stories unfold in ways that subordinate mystery to epistemological mastery. Roger Caillois proposes that the traditional

“value of a detective novel can be quite neatly defined by the affront to reason and experience contained in its point of departure, and the more or less complete and believable way that both reason and experience are satisfied by its conclusion. At bottom the unmasking of a criminal is less important than the reduction of the impossible to the possible, of the inexplicable to the explained, of the supernatural to the natural.” (3)

With each mystery’s conclusive unveiling of its enigma, the genre ultimately

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<sup>102</sup> Both Porter and Malmgren conflate two ways in which the crime is the origin and conclusion of a narrative. In relation to Todorov’s identification of the dual plots of detective fiction, they discuss the crime as the final moment in one chain of events and as the origin of the detective’s investigation (See Porter 29 and Malmgren 22). These are, as Todorov explains, two different narratives: the plot of the crime and the plot of the investigation, and the crime is a juncture between them. My point here is concerned strictly with the investigatory plot. In that narrative line, the crime is the point from which the detective sets off as well as the point toward which the investigation is directed. But in the narrative focused on the crime’s perpetration, the crime itself obviously need not be the story’s point of origin.

“undermines the very idea of mystery” (Malmgren 15).<sup>103</sup> Holquist writes that Poe invents the genre with his Dupin detective stories by creating “the essential metaphor for order: the detective [...] the instrument of pure logic, able to triumph because he alone in a world of credulous men holds to the Scholastic principle of *adequatio rei et intellectus*, the adequation of mind to things, the belief that the mind, given enough time, can understand everything” (156). In that world, “there are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning” (Holquist 157). The detective’s solution confirms that the evidence will give way to a totalizing and coherent explication. Martín writes similarly, detection “reverts to the scene of the crime with the regularity of ritual, reducing the anomalies present in a world made strange by crime to a norm and system” (41).

In this linear plot, the detective is both guide and cartographer. The detective acts as a guide who follows a line of reasoning like Ariadne’s thread through the labyrinth’s passages into the heart of the mystery. In the closing scene, the detective views his diachronic passage to truth retrospectively and converts it into a synchronic overview of the crime. Having probed the labyrinth and exited a master of its circuits, the detective produces a map that charts the labyrinth’s constitutive signs. That map plots all the corridors and identifies dead-ends and wrong-turns. With this map in hand, the reader shares with the detective a totalizing perspective from which to survey the relationships between the various pieces of evidence in an understanding of the crime and of the detective’s discovery. Marty Roth explains, “Since a condition of intimate and secret

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<sup>103</sup> Some mysteries double this moment of resolution by making the detective’s solution as much an enigma as the crime. In these stories, the detective’s mind and its subtle operation, like the crime itself, perplexes the reader. In the story’s revelatory conclusion, the comprehensive solution not only discloses by whom and how the crime was committed, but also how the investigator successfully arrived at the discovery. Although both the crime and its detection are initially represented enigmatically, the story eventually reduces the mystery and makes possible the reader’s mastery of the story.

relatedness governs all the signs, animate and inanimate, of mystery and detective fiction, the detective tells the story of those secret relationships” (176).

When Quinn initiated his work on the case, he was clearly aware of the import of this conventional outline to narratives of the mystery genre. Detective fiction promised Quinn a world in which reason reigned and signs surrendered the truth. The narrator informs the reader, “What Quinn liked about mysteries was their economy. There is no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not, it has the potential to be so” (7). In the world of detective fiction, the promise of meaning adheres to every detail, inviting the detective to search after its significance. In this world, “Everything becomes essence: the center of the book shifts, is everywhere...and no circumference can be drawn until the end” (7). Eventually, an end is reached, and when reached, the detective resolves precisely the significance of those details. The narrative of detective fiction insists on this coherence and lawfulness by bringing the criminal out from the recesses of mystery.

Initially, Quinn’s engagement with his clients conforms to this paradigm and readers can proceed expecting that they may be able to discover the truth themselves. At the very least, the story’s appeal to the mystery genre suggests that the narrative will lead to a point when the mystery will have been unveiled. The initial call to the Auster detective agency, seemingly directed to Quinn by mistake, presents the writer of mystery fiction with an enigma. Stillman Jr. insists that his call is a matter of life and death. When Quinn later meets with his clients, the mystery thickens. Quinn’s conversations with his clients are difficult to sort through. The younger Stillman spews forth a labyrinthine account of his father’s experiment and his own current situation. The story

he relates, fractured by unintelligible noises and fantastic pronouncements, weaves together repetitive and inconsistent declarations. Immediately following the conversation, Quinn is told by Virginia Stillman not to believe all that he has been told. Thus, after this first and only in-person encounter with his clients, Quinn is unsure what to believe concerning their apparent predicament or trustworthiness. He has instead a knotted, rambling, and enigmatic tale to analyze and sort through.

Daniel Quinn marshals all of the traditional tools of the detective trade in his effort to overcome the labyrinthine obstacles of his case. He tails the subject of the investigation, creates a record of Stillman Sr.'s various doings, engages him in conversation, and analyzes everything with the expectation that he can discover the intentions of Stillman. As he progressively employs these means to solve the puzzle of Stillman's return to New York City, the obstacles seem innumerable. Quinn's efforts are repeatedly frustrated.

The traditional detective is presented with a labyrinth in which a true path is to be discovered, but Quinn's work as detective is almost immediately presented as involving arbitrary choice concerning a sign's true reference. After speaking with his clients, he learns that the elder Stillman is to arrive at Grand Central station, and so he heads there with a photo. That twenty-year-old photo is his only means of recognizing Stillman. Peering down the train platform, Quinn has trouble picking Stillman out from the throng both when it looms before him and when he finds himself in among the people pushing past him. Eventually, he identifies a probable candidate, an older man who resembles the image of a younger Stillman. But with the passing of a moment, a double of the first Stillman appears before Quinn and throws his measured certainty into doubt. He follows

both to the information kiosk where the paths taken by the two split. Their separation forces Quinn to choose which of the two he'll follow. Nothing can indicate to him which man he should pursue, and so we read, "whatever choice he made would be a submission to chance" (53). With a tenuous presumption, he begins to follow the better dressed of the two men, but then turns back and picks up the trail of the more bedraggled. At the top of the frame, as Quinn pursues this Stillman, we read, "There was no way to know: not this, not anything" (54). Quinn is in the labyrinth, doing his best to tail the right man, but he finds this task a difficult one, involving decisions that have no sure basis. He can't get the photo to line up with its true referent.

Several other events undermine the traditional practices of the detective and progressively confirm that there is no way to know, no way to be certain of the maze's actual order. For example, as Stillman makes his way through the city, Quinn trails him, methodically watching and noting all that Stillman does. Quinn mirrors the man he assumes is Stillman as they move through the city, separated by a few meters.



Doubles of one another, each man makes his way down the street with a notebook raised before him, held in his left hand as he scrawls something with a pen. The two men reflect one another also in posture and perhaps even facially. Through this sequence, the

searching reader follows Quinn just as Quinn tails Stillman. The detective's quest to discover the meaning of Stillman's project reflects the reader's quest to identify the meaning of the paths cut by both Quinn and Stillman.

We read that Quinn "began to wonder if he had not embarked on a meaningless project" (58). To avoid this, "Quinn preferred to think that Stillman had a plan. It justified his tailing him" (59). Like Quinn working to discover Stillman's intentions, so readers can probe the story to grasp the intention behind the words and images. In another panel, Stillman peers into an empty can he has seemingly lifted from a garbage bin (58).

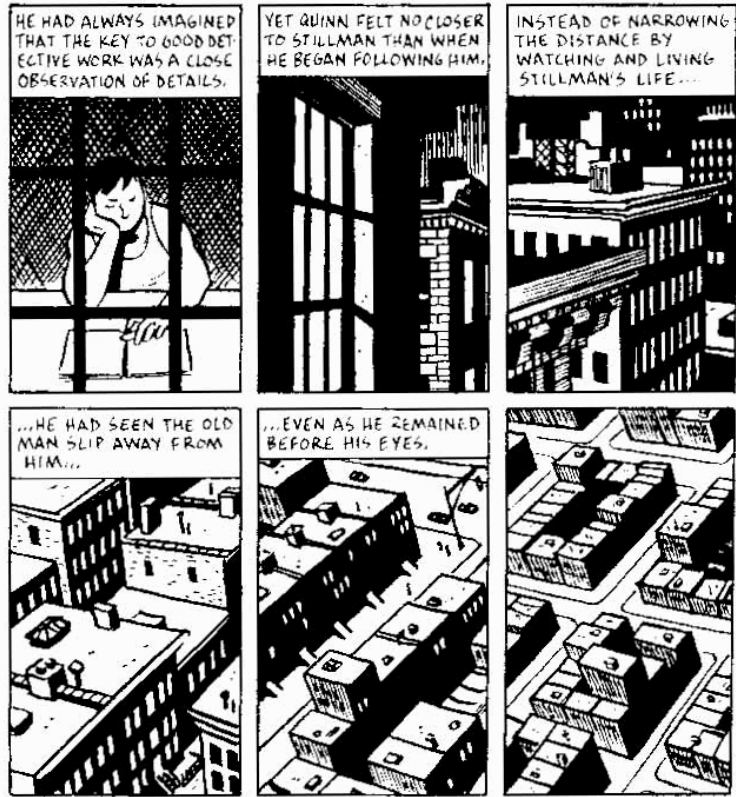


To the far left of the panel, across the street from Stillman, stands Quinn, viewing Stillman with a gaze equally ponderous. The doubling of this questioning gaze reflects the reader's relation to the story. The question invites the reader to ask if the story is as empty as the can, as devoid of meaning as Stillman's meandering course. By prompting this question, the text throws into doubt whether the maze of the book is one that reflects the design of its author or if it is instead a passage lacking a meaningful order. The reader who would solve the puzzle presented by the story is caught in the embarrassing position of trailing Quinn and Stillman in their unknowingly absurd quests.



