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THE OSWALD Review Undergraduate Research and Criticism In the Discipline of  
English: Volume 8 Fall 2006



THE  
**OSWALD *Review***

*An International Journal*  
*Of Undergraduate Research and Criticism*  
*In the Discipline of English*

Volume VIII  
Fall 2006



*To acknowledge the generosity of James and Mary Oswald, whose love of the written word has inspired innumerable others to a deeper appreciation of the complexity and richness of the English language and its literatures, The Oswald Review is named in their honor.*

THE  
OSWALD *Review*

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*In the Discipline of English*

Volume VIII  
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THE  
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***An International Journal  
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CONTENTS:

**Freud’s “On the Universal Tendency to  
Debasement in the Sphere of Love”  
as a Lens for Thomas’s “When, Like a Running Grave”** 1

Christina Braswell  
*Winthrop University*  
*Rock Hill, SC*

**“Passions That Were Not My Own”: Critique  
and Preservation of True Pastoral Life in  
Wordsworth’s “Michael”** 21

Katie Homar  
*John Carroll University*  
*University Heights, Ohio*

**A Contemporary Reading of Augustine’s *Confessions*** 39

Sharon Cantor  
*University of Pennsylvania*  
*Philadelphia, PA*

**CONTENTS: (con't)**

**What Hath Wittenberg to Do with Stratford-upon-Avon?:  
The Protestant Reformation in *Hamlet***

**59**

Jason Adkins  
*University of Tennessee at Martin*

**Life into Art:  
Solzhenitsyn's Bread of Life**

**75**

Ruth Trimmer  
*Messiah College*  
*Grantham, PA*

**Freud's "On the Universal Tendency to  
Debasement in the Sphere of Love"  
as a Lens for Thomas's "When, Like a Running Grave"**

Christina Braswell  
*Winthrop University*  
*Rock Hill, SC*

In criticism on Dylan Thomas's poetry, especially that which discusses his early work, the consensus seems to be that Dylan Thomas is "obscure." As C.B. Cox explains in his introduction to *Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "[t]here is evidence that as he [Thomas] revised his poems their obscurity increased. It is also true that for twenty years, he proved incomprehensible to some of the most perceptive critics and poets of his time" (4). One such critic, as Cox notes, is David Holbrook, who accuses Thomas of inventing a "babble-language which concealed the nature of himself and his readers" (qtd. in Cox 4). However, as Cox counter-argues, "Thomas had acquired a popular knowledge of Freud and Jung, and it can be argued that his understanding of

the power sex holds over human life is decidedly realistic” (5). Although Cox fails to develop this particular counter-argument, Thomas’s own words reinforce the idea that he was significantly influenced by “popular” psychology, especially that of Freud: “Freud cast light on a little darkness he had exposed. Benefiting by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize” (qtd. in Ackerman 25). Implicit in this statement is the notion that Thomas’s intent was not to be obscure; rather, he was trying to expound upon Freudian psychology in order to shed more light on the complex processes of the psyche. Therefore, many of Thomas’s poems consist of “babble language” only in the sense that our psyches are garbled to us; in translating the psyche into poetry, Thomas actually rendered an extremely accurate portrayal of how the psyche appears to human understanding. Thomas did, in fact, what he set out to do, expounding upon Freudian psychology by adding layers that were particular to his own personal understanding. In effect, Dylan Thomas takes Freudian analysis, which is dry and bereft of emotion, and infuses it with the intense emotion of the sufferer; the subjects of Thomas’s poems often suffer their conditions and analyze them simultaneously.

Being clear on one of Thomas’s poetic intentions does not, in itself, simplify Thomas’s admittedly difficult poetry. Fortunately, because Freud’s work functions as one of many structures for

Thomas to build upon, Freud's work can serve as a lens through which Thomas's readers can better understand his poetry. Freud's essay "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love" serves as such a lens for many of Thomas's early poems, of which "When, Like a Running Grave" is a representative example. This poem effectively expands upon what Freud's essay calls "psychical impotence" and its consequences.