Quinn is also thwarted when he attempts to probe the collected evidence through a careful retrospective analysis. While observing Stillman, Quinn had “decided to record every detail” (59). But later that day alone in his apartment, Quinn sits at his desk looking puzzled and depressed with his notebook open in front of him. One record of Stillman’s activities reads: “Sits on bench in park and reads through notebook” (61). The event in Stillman’s day seems a rebuke of Quinn’s and the reader’s efforts at close reading. The day he has just passed, a day spent meandering through the streets of Manhattan behind Stillman, has not born him to a point of greater understanding. Looking back retrospectively at the course he traversed reveals nothing. Quinn thinks to himself: “There were no leads, no moves to be made [...] Stillman’s behavior had been too obscure to reveal his intentions” (86). Despite his best efforts to unravel Stillman’s mysterious behavior, Quinn has no access to the purpose, if there is any, guiding the ex-convict’s steps. Readers are at as much a loss concerning what has passed to bring the story to this point.

Just after failing to solve his case by looking back through his notes, Quinn seems to find access into the maze precisely by acquiring a map-like overview of Stillman’s itineraries. Images looking down on the streets from above accompany his cartographic exploration (61).



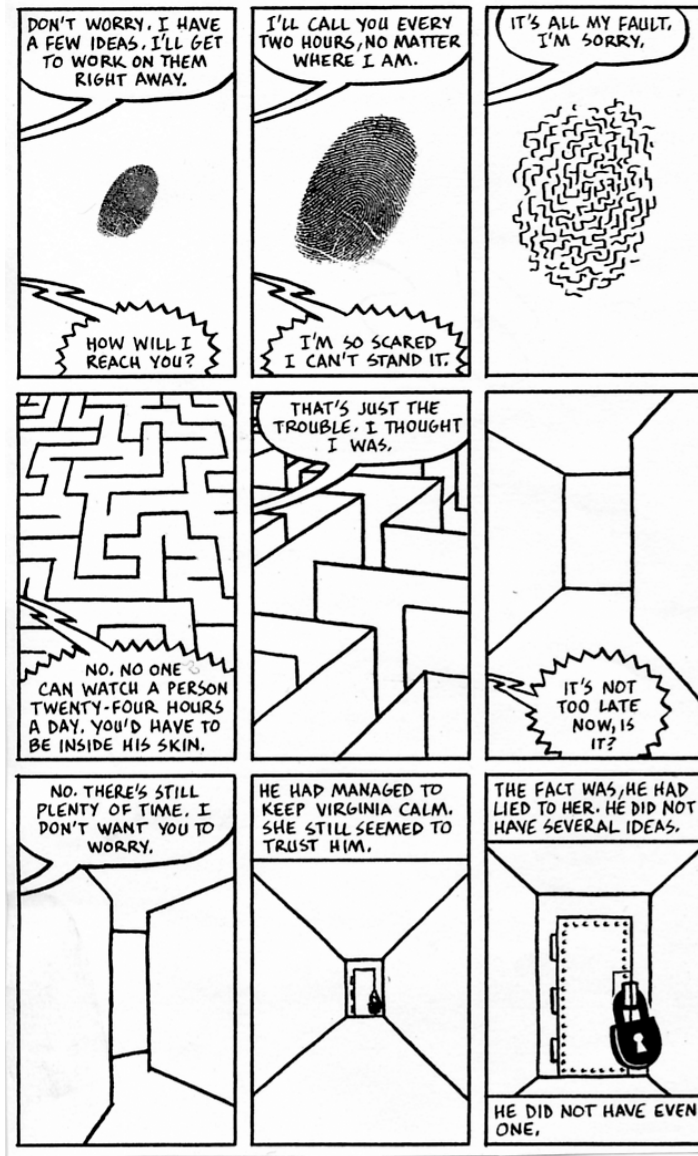
He begins to review Stillman's various routes through the city. For each day he has a record, he maps Stillman's walk. In doing so, he, like the exile-turned-voyeur, rises above the city and looks down onto the shape of those walks. Like the detective in traditional mysteries, Quinn translates his diachronic passage through the maze into a synchronic overview. From that vantage point, he sees in each day's route a letter. Still en route to a position of mastery, Quinn can read only the fragmented: O-W-E-R-O-F-B-A-B. Even as Quinn suspects that he has stumbled upon a hidden message, he is left pondering whether he is in fact working his way into the enigma. Quinn understood that by drawing these maps he "was ransacking the chaos of Stillman's movements for some glimmer of cogency" (63). Discovering the letters furnishes him just that, a glimmer. The letters perhaps constitute a message. But the message's focus, the myth of the tower,

adumbrates the undercutting of communication. His discovery leaves him in the midst of an enigmatic labyrinth.<sup>104</sup>

After Stillman eludes Quinn, the detective calls his clients and confesses that he's lost the target of his tail job. The labyrinthine images of one page represent Quinn's failure to grasp Stillman's intentions. Virginia Stillman attempts to console Quinn, saying: "No one can watch a person twenty four hours a day. You'd have to be inside his skin" (85), and Quinn replies, "That's just the trouble. I thought I was" (85). Mazzuchelli's panels associate Quinn's efforts to be inside Stillman's skin with a maze-like exploration.

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<sup>104</sup> When Quinn heads to Grand Central, Mazzuchelli depicts him looking down on the main lobby from above as well. He fails there also to discover Stillman despite holding the voyeur's overview (47).



In this frame, the curling lines of the fingerprint form long corridors (85). Quinn's fails to work his way into Stillman. The labyrinth proves impenetrable because the path leads only to a locked door. Readers are similarly refused entry to Auster's intentions and left instead immersed in the labyrinthine passages of the book to move through it as they will without any sure access to an intention giving them form.

By the end of the story, none of Quinn's methods of detection culminate in a conclusive determination of the meaning of the evidence he gathers. In contrast to the

conventional mystery plot, Quinn never decodes the enigma of Stillman's itinerant presence in Manhattan. The detective's process proves futile. Rather than discover a plot, he learns that Stillman has given him the slip. Unwilling to relinquish the case, Quinn attempts to discuss the situation with his clients, but finds that they also have vanished from the apartment where he had first met them. After learning that Stillman had committed suicide, Quinn never clarifies what has happened to his clients. Instead, he enters the apartment abandoned by them, strips, sprawls across the floor of an empty room, and remains enclosed there before finally disappearing entirely. Thus, rather than solve a case, the detective is enclosed in a dark room, apparently starved, mad, and entirely isolated, before he becomes a missing person himself.

Ultimately, Auster's novel challenges the hermeneutic and semiologic commitments of detective fiction.<sup>105</sup> As Quinn attempts to discover Stillman's intentions, the success of his investigatory work depends on two things: the functioning of signs through which he reads Stillman and his method of detection. Quinn discovers that neither signs nor the method work as conventional mystery stories promise. Detached observation, the collection and sorting of detail, and rational analysis are all required of Quinn in the prosecution of this case. However, as he proceeds, Quinn is challenged by the persistence of ambiguity and the place of chance in all he does and observes. His efforts to make an exile's passage toward truth seem compromised at every turn.

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<sup>105</sup> Allison Russell contends that the works of the trilogy "employ and deconstruct the conventional elements of the detective story" (71). Bernd Herzogenrath writes similarly that the novel is Auster's "re-writing and deconstruction of the traditional detective story" (26). Lavender writes that the whole novel deconstructs itself: "Characters appear, they are sketched full of potentials which we logically expect to be fulfilled, and then they walk off the page never to return. A mystery is presented, investigated, drawn out to what we feel is its midpoint, that place where it is most profligate of potential solutions, and then abandoned never to be solved" (78).

This undermining of the detective's interpretive practice progressively challenges readers to relinquish the expectations they bring to detective fiction. To assume a role analogous to the detective and read in anticipation of the case's closure grows progressively less acceptable as Quinn's method is repeatedly foiled. By the conclusion of the story, Quinn's effort to probe the maze of signs leaves him deranged. Readers pursuing interpretive closure are presented a tale in which a fixation on knowing the truth not only goes unsatisfied, but proves a harmful pursuit. As with Stillman, Quinn's function as a model of the reader promotes a potential means of orienting one's way through *City of Glass* that the story undermines. When readers are drawn into adopting the detective's assumptions about signs and their analysis, they are led into a narrative trap and caught in a literary labyrinth that resists and parodies those efforts.

### **III The Maze as Tomb-like Enclosure**

Auster discourages readers from approaching his text as Stillman and Quinn do the world. He does so, in part, by undermining their efforts. He also associates the labyrinthine enclosures in which Stillman and Quinn are trapped with death and burial. The whole course of their exilic passage to epistemic mastery is contaminated by death. Tomb-like enclosures lie both at the outset and end of their stories. Both initiate their quests following the loss of loved ones. Quinn isolates himself following the deaths of his wife and son. Stillman locks his son in the sealed room only after losing his wife. Additionally, the labyrinthine courses each walks lead to their self-destruction. Both are, at least apparently, led to their deaths by their efforts to gain a mastery over mystery. Auster represents the frameworks they employ for interpretation as confining and crypt-

like codes. The book seems to warn that to pursue interpretive mastery as do Stillman and Quinn is to take a self-destructive and alienating route through the maze.

As noted above, Stillman's passage toward interpretive mastery is associated with a series of isolating and destructive enclosures: his son's room, his prison cell, the narrowly circumscribed area in which he walks. Each of these enclosures is related to the project of control he has assumed for himself. They are tomb-like images of that project and its ultimate consequence. At the same time, the prophecy he creates concerning how language will be restored is linked to the genocidal history of American expansionism. Henry Dark, the Puritan invented by Stillman, identified America as the New Babel that God would use to restore Adam's tongue. The prophecy indicated that the tower reversing Babel could be built only "once that continent had been filled" (44). Although the imperial character of that prophecy is elided from Henry Dark's pamphlet, it nevertheless links Stillman's plan for gaining epistemic mastery to the drive for mastery of the continent. That earlier drive made of what became the United States a burial ground for the indigenous populations, the remnants of which remain enclosed on reservations.

Eventually, his drive to determine the order of the maze leads to his own death. His choice to leap from the Brooklyn Bridge symbolizes his experience of the world. Stillman contends that language, following the Fall, fails to form a bridge between himself, the world, and God. Lacking that bridge, he yearns to restore language's univocal reference and make language a straight route spanning two points. Similarly, his various projects are each meant to be bridges that allow him to complete his exile's passage. By way of his experiments, he expects to return to a divine-like position of

epistemic mastery. Finally, he finds a route to that goal adapted to the framework with which he is working. He leaps from the bridge and brings his quest to an end by exiting the Babel like city in which signs fail to line up. By doing so, he insists that the word and thing fail to function as they should. The structure was called a 'bridge' but it didn't get him to the other side. When he leaps from 'the bridge' he restores language by making the structure his route out of the broken world. In this way, the word 'bridge' comes to bear its proper meaning in an action that brings him to rest. He ends his quest for a language that functions and solves the riddle of his identity by bringing himself to rest as a dead-still man.

Stillman's name, in this light, is a foreboding warning that even as he walked through the city, he was effectively as still as a dead man. His exilic passage to the voyeur's perch is a death-like final passage. That passage, as de Certeau notes in his essay, relates the pursuit of an epistemic overview to an "erotics of knowledge" (127). As de Certeau explains, the "gnostic drive [...] is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (127). The overview of the streets held by the voyeur is an ecstatic experience: it "is to be lifted out of the city's grasp" (de Certeau 127). High above the complicated world below, the exile-turned voyeur is at home in the heavens. In relation to that position, he posits his epistemic mastery of the whole. Rather than laud that mastery, Auster, like de Certeau, suggests that the totalizing overview is a death-like perch. By linking the drive to epistemic mastery to death, Auster discourages his readers from aspiring to it. To exit from the mediating play of signs by claiming for oneself an overview of them is not unlike desiring to be outside time and so outside life.



In a manner comparable to Stillman's experience, Quinn's investigatory passage functions for him as a tomb-like enclosure. When he takes on the Stillman case, he enters a labyrinthine crypt. In that crypt, Daniel Quinn attempts to bury his past, but his passage through the city winds up leading to his own isolation, self-enclosure, and entrapment. Auster's representation of Quinn contributes to his parody of the conventional, male detectives of mysteries and *film noir* and the ways they make their way through the world. In particular, Auster links the detectives' strategy for dealing with mystery to emotional restraint. Auster presents the detective's linear passage from enigma to its solution as a cold, rational march. He is not alive to his feelings, but trying to die to them by taking on the persona of detective.

Quinn's passage through the city forms an emotional enclosure that recalls Edgar Allen Poe's stories of detection as well as those of premature burial. Like later detectives, Poe's Dupin sorts his way into the mystery by focusing his rational powers. In Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Dupin enacts the detective's concentration in an exemplary manner when he seals himself in a dark and "little back library, or book-closet" to ponder the enigma presented to him by the prefect of police (Poe 208). The enclosure in which he takes refuge is a symbolic rendering of the conventional detective's rational concentration. Daniel Quinn attempts to do the same, but Auster's treatment of his detective's self-recollection links this emotional reserve to Poe's stories on premature burial. Quinn detaches himself from the experience of pain and loss that followed the deaths of his wife and son by living as if he were dead himself.

As Quinn settles into his work, Auster suggests that the concentration he acquires through doing so involves a death-like foreclosure of life. For example, when Quinn

meets Virginia Stillman, although he imagines her undressed, he struggles to master his sexual longing.<sup>106</sup> The provocative *femme fatale* of *film noir* threatens to seduce the detective and lead him astray in the labyrinth. He insists that her “sexual habits or lack of them” are not his concern (26). Strained by his longing for companionship and sex, he wipes his eyes and imagines himself to be the rock-jawed, consummate detective of his stories: Max Work. Living vicariously through Work, he divorces himself from his own body. At the same time, he makes the work of the private investigator a refuge from his desire for Virginia. He gets to business and tells her, “An advance would ensure us a privileged investigator-client relationship” (30). Although doing so secures their confidence, it also defines their relationship in the cold terms of professional conduct. He asserts that he is a private eye, that he does not exist “for anyone but himself” (3).

Quinn repeatedly inhabits confined spaces that manifest his psychological isolation, including his apartment, a dumpster, and later Stillman’s apartment.<sup>107</sup> At the start of the story, Quinn’s home already serves him as a crypt-like enclosure in the midst of the labyrinthine city. He is enclosed there, cut off from his old friends, and slowly leaving his past behind. Karasik and Mazzuchelli depict Quinn in his bed as paper pours in his open window burying the mystery writer. Auster suggests this city, like the ground on which it is built, is a place of the dead. It is a place where lives are consumed by

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<sup>106</sup> Virginia Stillman recalls the two conventional roles assigned to women in *film noir*. She is a *femme fatale*, the sexually provocative spider woman, who threatens Daniel Quinn, and also what Andrew Spicer has called the “supportive homebuilder” (84). She tempts Quinn, but she goes without sex because she “sees her role as support and solace for the man” (Andrews 91). This is a challenge both to Quinn and that reader who would try to discover a single, coherent truth behind her images. Her identity is a labyrinthine riddle that forces a choice concerning how she is to be viewed, and thus also, how we are to view Quinn’s involvement with her and the case more generally.

<sup>107</sup> In the original novel, Auster describes Quinn’s morning at the Columbia library in a manner that associates his detective work with one more tomb. We learn he entered the library like a “crypt of oblivion” (50). Sitting there, he turned his back to the window and resisted “a call to wander aimlessly” (50).

maximum work. It is a place where work consumes the memory of those who have died in the past. Quinn longs to be consumed by his work, so that he can stop feeling the loss of his wife and son. And so, the storyline he pursues is meant to enclose him in a labyrinthine crypt.

Once on the case, when Quinn isn't on the street, he is frequently tucked away in his apartment, alone in its dark space, retracing the events of the day at his desk, wondering if his work is a way of "just killing time" (62). When he does this for the first time, he strips naked and enters his own-name in the case notebook rather than his pseudonym. It seems that he is reclaiming his life. He seems to be making of the apartment a place of re-birth. Indeed, Quinn treats his apartment, as he works on the case, like a womb from which he hopes to be born into a world free of brokenness. However, this womb is the same enclosure out of which Stillman expected his son to be re-born with the divine tongue. It is not a place inhabited by the living at all, but a place of death. On the exile-turned-voyeur's map, that origin and womb is one and the same with the journey's end: a resting place outside time. Like Stillman Sr., Quinn succumbs to the "gnostic drive [...] this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (de Certeau 127).

Later in Quinn's investigation, he climbs into a dumpster in an alley by the Stillman apartment. Although he aims ostensibly to watch over his clients, he "began to understand the true nature of solitude" while enclosed there (111). We learn later in a conversation Quinn has with Auster just how isolated he was. Auster tells him that Stillman Sr. committed suicide and asks him how he could have missed it in the newspapers. Insulted, Quinn declares, "I don't have time for newspapers" (119). While living in the alley dumpster, he used the papers placed there "to wipe himself" (110). He

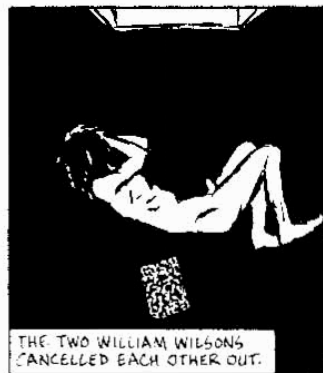
shut himself off from what would have disclosed to him that the case was closed and that he could get on with life. Instead, he treated himself like waste, like some thing that had exhausted its purpose. As if expired, he shuts himself in the coffin-like dumpster.

In the end, Quinn's drive to eliminate the enigmatic meanings from a set of signs duplicates the crime first perpetrated by Stillman Sr. against his son. Quinn enters the Stillman apartment and encloses himself in a darkened room. By the end of the novel, Quinn disappears even from there. His maze-like investigation leads him into an entirely inaccessible space. Narrator and reader both are unable to say what has come of the detective. Although the novel leaves Quinn's fate in question, the graphic novel hints at a more determined end. In some of the last few images, Quinn is depicted diving into water as if he has followed Stillman even in death. We read that the case had "become a bridge to another place in his life" (131). The graphic novel quotes the novel exactly, but the images accentuate the association between Quinn's making of the case a bridge and Stillman's ultimate demise. The images depict Quinn, nude and with pen in hand, diving into water. Once again, *City of Glass* discourages readers from attempting to determine either comprehensively or finally the meaning of its own signs by insinuating that a character's comparable ambition is destructive.

The graphic adaptation develops this theme in a unique way by opening and closing with images of dark enclosures. The book sets off from an ambiguous image of a black hole. After a few panels, it is identifiable as the center of a zero on a phone dial.



The zero is, like the misdialled call for Paul Auster's Detective Agency, the "wrong number that started it" (1). It is an image of enigma itself: an image of the absence of reason, the lack of a point, oblivion. At the close of Quinn's story, he lies naked, curled in a fetal position, situated in a dark and empty room.