According to Freud, psychical impotence occurs when "the two currents whose union is necessary to ensure a completely normal attitude in love"—the "affectionate" and "sensual" currents—have failed to combine in a man in a way that causes him to "seek only objects which do not recall the incestuous figures forbidden to" him (182). Here, the "affectionate current" consists of affectionate feelings a man has learned in childhood—these affections have an erotic dimension of course, but that dimension is "diverted from its sexual aims" (181). The "sensual current," which comes about during puberty, "no longer mistakes its aims" and "never fails [. . .] to follow the earlier paths and to cathect the objects of the primary infantile with quotas of libido that are now far stronger" (181); in other words, the "sensual current" is a sort of conscious sexual desire for the people for whom the subject has felt affection in childhood, i.e., parents and siblings. The "sensual current," because it is at first an incestuous current, must "make efforts to pass on from" the objects of affection and "find a way as soon as possible to other, extraneous objects with which a real

sexual life may be carried on” (181). Thus, when a man seeks “only objects which do not recall incestuous figures forbidden” to him, he is essentially avoiding sex with those for whom he feels affection because those people will inevitably have characteristics he learned to love as a child; the association with the “object” and the family is so strong that he rejects the idea of sex with such an object (182-3) and resorts to seeking objects he does not “need to love, in order to keep” his “sensuality away from the objects” he loves (183). For Freud, the “main protective measure against such a disturbance which men have recourse to in this split in their love consists in a psychological *debasement* of the sexual object, the over-valuation that normally attaches to the sexual object being reserved for the incestuous object and its representatives” (183). In other words, a man suffering from psychological impotence will debase the “object” so that that person cannot have the affection-status of a family member; thus, such a man will seek prostitutes or other women he deems unworthy of real affection.

In “When, Like a Running Grave,” actual and psychological impotence are overwhelmingly present and are very similar, in process, to the impotence Freud describes in “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love.” The one key difference between Freud and Thomas is that, for Thomas, psychological impotence does not result from a dread of incest but from a dread of the death he associates with birth and, consequently, with sex. As George Weick affirms in his essay on the poem, ““When,

Like a Running Grave' tends to be read as presenting a rather commonplace theme: namely, that love, particularly in its explicitly erotic manifestations, and death are inextricably connected" (par 1). In "When, Like a Running Grave," Thomas—if we can assume the speaker is Thomas himself—tries to resist the onset of the sensual current but is eventually unable to resist; he thus moves from actual impotence to a brief period of psychological impotence in which he debases the sexual object and then finally to a psychological impotence in which he cannot enjoy the sexual act.

Thomas begins by translating Freud's description of the transition from childhood, when only the "affectionate current" exists, to puberty where the "sensual current" begins to take control. Aware as he is of his own mortality, Thomas recalls resisting the onset of the "sensual current" with a sort of hopeless tenacity. In the first stanza, Thomas accurately describes the onset of the "sensual current" as something that subverts a man's control over his desires: "When, like a running grave, time tracks you down, / Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs, / Love in her gear is slowly through the house, / Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse, / Hauled to the dome" (lines 1-4). Time, in the sense of the affectionate and sensual currents, is the time of the coming of age, the onset of manhood that hits a man violently—"like a running grave"—and sullies him with the "sensual current" and its taint of death. In the second line, Thomas is describing how something innocently developed from the "affectionate current" has suddenly

become something potentially harmful; “Your calm and cuddled” describes perfectly the sort of protection and comfort the affectionate current brings the pre-pubescent child: “The affectionate current [. . .] springs from the earliest years of childhood; it is formed on the basis of the interests of the self-preservative instinct and is directed to the members of the family” (Freud 180). This “calm and cuddled” morphs into something else entirely once the coming of age has taken hold; it becomes a “scythe of hairs,” a lethal reaper sharp enough, as George Weick conjectures, to “split hairs” (par 5). “Love in her gear” is the “sensual current,” and she is moving through the “house” of Thomas’s body. The “naked stairs” of this “house” suggest both a child’s vulnerability and his innocence—the “stairs” have not been tread before and are thus naked. If the house is the body, then the “dome” is the mind where all of the psychological processes occur. In essence, what Thomas is saying is that the sensual current has invaded his mind.