Like the zero, the room is a dark enclosure, and it too is a site of oblivion and loss. Quinn and the Stillman couple disappear from this room seemingly to enter into the nothingness that the zero connotes at the start of the book. Although the zero and the room are clearly not exact reflections of one another, they mirror one another connotatively by evoking nothingness, enclosure, and the darkness of mystery.

In relation to these images at the start and end of the story, the string of images forms a circle. The dark center of the zero and the dark enclosure of the room give the

linear panels of the graphic novel the form of a loop. Between these two images, stretches the storyline, all the action that might make sense of why early on the reader peers into the dark and hollow center of a zero and on one of the last pages, into a dark and hollow room at an enclosed man. In the traditional detective story, the narrative loops back to the crime to disclose the truth concerning what happened. In *City of Glass*, Auster and the graphic artists subvert the conventional function that circular form serves in the detective genre. The circuit running from beginning to end is emptied of its explanatory content. It does not enact a moment of epistemological and interpretive mastery. Although he is in the role of detective, Quinn never discloses the truth. He is instead enfolded in the dark of mystery.

Thus, the images of the zero and the room not only reflect one another, but also the whole of the book and its circular storyline.<sup>108</sup> Each image of enclosure and mystery functions as a symbol of detective fiction's linear and closed narrative. In effect, the zero and enclosed room are images that confer significance on the paths walked by Stillman Sr. and Quinn as they pursue mastery of the maze. Those paths are the linear loops of the exile-turned-voyeur, whose circular course is an attempt to return to a position that brings their epistemic quests to a close. But instead of signifying a fixed grasp of the truth, these images recall all the particular ways that their aspirations to epistemic mastery prove empty and self-enclosing.

In relation to these images, the book likens the epistemological ambitions of Stillman and Quinn to labyrinthine crypts. They long to acquire a fixed position

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<sup>108</sup> This particular use of the circular structure is at work on the first page of the book itself. The first line of the graphic novel reads: "It was a wrong number that started it" (1). The first and last word of the page's only sentence is 'it', neutral and empty like the zero and room at the end of the book. Readers are left turning in that enigmatic loop.

concerning the truth, but they reach their resting place only in death. They aspire to have a comprehensive overview of the truth, but this pursuit is a gnostic and disembodied flight from time and the material world. They want to bring their pursuit of the truth to a resolute close, but to do so they force themselves and others into enclosures. Thus, the book suggests that these ambitions to see wholly, to know fully, to survey the truth as if from a fixed position are deadly.

#### **IV Paul Auster and the Narrator: Two Additional Ways through the Maze**

If detective fiction's allure is in part the promise of epistemic mastery, *City of Glass* not only undermines that promise, it also presents at least two characters that do not make it their own aspiration. Each differs considerably in how they relate to mystery from the story's theologian and detective. In the first instance, Auster himself figures into the story as a meta-fictional oracle.<sup>109</sup> As a character, he lauds the open, literary passage that refuses to be mastered. In a conversation with Quinn, he praises literature's potential frustration of efforts to bring interpretation to closure. Then, at the close of the book, the narrator has a similar role. The unnamed narrator confesses the limitations circumscribing his best efforts to recount the events of the story. In contrast to Stillman and Quinn, neither Paul Auster nor the narrator would claim an absolute mastery over the mazes they encounter. Neither of these models anticipates any exile-turned voyeur overviews with which to survey the maze. But these characters contrast not only with the detective and theologian. They also represent two distinctive approaches to sorting a way

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<sup>109</sup> Late in Quinn's adventure, badly in need of money and help, having assumed Auster's identity to take the case in the first place, Quinn seeks out Auster with the check securing his services in hand. When he arrives at Auster's apartment, he discovers that Auster is not in fact a detective, but instead, just a writer.

through maze-like signs. Finally, although neither of the approaches is an uncompromised model for the reader, it is the narrator's approach toward which Auster leads his reader.

For the character Auster, a good story doesn't lead like a path to the truth as Quinn and Stillman might hope. Rather, literature opens multiple pathways for a reader's interminable exploration. When Quinn visits Auster in his apartment, their conversation turns to Auster's current project: an exploration of the authorship of *Don Quixote*. Auster proposes an elaborate theory concerning Cervantes's source for the story and Quixote's own role in the book's production. The focused discussion of *Don Quixote* allows Auster the author to give voice to an additional take on language and on literature specifically. Auster tells Quinn that the appropriate question to ask of literature does not concern its relation to truth, but instead, how well the story entertains through artifice. Quinn wonders why anyone would go to all the trouble Auster attributes to Quixote. Auster supplies a motive: to discover to what extent people would "tolerate blasphemies, lies, and nonsense if they gave them amusement" (93). Auster confides to Quinn that he believes the answer is "to any extent" (93), because finally the only thing people want out of a book is "to be amused" (94).

Auster's affirmation of literature's capacity to delight has labyrinthine connotations. In contrast to Stillman and Quinn, who yearn for resolution and a relation to signs that leads toward truth, Auster celebrates in the name of play a literature of departures lacking any final points of arrival. In contrast to Quinn and Stillman both, the fictional Auster is a reader who draws enjoyment from a text's potential for persistent mystery. Auster celebrates this perpetual indeterminacy and a text's power to open a



maze of diverging possibilities to its readers. Readers, he proposes, draw delight from the varied diversions opened by literary passages.

As they have their conversation, it is clear that Quinn is not entirely comfortable with Auster's proposals. Quinn, with tears "behind his eyes" (91), grows visibly anxious as Auster lays out his view. A conversation between the detective and Auster's son concerning a yoyo develops the contrast between the two men. Quinn attempts to demonstrate how to play with the yoyo. In Quinn's hands, the yoyo rolls quickly to a point of rest at the bottom of the string. The boy complains: "But you didn't make it go up" (95). Quinn insists: "You have to keep trying" (95), just as he insists on continuing to try to make sense of the case's enigma. Like the walker of any unicursal labyrinth, the yoyo winds along a single line. Quinn's failure with the toy mirrors his failure to follow the thread into the heart of the labyrinth and exit from it ready to disclose its secret. Additionally, though, his inability to keep the yoyo in motion suggests his reluctance to have meaning remain in play. When he quotes a "great philosopher" and insists "the way up and the way down are one and the same," he reveals his limited expectations of the toy (95). For others, the way up and the way down need not be the same. The diversions it offers are not exhausted in the simple and repetitive movement along the line, but also in the performance of tricks such as barrel rolls and loop the loop.

Auster's appearance in the story as a counter-model contributes to the entrapment of any readers who have chosen to read the book up to his appearance as if it would finally give way to interpretive closure. The author himself seems to appear in the story simply to dismiss the detective-like aspiration of a reader to get to the truth. The character Auster commends an approach to literature that resonates more with

contemporary literary theory and its celebration of the play in language. Some scholarship suggests this perspective is precisely the one proper to the novel. For instance, Tysh writes that “instead of a writing anxious to promote the intelligibility of human experience and the readability of its signs [...], *City of Glass* deploys an economy of dissemination, decay, and, above all, opaque chaos” (47). The author seems to reject as a delusion the aspiration to hold that decay in check by discovering the story’s final meaning. The trap snaps with all that much more force on readers who presume that interpretive labor will disclose the author’s intended meaning because Auster himself seems to assert that writers aspire to do nothing more than toy with their readers.

However, if readers find Auster an admirable model, they too may discover themselves entrapped by the narrative. At the very close of the story, the narrator rebukes Auster. He suggests that Auster’s attitudes toward reading lead one into a trap as well. The anonymous narrator writes that as he listened to Auster’s explanation of all that had come to pass, he grew “angry that he had treated Quinn with such indifference” (134). He writes, “I scolded him for not having done something to help” (134). Finally, he closes, writing: “As for Auster, I am convinced that he behaved badly throughout. If our friendship has ended, he has only himself to blame. As for me, my thoughts remain with Quinn. He will be with me always” (136). The narrator suggests that Auster could have intervened and kept Quinn’s life from coming to the end it did. With these remarks, the narrator comments on Auster’s way of relating to texts. From the narrator’s perspective, Auster’s appreciation for the play of signs is insufficient. Comfortable with life, Auster is at home in his apartment, resting up above the city streets, taking delight in the diversions that reading and writing afford him. He makes a living by threading his

way through the “opaque chaos” of old books and debates about them (Tysh 47). The narrator chastises Auster for residing in his own kind of maze-like enclosure: he is cut off from the world and others. The narrator believes that Auster was lost in his diversions when he should have been looking after Quinn. Thus, readers who adopt the attitude voiced by the character Auster are drawn into a role that the narrator then paints as heartless.

The sudden and late appearance of the narrator in the story is one further entrapping mechanism of Auster’s labyrinthine novel. Through three-quarters of the novel, the events of the story seem to be related from an apparently objective and omniscient point of view. Up to that point, the narration seems an impersonal overview of the events. As a disembodied voice, the narrator seems to hold the voyeur’s position of mastery. The clarity concerning all that has happened invites a trusting response that there are hard facts with which to work and a true and comprehensive perspective to be attained. We are led to posit our reading in relation to the authoritative and invisible figure who records with confidence the events of Quinn’s story. When the narrator emerges from behind the veil of the narrative, we are reminded that this is a story and not the truth. The trust the narrator is accredited by the reader is called into question, once again trapping the reader in an assumed reading practice that the story discredits.

When the narrator emerges, Auster incorporates into the story an approach to textual indeterminacy distinct not only from the graphic Auster, but also from those of Stillman and Quinn. In contrast to the latter two characters, the narrator concedes that he has no comprehensive overview of the labyrinth. Even as the narrator serves as an architect and guide, he acknowledges that he does not in fact have a masterful

understanding of the story he is relating. He explains that he and Auster found Quinn's notebook, that he kept it, and that he has used it to recount what happened. He reports that the facts of the case merit only a measured confidence. He proposes at one point that the "account of this period is less full than the author would have liked" (107). Then again, he writes, "We cannot say for certain what happened to Quinn during this period" (107). He even casts doubt on his source. He explains, "Facts are scarce, and even the notebook, which has provided much information, is suspect" (71). Finally, unsure of what eventually came of Quinn, the narrator acknowledges: "At this point the information has run out" (134). At the close of the story, the narrator writes that "it is impossible for me to say where he is now" (136). The notebook and the events of Quinn's case form a maze he cannot chart fully.

If the narrator concedes this limitation, he is also like Auster in his willingness to weave his own way through the maze before him. While relating Quinn's story, he has not obliged himself to passively duplicate the notebook. He makes his own playful passage through the diversions opened by the signs and gaps it includes. John Zilcosky notes that the narrator's claim merely to have edited Quinn's casebook is "clearly a lie: Quinn does not even buy the notebook until [midway through the narrator's account]" (67). Thus, he has created the story of what came before. He bridges gaps. He claims to know much more than he in fact knows.

Although he lacks the truth, he is unwilling to give up a belief that a full and unified account could be offered. He insists that Quinn told Auster "the whole story" (89). Even as he creates sections of the story, he suggests that he measures his account against the truth of what has happened. Obstacles arose as he worked his way through

the notebook. He explains that the “text was difficult to decipher” (138), but that he has “followed the notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies should be blamed on me” (138). Thus, he gives curious testimony. He claims what he writes is ordered in relation to the truth even as he creates the story and acknowledges that his construction is limited in its grasp of what in fact happened.

A section of Quinn’s story represents a mode of making one’s way through a labyrinth that is comparable to the narrator’s own. This segment of Quinn’s story unfolds precisely during a brief break he takes from his detective work. After meeting with Auster and his wife and son, Quinn leaves the apartment feeling that “he had been sent back so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine” (97). After meeting Auster, Quinn spent the day on his feet. He “didn’t consider where he was going” (100). Extricated from the case, he moves through the city with the openness to others lauded by the narrator. Following the walk, he decided “to record the things he had seen that day” (102).

The poem he writes includes the following passage:

“Today as never before: the tramps, shopping bag ladies, drifters, and drunks . . . the merely destitute to the wretchedly broken. They are everywhere. Some beg with a semblance of pride: soon I will be back with the rest of you. Others have given up hope. Still others try to work for money. Others have real talent. [...] Far more numerous are those with nothing to do . . . hulks of despair, clothed in rags, faces bruised, bleeding. They shuffle through the streets as though in chains. They seem to be everywhere the moment you look for them” (102).

As he walked, Quinn was free of his enclosure, released from his drive for epistemic mastery. After considering abandoning the case all together, Quinn spent the day trying to reach Virginia Stillman out of concern for her and Peter. He is suddenly present to those most vulnerable in the city. During this walk and as he writes, he opens his eyes and witnesses others, many of whom are living in pain around him. Rather than use his notebook in an effort to leave the past behind, he wrote then to get things down “before he forgot them” (102).

The narrator and Quinn during this meandering walk model a kind of attention that the book seems to encourage. Each witnesses others in the maze with them. As they make their passages, they choose to remain with the marginal and excluded. They avoid entering an isolating enclosure. Language props up their memories and serves them as a bridge between themselves and others. It does so, even if it operates in ways that exceed their full grasp.

In contrast to the exile, they do not move unambiguously toward a true home. They do not assume that they have a totalizing access to the truth. However, in contrast to Auster, who is at home in a world lacking any exile-turned-voyeur overviews, they are men on the move. In the absence of the case, “Quinn was nowhere” (96). Likewise, the narrator has insisted: “my thoughts remain with Quinn [even if] it is impossible to say where he is now” (136). Their way through the labyrinth is “freed from the mapped route” (de Certeau 132); it cannot be “reduced to any graphic tracing” (de Certeau 132).

In fact, when they move as they do, it is difficult to determine or plot their epistemological stance. No coherent theoretical framework underlies the narrator’s practice of reading and re-writing the notebook. His mode of moving through the maze

of signs draws together elements of play, concern for the truth, a willingness to take an authoritative posture, and acknowledgment that his authority has no sure ground. Both the narrator and Quinn model approaches to the maze that are finally difficult to define. Perhaps it is for this reason that the narrator goes unnamed and why Quinn's name recalls quidity only "to fly off in so many directions" (68). The passages they make through the city resist being placed or plotted in a systematic fashion.

Often, the approaches they take to the maze cannot be distinguished with ease from those of other characters. This is in part because they intentionally aspire to remain with those others. But the difficulty individuating their approach can also be understood in terms of an eroticism that has been attributed to the experience of the modern city.

Drawing on cinematic representations of the city, Ackbar Abbas writes:

"This eroticism has nothing to do with romantic clichés or, as Roland Barthes reminds us, with red-light districts. Rather, it relates to the kinds of uncertain sociality found in cities, where social relations with others have broken down. The 'erotic dimension' in the most general sense is the experience of these new forms of often painful sociality, which take place always with a mixture of desire and puzzlement, where eroticism vies with confusion. It is in this sense that the city is erotic and becomes the 'site of our encounter with the other . . . the privileged site where the other is and where we ourselves are the other'" (145).<sup>110</sup>

The labyrinthine city in which Quinn and the narrator move is just such an erotic space in which the distinction between one person and another begins to fall away. Clarity concerning who the characters are and the particular approaches they take to the maze

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<sup>110</sup> Abbas quotes Barthes's paper "Semiology and Urbanism."

break down. One can be mistaken for another. We move through the book as Quinn does through the city, only to discover how “all places [become] equal” (4). In this city, Daniel Quinn can indeed take a call for Paul Auster’s agency.

Finally, the narrator and Quinn during his brief period free of the case do not constitute a clear alternative model that the book indicates should be our own. It is impossible to distinguish the position and perspective held by Quinn and the narrator from the others. On that account, their approach is susceptible to the same narrative traps. To assume that the narrator is the guide that Auster the author truly intended his readers to follow presumes a kind of mastery in the labyrinth. To make the narrator the center of the book, the one who answers the question of whether the book means anything is to claim an insider’s knowledge of the real author’s intention. Readers who follow the narrator as the authoritative voice have wound their way back into the role that Quinn had assumed for himself. Just as Quinn encourages himself to “[I]ook at it through Auster’s eyes” so these readers sort their way through the maze of the book in relation to the author’s personal overview of his work (47). What did Auster mean to say here? Have I found my way into understanding what this is really about? The reader may imagine, as Quinn had imagined of Stillman’s walks, that the book’s passages were formed according to “a plan” (59). To presume the book is designed to promote the approach modeled by the narrator is perhaps simply to slip back into the uncomfortable shoes of Quinn when he pursues an epistemic mastery of the truth.

Yet, if the book makes ambiguous which model the author Auster intended his readers to follow, it is only by compromising the narrator’s status as authoritative guide that the book leaves readers in a truly comparable position to that of the narrator. The



narrator cannot in fact justify his reading of the notebook strictly by appeal to its signs or account for what happened to Quinn. Although in the dark epistemologically, he insists on testifying to Quinn's existence and the way he came to his end. He declares that Quinn was lost in the maze because Auster was too much a private eye/I and not concerned enough with the well-being of others in the maze of the city. Like the narrator, we are set before a story that will not yield to our interpretive mastery. Lacking access to the truth and immersed in the maze, the book entraps its reader by depriving them any sure thread or interpretive position with which to justify an approach to the book. But in so doing, the book leaves us like the narrator in a position to witness others in the maze. We can testify like the narrator that we have seen these others even if the truth exceeds our grasp.

## **V The Visual Snare in Karasik and Mazzuchelli's Graphic Maze**

In Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, invitations to correlate one's own response to the text with the epistemological assumptions and practices modeled by characters in the story are numerous. The story sets up several analogies between the various characters and the audience reading the story. To a minimal degree, such an analogy is introduced immediately by making reading an element in the explorations of Quinn, Stillman, Auster, and the narrator.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, these characters and their attitudes toward the city, its objects, and the people model approaches to the labyrinth of the book as they.

The narrative itself promotes the audience's identification with these characters only to

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<sup>111</sup> The characters like the audience read and attempt to make sense of the texts before them. Stillman's dissertation is a patchwork of citations that reflect his effort as a reader to understand two biblical texts. Reading books and words figures explicitly in Quinn's efforts as well. Quinn not only begins his investigation in Columbia's library reading *The Garden and the Tower*, he also studies his notebook, and finally, he discovers in Quinn's migrations through New York City a hidden, verbal message.

then subvert the apparent validity of their modeled epistemological practices. If the various models are in mutual contestation, this necessitates that readers choose a guide or guides and determine a course on their own.

In the graphic adaptation of Auster's novel, this narrative strategy develops in ways that are impossible in the strictly literary work. In particular, the graphic form augments the correlation between audience and character. The graphic form engages its reader in an analysis of visual signs that mirrors the looking done by characters walking through the fictional city. To put the audience in their shoes, Paul Karasik and David Mazzuchelli capitalize on the layout of the graphic page. In particular, Karasik and Mazzuchelli associate the frame and panel layout of his book with labyrinthine structures and with glass. By doing so, they link the form of the book to its thematic and self-reflexive treatment of epistemology and reading. Ultimately, the complex associations Karasik and Mazzuchelli create between the graphic form and the content of Auster's story contribute to the entrapment of readers in "the complexities of interpretation" (Wilson 21). To read the book is to make a passage through a labyrinth that at alternating moments seems accessible and transparent, impenetrably and inextricably dark, and a place of reflections.