In the second stanza, as Thomas attempts to resist the onset of the sensual current, he describes the actual impotence that precedes merely psychological impotence in his particular case. He writes, “Comes, like a scissors stalking, tailor age, / Deliver me who, timid in my tribe, / Of love am barer than Cadaver’s trap / Robbed of the foxy tongue, his footed tape, / Of the bone inch” (6-10). Here, we can assume that “Comes” is yet another verb for the subject “Love” (the sensual current) from the previous stanza. That

the sensual current “Comes, like a scissors stalking” reaffirms the notion that sexual love will lead to birth, which will only lead to death; as Elder Olson writes in his essay “The Universe of the Early Poems, “Scissors or knives are symbols of birth (on the ground that the birth-caul is cut open, the birth-string cut) or of death (on the ground that the thread of life is cut, the branch lopped)” (51); of course, in this case, the scissors signal both birth *and* death. In the second line, Thomas asks for deliverance from the taint of death that comes from the sensual current on the grounds that he is “timid in” his “tribe.” If we take the word “tribe” to be synonymous with “family,” Thomas’s being “timid in” his “tribe” suggests that the others of his family are not timid in comparison and thus exercise dominance over him. As David Holbrook notes in his essay “The Code of Night: The ‘Schizoid Diagnosis’ and Dylan Thomas,” Thomas did indeed have such difficulties with his family: “We learn from Constantine FitzGibbon that Dylan Thomas could not take the top off an egg unaided by his mother at seventeen. Obviously, too, his father wanted him to be the successful poet he had never become” (169). In Freudian terms, this timidity would result in an inability to shift desire from familial objects to other objects “with which a real sexual life may be carried on” (181). Thomas is also timid, of course, because of the inevitable taint of death that comes with the sensual current. Thus, when Thomas writes, “Of love am barer than Cadaver’s trap / Robbed of the foxy tongue, his footed tape / Of the bone inch” (8-10), he is basically saying that he has

been rendered physically impotent. He cannot accept the “normal” sensual current—“the Cadaver’s trap”—because of its connection to death. With family members, what Freud calls the “barrier against incest” (181) makes having affection for his family safe; he cannot pursue sexual connections with them and will therefore never cause the birth that leads to death. According to Freud, a man who allows the affectionate current to hide the sensual current in this way “becomes tied to incestuous objects in the unconscious, or, to put it another way, becomes fixated to unconscious incestuous fantasies” (181-2). The result of these fantasies is “total impotence, which is perhaps further ensured by the simultaneous onset of an actual weakening of the organs that perform the sexual act” (182). This is, in effect, what has happened to Thomas in “When, Like a Running Grave”; he has been “Robbed of the foxy tongue” and “footed tape / Of the bone inch,” all of which are possible references to a functioning phallus. As William York Tindall writes in *A Reader’s Guide to Dylan Thomas*, the speaker of the poem is “lacking ‘the bone inch’ of phallic death” (55). Indeed, that the “tongue” is “foxy” suggests that it is sexually alluring, and although Thomas could be referring to seductive speech, the other images suggest otherwise.

In the third stanza, Thomas expands on Freud by portraying a transitional stage between actual impotence and the onset of a merely psychological impotence—Freud himself does not account for such a transitional phase. Thomas pleads, “Deliver me, my maters, head and heart, / Heart of Cadaver’s candle waxes thin” (11-12).