In the graphic novel, Karasik and Mazzuchelli amplify the glass motif of the title in a number of ways that reinforce the book's capacity to engage readers in a performance of the book's themes. Windows do not figure nearly as prominently in the original work. In the graphic novel alone, windows appear conspicuously and repeatedly not only in images of buildings, but inside many settings such as the characters' various

apartments and the restaurants in which they meet. On more than one page, Karasik and Mazzuchelli represent Quinn as if on the other side of a window



The graphic frame divides the page into nine panels as if a window frame with nine glass panes (60). Images of Quinn sitting by windows on the adjacent pages reinforce the visual suggestion that we are peering in through the frame of the page as if through the frame of a window.

Making that connection between the page and window has multiple effects. Most notably, it positions the reader as if present in the world of the characters. The audience

watches the action of the novel unfold by looking through the pages of the book as if they were the windows of the city of glass. This correlation of the page with the story's windows gives other sequences a heightened self-reflexive character in the graphic novel.

In particular, the association exploits in a fuller manner the analogy between the detective and reader. When working with the graphic novel, the reader's visual analysis of the images reflects the detective's reliance on surveillance.<sup>112</sup> Reading, like detection, requires observation. Just as attention to the visible clue will seemingly contribute to Quinn's successful discovery of Stillman's intentions, so readers of the graphic novel are invited to look at the page for indications of meaning that present themselves visually as they move through the book. This overt correlation helps to implicate the audience in a way the conventional novel cannot.<sup>113</sup>

At the same time, the form of the graphic novel recalls two kinds of mazes. First, the string of panels running from the start to the end of the book forms a long corridor. The division of images can suggest the segmented sidewalk on which Quinn follows Stillman. At certain points, the panels recoil upon a single image, as in the case of the

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<sup>112</sup> The novel stresses that Quinn's investigative work is based on observation. To track Stillman, Sr., Quinn "posted himself on a bench watching the hotel" (57). He encourages himself to see as the detective Paul Auster would, telling himself, "Look at it through Auster's eyes" (47), and he is characterized as having "imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details" (61). However, Quinn's best efforts to observe Stillman do not yield satisfactory results. Quinn comes to realize that "he could do no more than observe . . . write down what he saw, hover stupidly on the surface of things" (57). Indeed, "He had seen the old man slip away from him [...] even as he remained before his eyes" (61). Later, Stillman seems to have become "part of the city, a brick in an endless wall of bricks" (86). The man Quinn is to tail has disappeared into the labyrinth and become indistinguishable from its walls.

<sup>113</sup> Karasik and Mazzuchelli sharpen the association of the detective's gaze with the audience's own through the control of visual perspective. The artists determine from what point of view Auster's audience has access to the depicted world. On one occasion, they align the audience's perspective with Quinn's own. As if looking from Quinn's point of view, the reader peers over the detective's legs and arms into an empty living room (see page 94). Forced into Quinn's shoes, the reader's perspective is visually fused with the detective's own. In that same scene, Quinn is growing anxious that detection may not fulfill its promises. He has adopted the role of the detective Paul Auster that he is discovering that doing so may be a trap. The reader too may feel snared by the image, as he or she is compelled to assume Quinn's perspective precisely as it is coming to seem untenable to him.

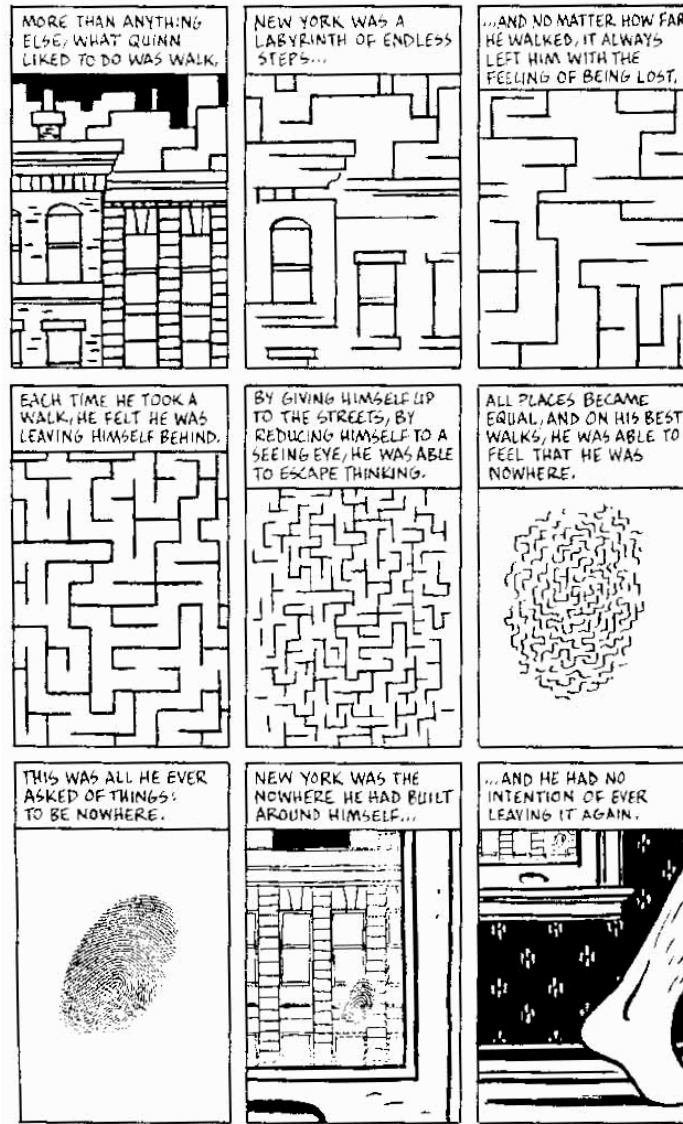
grieving face that appears on three pages (7, 33, and 75). In one panel, we see Quinn making his way through Central Park (116):



Like Quinn on the long path through the park, we can traverse the pages of the book and make our way toward the Stillman apartment where the story comes to its end.

Secondly, even as the linear panels form such a labyrinth, the lines of the frame also constitute a maze. The frame's lines on any given page suggest the non-linear and multiple routes open to pedestrians in the city. Seeing the book's form in these ways links the reader's passage through the *City of Glass* to the character's ambulatory passages through the city.

Early in the graphic novel, the panels of a single page are suggestive of the whole novel's integration of formal and thematic issues vis-à-vis the maze and glass. The panels in this series gradually transition from images of city buildings to the lines of a labyrinth, to the winding circuits of a fingerprint, back to an image of the city (4).



The initial image is a relatively realistic rendering of two of New York's buildings. In the following panel, the brick and window pattern gives way to abstraction. Then, in the third panel, shapes from the building facades are nearly unrecognizable as such. By the fourth panel, these lines are converted into a tangle of right-angled maze-like lines. Following this panel, the images effect a second similar visual transition as the line's rectilinear sharpness diminishes until they form the curved lines of a fingerprint. In the next to last panel of this series, the maze-like fingerprint rests on the window pane

through which we see the buildings outside. Because buildings and glass windows appear in the images that begin and conclude this series of panels, the frame as a whole is a recoiling, maze-like path.

In general though, the visual transitions generate an irreducibly complex network of associations. This frame correlates the city, the fingerprint, glass, and the labyrinth. It suggests that the text is not a line of signs leading denotatively toward some reality or single referent. Instead, it weaves the associations proper to the glass window, the fingerprint, the maze, and the city into an interlocking network of meaning. In that labyrinth of signs, the connotations proper to each independent sign are held in common. By employing this visual strategy, the book positions its reader before a labyrinthine form, a text with its own winding and circuitous passages.

Ultimately, the conflux of possible readings is open to varied interpretive assessments. The story not only fails to answer the question “whether or not it means something” (4), it also leaves open what the significance of that failure would be. Like Stillman and Quinn, readers can find the text’s inconclusive and fractured form troubling. The irrepressible mystery of the book can seem an obstacle to our hope for interpretive control. Or like Auster reading *Don Quixote*, we can find in the book a maze in which to divert ourselves. The lack of closure and coherence is not a threat, but an opportunity for delight. Or perhaps like the narrator and then also Quinn when he abandons the case, we can move through the book without a controlling principle, but with a sense that those passages become meaningful in relationship to the people with whom we share them. We can look for meaning and a better understanding of our place in the world without expecting that position to be one that is fully coherent or expressible.

In the end, the book invites its readers to frame their interpretive practice as they see fit. By engaging readers in that process, the book traps them in the very difficulties it represents. Thus, the *City of Glass*'s thematic treatment of signs in the detective quest proffers a self-reflexive commentary on the status of its own signs and their decipherment by the reader. The text of the *City of Glass*, no less than Stillman's wanderings, refuses any determinate reading, any final clarification of its intent or meaning. Rather, it seems that signs do not lead to any conclusive meaning, but only varied readings afforded by the ambiguities in signs. The choices of readers determine what will be found in the book. The audience remains in the labyrinth, making its way with a limited capacity to plot an approach relative to other positions.

When these varied associations register for readers, the graphic novel forms a glass maze. Frequently, that labyrinth seems to concede access to its order and meaning. The book seems an open window through which we can peer and recognize the sense of what goes on. To read is to follow the panels toward some determinate center or goal. Arrival at that point allows the reader to re-plot particular passages of the book in relation to the whole course traversed. The interpretive map that emerges out of that process gives the reader an overarching perspective on the story. However, at other points, the glass constituting the labyrinth seems impenetrably opaque and enigmatic rather than transparent. The pages resist the reader's probing analysis. Their signs make of the book a site of obstruction. We stare down dark corridors. Conclusions concerning what has happened and its meaning are thrown back into question. In this case, the labyrinth of the book leaves its readers disoriented. Finally, these varied options are precisely what make the visual passages of the graphic adaptation so labyrinthine. Readers remain free to



follow alternative routes without any final organizing map. Choices to read one way rather than another allow readers to follow meaningful routes woven into the text without finding any sure thread with which to sort through the whole structure.

Much in the story, although surely not everything, encourages its readers to enter into its labyrinthine city of glass. Rather than offer readers interpretive mastery, the book offers its readers access to the city it depicts. Moving through the pages of the book, we can experience our own finitude and the challenges of living in a world that very infrequently holds together. If the book's pages are windows by which we can look into that world, they are often broken and fragmented like glass. The book's meaning may well be shattered and incapable of being put together neatly. But this makes it all that much more of an effective means of prodding readers to enter into a structure that resists their understanding. Reading the book, we see that entrance into that world is not gained by putting everything together as Stillman and Quinn aspire to do, but by breaking the glass of the page. If we implicate ourselves in what we witness, we can be present to those making their way through that fragile world. By leading its readers to accept such incoherence and to thrust themselves into the world of the book, Auster, Mazzuchelli, and Karasik invite their audience to do the same as they go about their lives immersed in a maze-like world.

## Conclusion: Immersed in Labyrinthine Passages

“To open a book is to enter a labyrinth.  
To read it is to pass through one.”

Jacques Attali *The Labyrinth in Culture and Society*

Each work examined in this dissertation—St. Augustine of Hippo’s *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions*, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and Paul Auster’s *The City of Glass*—likens the passages formed by signs to the passageways of a maze. All the books suggest self-reflexively that no complete threading of these literary mazes is possible. The books feature people who make their way through the world lacking map-like overviews, and they also deny readers any full charting of their passages. The authors employ the maze consistently to represent epistemic limitation and to engage readers in an experience of mystery. All these books immerse readers in maze-like processes involving choice, challenge readers to abandon expectations of comprehensive exploration, and encourage them instead to expect the truth to be encountered on the move while in passage as much as by arriving at a fixed position.

At the same time that the authors promote openness to mystery, they also represent how the enigma of the maze can be construed in diverse ways. Their protagonists respond variously as they progressively realize that their grasp of the maze’s layout is severely limited. Some imagine that the obstructions of the maze are merely temporary. They anticipate the acquisition of a full understanding of the maze’s design. Others resign themselves to their position in the maze and construe the maze as a perpetual obstruction to true understanding. Still others discover in their limited grasp

cause for delight: the maze leaves them free to move in ways that have not been anticipated by an overarching plan.

If those in the stories experience the maze in these ways, it is possible to read the books with each of these attitudes as well. The examined pieces of literature all employ maze imagery in self-reflexive representations of the reading process. The books obstruct the conversion of their complex meanings into any final, conclusively determined interpretation or set of interpretations. To read them is to be immersed in their passages without an overarching interpretive principle. Situated in this way, readers can hypothesize that a point external to the story furnishes a position of interpretive mastery with respect to the literature. Or readers can concede that no final reading is possible and contend that this puts in question whether the story has any discernible meaning whatsoever. Or they can look to cut varied meaningful passages through the literature without subordinating those readings to a single overarching interpretive principle. These possible choices are themselves a function of the labyrinthine quality of the literature.

Nevertheless, these books do not employ maze-imagery solely in a self-reflexive manner. All of the books employ labyrinthine imagery in narratives that draw analogies between the reading we do and the living we do in the world. In general, the books liken the effort to choose an interpretive route to the process of choice by which we move through the world. We make choices, the books suggest, to read and move in particular ways while lacking a comprehensive mastery of our position. Thus, the books resist interpretive closure in order to affirm that the understanding we can have of our lives, the lives of others, and the world more generally is necessarily limited. By bringing readers

up against maze-like complexity, the books become an intellectual exercise. That exercise permits readers to reflect on comparable processes of choice and exploration that they might assume as they go about their lives. By drawing these analogies between books, the world, and the maze, these authors lay claim to a power to engage us in an activity comparable to the challenges we face while living in a complicated world. Thus, an additional point of congruity can be noted between all of the works: although all of the authors challenge presumption to epistemic mastery, they insist that our choices in the maze have stakes in addition to diversion. These authors suggest reality resists totalizing, conclusive analysis, but each insists that to make sense one way rather than another our choices have consequences. Thus, the point of the books is not by any means a nihilistic insistence on the absence of meaning. Nor do any of the works evidence or give rise to a moral relativism.

More specifically, the authors draw on the symbolic riches of the maze in order to characterize such things as identity, eroticism, death, fame, violence, the city, and history. For example, Ondaatje uses maze imagery to characterize both the obstructions on which erotic desire feeds and also the disorientation generated by erotic love's overwhelming force. Within some books, such comparisons are developed flexibly, so that the same aspect of the maze can be utilized for diverse and even opposing symbolic ends. For example, Augustine associates the bewildering grip of the maze with lust but also with immersion in a holy mystery beyond his grasp.

Such variation in the books use of maze imagery makes it impossible to draw any full map of the complex intersecting and diverging uses of maze imagery within the books. Any such orienting thesis would contradict my understanding of how these books

in fact frustrate such reading. The theme of the labyrinth is not a controlling principle within the books, but a symbol within the works of realities that resist masterful analysis. By renouncing the aspiration to offer a more comprehensive thesis concerning the books and their relationship to one another, it is possible to be truer to the way their dynamic meaning exceeds reduction to a chart-like analysis. Thus, rather than offer a single orienting map or thread, I probe the particular ways that these books use the maze to immerse readers in labyrinthine passages.

Contemporary literary theory models such criticism and gives direction to my reading of these books.<sup>114</sup> Post-structural and deconstructive literary theory, like the literature examined, often discloses that signs form maze-like passages. In that theory, signs are shown to form divergent passages that do not radiate from any integral, fixed, final, or totalizing ordering principle. Meaning according to this theory is plentiful though indeterminate. As a result, we will never be able to master a labyrinth of signs conceptually or chart its passages completely. If contemporary theory indicates that meaning cannot be mastered, the outcome is not a sense of defeat. Within the maze-like passages formed by signs, readers are free to probe for significance, deviate from previously trod courses, and open new meaningful routes. Thus, the tenor of this theory is often celebratory and even ecstatic: the complexity of the maze is credited with opening endless diversions and liberating routes.

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<sup>114</sup> In the oral defense for the *doctorat d'état*, Derrida noted that much of his work on writing seems “anamorphic or labyrinthine” and not proper to the conventional form of a thesis and its positional mode of argument (“Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis” 124). He recounts the course leading up to that defense in which he foregrounds several labyrinthine features of his work: a reliance on guidance when making his decisions, his reluctance to come to a fixed position, and his insistence that he had adopted the “aleatory strategy of someone who admits that he does not know where he is going” (128). In the case of my own project, the books I examine lead their readers in directions that are unspecified at the outset, unanticipated in the process, and never finally fully comprehended. As in the case of Derrida’s work, these books open such passages to their readers not out of an aesthetics of obscurantism, but in order to foster openness to what cannot be formulated in a fixed manner and systematically understood.

Finally, though, such theory and criticism offers helpful but over-simplified guidance when assessing the intersection of this literature and the religious imagination. Each book integrates the maze and the idea of God in ways that exceed the characterization of theology formulated within many post-structural and deconstructive theories. In contrast to the books examined in this dissertation, post-structural and deconstructive theorists have associated certain labyrinthine features of texts—non-linearity, the absence of any integrating threads, the perpetual deferral of any conclusive points of arrival—with the circumvention of conventional metaphysics. Theology, in particular, is regularly critiqued as necessitating a limited and limiting conception of signs and reading. Within this theory, God epitomizes the constrictive and homogenizing effect of a totalizing and systematic charting of meaning.

For this reason, contemporary literary theory often positions itself as an undermining of theological paradigms.<sup>115</sup> For example, Roland Barthes proposes that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (876), and asserts that the text “liberates what may be called an antitheological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law” (“The

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<sup>115</sup> Post-structural theory tends to consign theology to the role of foil, so that those elements most congruent between contemporary theory and theology are effectively suppressed. This is the effect when negative theologies that stress that God is ineffable mystery are characterized as “always just detours on the way to even higher, more sublime affirmations” (Caputo 25). It is reductive to view negative theologies as “variations on the philosophy of presence which always turn out to be philosophies of super-presence” (Caputo 25). Such reductions are useful to readers who wish to draw a neat structural distinction between postmodern theory and theology. Working with this assumption, though, build up obstructions to reading certain theological passages that stress, not merely temporarily, that God is mystery.

Death of the Author” 877).<sup>116</sup> Derrida writes similarly that in the “delineation of *différance* everything is strategic [...] because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field” (7). Umberto Eco also contrasts his theory of the “open” work and the “work in movement” to medieval theologically framed “poetics of the necessary and univocal [...] which each individual must understand in the only possible way, the one determined by the creative *logos*” (6). Like Barthes, Eco claims that divergence from that theological frame makes possible a “revolutionary pedagogics” (Eco 11). All suggest that God names a point outside the maze that determines the order of meaning and in relation to which we claim a masterful, cartographic view of the whole. Furthermore, this God-like overview entails a constrictive practice of reading reflective of an “imperial and theocratic society [...] the laws of an authoritarian regime” (Eco 6). To enter into the maze of signs and truly acknowledge the freedom we have as readers, this theory suggests that we must cut a course uncharted by the theological imagination.