Here the “head” refers to what is currently going on in his mind: the “unconscious incestuous fantasies” of the second stanza; of course they are conscious for Thomas, as he is both sufferer and analyst all at once. The “heart, / Heart of Cadaver’s candle” is, of course, the sensual current once again—Thomas is teetering on the boundary between the affectionate current’s total dominance and the sensual current’s complete onset. That the “Heart of Cadaver’s candle waxes thin” suggests that the sensual current is gaining some measure of sway: the “Cadaver’s candle”—the phallus—“waxes,” or grows as in an erection, but only just barely so—it only “waxes thin.” All of this occurs “When blood, spade-handed, and the logic time / Drive children up like bruises to the thumb, / From maid and head” (13-15). In other words, the miniscule gain in the sensual current’s sway occurs when one’s “blood” (desire) and “the logic time” (the inevitable, logical onset of manhood) “Drive children up” from both “maid” and “head” (both the objects to whom the sensual current should drive him and the incestuous fantasies that currently dominate his mind). In other words, Thomas is driven away from both “unacceptable” extremities of his sexuality.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, Thomas experiences the onset of psychological impotence in which sexual activity is “forced to avoid the affectionate current”: “Where they [men experiencing psychological impotence] love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love” (Freud 183). In the first two lines of the fourth stanza, Thomas attempts to merge the sensual and affectionate

currents so as to have a “normal” sexual relationship, but he is still clinging to the innocence of childhood, still trying to hold on to that affectionate current as a solitary entity: “For, sunday faced, with dusters in my glove, / Chaste and the chaser, man with the cockshut eye, / I, that time’s jacket or the coat of ice” (16-18). That Thomas is “sunday faced” suggests that he is at least maintaining a mask of innocence, but his having “dusters” in his glove suggests that he is planning to have sex. According to the *OED*, a “duster” is, a “light cloak or wrap worn to keep off dust” (4:1138); because the “dusters” in Thomas’s glove could not possibly be whole cloaks, it is safe to assume that Thomas might be referring to another type of protective “clothing”—condoms. In this sense, “time’s jacket” or “the coat of ice” both refer again to condoms; since “time” is the onset of manhood, the condom would be “time’s jacket” if intercourse were successfully carried out, and the condom would be a “coat of ice” if impotence were to take hold instead. That Thomas is both “Chaste and the chaser” reinforces the notion that he is trying to merge the innocence of the affectionate current with corruption of the sensual current, and his description of his eye as “cockshut,” a word which refers to “twilight” (*OED* 3: 421), further suggests that he is still experiencing transition; just as twilight is the threshold of night, Thomas’s current state serves as a threshold of sexual experience.

Despite his brief attempt to merge the two currents, Thomas experiences only the onset of psychological impotence. Taken together,

the last three lines of the fourth stanza and the first line of the fifth stanza illustrate the typically psychically impotent man who avoids a potential object of the affectionate current: “I, that time’s jacket or the coat of ice / May fail to fasten with a virgin o / In the straight grave, / Stride through Cadaver’s country in my force” (18-21). Here, the verb that goes with the subject “I” can be none other than “Stride”; thus, it becomes clear that the “that” in line eighteen means “in order that.” Since the cadaver is a symbol for the sensual current and its taint of death, “Cadaver’s country” would be a physical place where the sensual current would be allowed to run rampant apart from the affectionate current—thus, this “country,” in Freudian terms, is a “debased” place. That Thomas strides “in my force” confirms that he is no longer actually impotent; the word “force” here most likely implies virility. Striding through “Cadaver’s country in my force” is thus a euphemism for the actual sexual act with one or more lowly women. Thus, lines eighteen through twenty-one basically translate to “I, in order that my phallus will not come in contact with a virgin’s vagina (“o”), join with debased objects instead.” Therefore, by the beginning of stanza five, Thomas has successfully moved from actual impotence to a merely psychological impotence.

Accordingly, the last four lines of the fifth stanza describe the sexual act. Thomas writes, “My pickbrain masters morsing on the stone / Despair of blood, faith in the maiden’s slime, / Halt among eunuchs, and the nitric stain / On fork and face” (22-25).

Because “morsing” is the “action of priming (a gun)” (*OED* 9:1098), the “pickbrain masters”—the incestuous fantasies and the sensual current of stanza three—have essentially “primed” the “stone” (i.e., the phallus) for sexual readiness; they have driven the speaker to sexual activity at last. In the context of the rest of the poem, “Despair of blood” is most likely the despair Thomas felt because of unfulfilled desire; “faith in the maiden’s slime” is most likely Thomas’s belief that tainting a maiden (a virgin) with the taint of the sensual current would lead to birth and thus to death.

Because of the union with a debased object, feelings like “Despair of blood” and “faith in the maiden’s slime” are temporarily suspended; they “Halt among eunuchs”—those who are psychologically impotent—so that sexual activity can proceed; the “nitric stain / On fork and face” results from this halting. As Tindall suggests, this “nitric stain” is the “acid stain of sin and shame on ‘fork’ (crotch) and ‘face’”(55); in other words, the “nitric” stain is the physical evidence of sex—it is the ejaculate. And although Weick suggests that the period after “face,” which is the first period of the entire poem, is merely the end of one long and involved sentence (par 5), what Weick calls Thomas’s “torturous syntax”(par 6) does not, in fact, translate into an intelligible sentence; instead, Thomas’s use of a period here suggests the release of sexual tension that has been building since the beginning of the poem.

Thus, despite the brief suspension of inhibitory feelings, stanza six catalogues the regret that Thomas feels after the sexual

act; he is now experiencing the type of psychological impotence in which he can no longer enjoy the sexual act. As Freud writes, “[i]f the concept of psychological impotence is broadened and is not restricted to failure to perform the act of coitus [. . .] we may in the first place add all those men who [. . .] never fail in the act but who carry it out without getting any particular pleasure from it” (184). Thomas experiences this second type of psychological impotence, but his lack of pleasure in the act begins with painful regret. He writes, “Time is a foolish fancy, time and fool. / No, no, you lover skull, descending hammer / Descends, my masters on the entered honour. / You hero skull, Cadaver in the hanger / Tells the stick, ‘fail.’” (21-25). While this stanza may seem to suggest actual impotence since the “Cadaver / Tells the stick, ‘fail,’” this command represents a return to an “impotence” that is self-inflicted; Thomas returns to it willingly after the “nitric stain” of the previous stanza. Because “nitric” suggests “nitric acid,” which is “a highly corrosive and caustic acid” so potent that it can be used for “dissolving metals” (*OED* 10.439), the “stain” of ejaculation has proven to be corrosive rather than generative, and all of Thomas’s anxieties about sex have proven to be well-founded. “Time,” the coming of age, has “been a foolish fancy” that has made a “fool” of the poet. The “lover skull”—the taint of death that comes with sexual love—has descended like a “hammer” on the “entered honour,” i.e., sexual intercourse. That the “honour” has already been “entered” into reaffirms the notion that Thomas is expressing regret rather than foreboding. Indeed,

the “skull” in line twenty-nine is a “hero” because it has triumphed; the sensual current has found expression. Once again, the consistent use of periods suggests the finality, now terrible and frightening, that accompanies the sexual act.

Beginning in the seventh stanza, Thomas ceases to be the sufferer and analyst, becoming instead a cautionary voice for the rest of the world. Unlike Freud, whose idea of healthy sexuality involves fusing the affectionate and sensual currents (180), Thomas believes that the only solution to problematic sexuality is to scrap the entire sensual current. In his new role as cautionary voice, the poet promotes this solution by warning men and women about the dangers of sex: “Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam, / The cancer’s fusion, or the summer feather / Lit on the cuddled tree, the cross of fever, / Nor tar and subway bored to foster / Man through macadam” (31-35). The line “Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam” suggests, once again, that joy (i.e., sexual pleasure or orgasm) is not generative. Although sexual intercourse can generate human life, the things that come with human life—“the cancer’s fusion,” “the cross of fever” and the “city tar and subway”—are all worthless because they are unable “to foster / Man through macadam.” Here, the word “macadam” *can* indicate “a kind of roadway” (*OED* 9: 148); however, the word can also be broken down into “mac,” a “Gaelic word for ‘son’” (*OED* 9:148), and Adam, the biblical father of all men. Thus, “macadam” refers both to a road or path and also to the world in general, since the world is made of all