Penelope Reed Doob’s *The Idea of the Labyrinth* employs this same basic conceptual framework when characterizing ancient and medieval culture. She contends that ancient and medieval authors and artists tended to represent labyrinths, whether multicursal or unicursal in form, as “an embodiment of contraries—art and chaos, comprehensible artifact and inexplicable experience, pleasure and terror” (24-25). Doob claims that the medieval religious imagination reconciled this duality of the structure by proposing that once wayfarers “learn the maze or see the labyrinth whole, then, elaborate

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<sup>116</sup> This same anti-theological disposition is evident in “From Work to Text” where Barthes claims that “the text could well take as its motto the words of the man possessed by demons (*Mark* 5.9): ‘My name is legion: for we are many.’ The plural of demoniacal texture which opposes text to work can bring with it fundamental changes in reading” (880). Comparable theoretical assessments are made by Jean Baudrillard, J. Hillis Miller, Deleuze and Guattari and are referenced in the following chapters.

chaos is transformed into pattern” (24). The wayfarer’s course shifts from being one of disorientation to clarity of direction. That shift, Doob explains, follows either a moral or epistemological change in the wayfarer. Characterized metaphorically, such a transition is achieved either by Daedalean flight to a point overhead or by completion of the labyrinth. Those metaphors connote a totalizing mastery of the labyrinth: the routes are fully explored, the center is probed, the exits and entrances are identified. All the apparent structural ambiguities and complexities of the labyrinth have been fully mapped and controlled. When Doob examines medieval literature, she proposes that this metaphor of labyrinthine “convertibility” shaped the religious characterization of books and the world (24). Thus, Doob echoes contemporary theory in positing that God functions essentially as a single and stable position toward which believers direct themselves through a maze of a fixed and knowable order.

My examination of Augustine and Chaucer challenges this theoretical and critical stance by which God is conceived to be a stable overview on which believers base their interpretive and epistemic mastery. In contrast to the postmodern theory and Doob’s criticism, Augustine and Chaucer do not conceive of God as promising them a position from which they can chart the truth. Rather than depict God in opposition to maze-like mystery, Augustine and Chaucer suggest that God is a complex reality over which they can gain no controlling or totalizing perspective. Thus, neither of these pre-modern authors depict our access to the truth as a process by which we reach the end, exit, and chart the maze. Their books resist interpretive closure and emphasize our lack of epistemic mastery not after abandoning a theological framework, but on the basis of



theological convictions. Augustine and Chaucer conceive of God as a mystery that precludes our acquiring a fixed epistemic position subordinating the truth to our control.

In the first chapter, I examine Augustine's treatise on biblical interpretation *De doctrina christiana* that likens both reading and life to maze-like explorations. The treatise presents both signs and the world as opening innumerable routes to us as we make sense of them. This pre-modern Christian theologian affirms that signs form labyrinthine passages no less than the post-modern theorist. For Augustine, God neither elides textual indeterminacy nor promises us mastery over the maze of signs. From Augustine's theological perspective, God, though ontologically one, opens the various routes we may take through signs and the world. As the loving architect and source of meaning's untamable complexity and variegation, God does not restrict reading but makes possible its variation. Indeed, Augustine employs theological doctrines to indicate the flexibility and dynamic potentials of signs to generate, bear, defer, and elide meaning. For him, to read theologically is not to thread every passage we read with a single, final, fixed, eternally true, or exclusive interpretation. Rather, faithful reading engages us in a process by which we come to turn in the varied ways opened by divine love. And there are many ways to be lovers.

In the following chapter, I examine how Augustine's theological characterization of the maze of signs contributes to his *Confessions*. In that book, Augustine casts the course of his life as a labyrinthine passage from exile in sin to a fuller life in the mysterious ways of charity. As Augustine recounts this story, he can seem to position himself as if he is in possession of a fully drawn map of the truth. He recounts the events of his life as if he now grasps the thread of providence and can follow it with ease

through the various events of his life. In contrast to such a reading, I argue that Augustine employs stories from his past as a means of modeling how we move within the maze even as we lack such overviews and sure threads. As he confesses, Augustine models a signifying practice by which he attempts to work his way into the maze in a manner that is proper to his finite existence. His confessional practice does not rest on or anticipate extrication from the maze or a mastery of its layout. Rather, by confessing, Augustine makes a maze-like passage that involves entering into the world and conceding that its complexity exceeds his comprehension. Augustine testifies to a God who does not provide him control over the truth or divinity. Instead, as Augustine composes his confession he makes a maze-like passage the principle of which exceeds his ability to name even while motivating his search.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* features the poet as the recipient of a dream vision that furnishes him no conclusive revelation. The dream sets him instead within a maze over which he can gain no full understanding. Both as he dreams and as he analyzes and recounts his dream "Geffrey" finds that signs resist his efforts to determine their meaning. In each book of the poem, but especially in the third, when he arrives at the house of Lady Fame, Geffrey discovers that no sure principle governs meaning as it appears in literature and rumor. Chaucer reworks the dream vision genre by subverting the expectation that a visionary experience permits its recipient to lay claim to a map of the truth. But the poem undermines the genre's promise of closure to make theological points concerning Fame's instability and God's mysterious character. Indeed, in the final lines of the poem, Chaucer represents the disruptive arrival of a man of great authority within the spinning House of Rumor. Rather than draw the believer from the maze to a

fixed position overhead, the great authority enters into the maze, sets all of its inhabitants astir, and remains beyond any final and conclusive identification.

After the examining these pre-modern works, two chapters—focused successively on Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster’s *The City of Glass*—examine postmodern works that attend thematically to the relation between the maze of signs and theological inquiry. These works are less like Augustine’s books than Chaucer’s *House of Fame*. Chaucer, Ondaatje, and Auster draw on genres that typically promise readers narrative and interpretive closure: the dream vision, the detective story, and the mock biography. Each of these genres is organized conventionally in relation to a promise that the truth—of the dream, the story, the life—can be accessed. Their storylines feature protagonists who convert complex mysteries into ordered revelations: the characters sort their way through maze-like enigmas and acquire a full understanding of their layout. Moreover, each genre reinforces this commitment to the full intelligibility of signs by promising readers interpretive closure. Thus, these genres typically celebrate the acquisition of a masterful and demiurgic overview of the maze.

In contrast to conventional works within these genres, the selected books parody this promise of narrative and interpretive closure. Chaucer, Ondaatje, and Auster subvert their selected genre’s conventions in order to exhibit the dynamic indeterminacy of meaning. As the authors subvert their books’ generic promise of closure, they dismantle expectations that God will furnish a totalizing grasp of how the world is laid out. Each book parodies efforts to treat God conceptually as a fixed epistemic foundation and overview of the maze.

Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* depict the famed outlaw crisscrossing the labyrinthine West as he flees the law and a truthful biographical account. Ondaatje presents both the lawmen and the narrators of Billy's story struggling to gain a totalized charting of the mazes proper to Billy's life. Their efforts to attain those positions of mastery and to capture Billy prove violent and alienating. The violence that derives from the characters' drive for and claim to political power and epistemic mastery takes on meaning in relation to Christian imagery. Ondaatje links the violence of such mastery to a conception of God as a fixed overview and a stable Law. However, his book is not a straightforward critique of Christian theology. Although Ondaatje depicts the overview in relation to Christian imagery, he also subordinates that imagery to an erotic framework by associating Christ with Dionysius and Apollo. In the process of doing so, he creates a poem that resists a fixed construal and that instead raises for consideration the interaction of violence, law, eroticism, religious belief, representation, identity, and the complexities of their various relationships.

In the final chapter, I examine the graphic adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* which features a theologian and detective who try to extricate themselves from their limited grasp of the truth. Both the theologian and detective yearn to determine the precise significance of the mysteries they encounter. Neither can accept living in a world for which they cannot give conclusive accounts of what words, things, and events mean. They move through New York City's streets as if in a maze that perpetually frustrates their longing for such resolved understanding. Auster's novel parodies their epistemic aspirations by having their drive for truth lead them into madness, isolation, and eventually to their deaths rather than to the truth's disclosure. However, Auster

complicates his novel's rejection of narrative closure. Even as he critiques the hope of our accessing the truth conclusively, he represents certain ways of conceding this point as equally untenable. Auster does not simply insist that we resign ourselves to the fact that the truth is elusive, but also challenges readers not to use this predicament as an excuse for neglecting others who share the maze with us. Because the book resists any comprehensive or fixed interpretation, it leaves readers within its maze-like passages to reflect on how to proceed in the absence of a full understanding. Thus, as a whole, the book promotes a reading practice like Augustine's that necessitates openness to mystery, acknowledgment of one's limited grasp of truth, and attention to others and to the effects of that attention as we proceed through the maze.

In summary, these books lead readers not toward a firm grasp of the truth, but to an admission that the truth exceeds understanding and articulation. Augustine makes an earnest exploration of the limitations circumscribing our epistemic position. In contrast, the other authors develop playful literary parodies that challenge claims to epistemic mastery. All four authors suggest that the association of God with a fixed epistemic position has harmful repercussions. The authors suggest that the consequences of such a drive to mastery include the isolation of oneself, the constraining of others, and the preemptive exclusion of possibilities. And in doing so, they encourage readers to be open to mystery and relinquish their efforts to subordinate their books, other people, or other complex realities to epistemic mastery.

In this way, the books function in a manner quite comparable to the expectations Augustine had of the Bible and his *Confessions*. They immerse their readers in labyrinthine passages, the mysterious and myriad significance of which exceeds our full

knowing. If it is customary to imagine the mysterious as something to work out like a problem, these literary mazes encourage an openness to what is alluringly beyond our grasp. Rather than lead to fixed positions and comprehensive answers, these authors immerse their readers in unfathomable mysteries.

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