the sons of Adam. Essentially, what Thomas is saying is that the products of sexual intercourse are worthless because they do not really help each other through the world—human beings in general only inflict death and disease upon one another.

In the eighth stanza, Thomas, speaking now only to the men of civilization, reiterates his somber message and argues that his solution to the problem of sexuality is indeed the only viable solution. Thomas writes, “Joy is the knock of dust, Cadaver’s shoot / Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift / Love’s twilight nation and the skull of state, / Sir, is your doom” (36-40). “Joy,” instead of being a “knocking nation,” is the “knock of dust” or death. When he writes, “Cadaver’s shoot / Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift,” Thomas is basically telling us where the whole destructive power of the sensual current began; “Cadaver’s shoot” is suggestive of a nascent happening that perpetuates itself through the “bud of Adam,” a phrase which could refer to those that “budded” from Adam—Adam’s children. Because the destructive sensual current began with Adam, much like original sin, “Love’s twilit nation and the skull of state” will be mankind’s doom as well; the sensual current cannot be purged of its taint of death and therefore must be extinguished altogether. Thus, when Thomas says, “I damp the waxlights in your tower dome,” he is hoping to extinguish the sensual current, represented by “the Cadaver’s candle” in stanza three, that has invaded civilization’s collective mind—“your tower dome.” If the dome is now the collective mind, then the “tower” of

that dome is the collective body that acts out the whims of the sensual current.

Once these bodily whims are eradicated and the sensual current becomes powerless, the vicious cycle of birth, death, and decay will be over: as Thomas asserts in stanza nine, “Everything ends, the tower ending” (41). This end yields a finality unlike sexual finality—it does not result in further destructive activity: “(Have with the house of wind), the leaning scene, / Ball of the foot depending from the sun, / (Give, summer, over), the cemented skin, / The action’s end.” (42-5). The “tower,” which is synonymous to the “house” of the body from stanza one (line 3), falls. Tindall compares the “Ball of the foot depending from the sun” to a “masterbuilder, his feet up as down he comes” (105). If the falling man is indeed a “masterbuilder,” then it is likely that he is Death personified; Death tumbles from his seat of control in the tower once the sensual current is eliminated. In the final stanza, Thomas argues that this elimination will enable men to take control of their lives. In the final two lines, he writes, “Happy Cadaver’s hunger as you take / The kissproof world” (49-50). The “Cadaver’s hunger” is “Happy” or fortuitous because men are now able to “take” the uncorrupt “kissproof world” (49-50) for themselves. In other words, as long as the tainted sensual current is unsatisfied (“Hungry”), men cannot fall under its control and are consequently able to maintain autonomy.

With the final stanzas of “When, Like a Running Grave,” Thomas accomplishes what he set out to do by building on Freud: he has benefited “by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness” and has dragged “further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realize” (qtd. in Ackerman 25). And although Thomas diverges from Freud’s analysis by condemning the sensual current altogether, Freud’s influence is perceptible even in this disagreement between the poet and the analyst; after all, Thomas, like Freud, sees problematic sexuality as a universal malaise. Indeed, Thomas’s addressing the entirety of civilization reflects the same sense of universality as Freud’s assertion that “we cannot escape the conclusion that the behavior in love of men in the civilized world today bears the stamp altogether of psychical impotence” (185). Thus, despite some major differences between Thomas’s view and Freud’s, viewing Dylan Thomas through the lens of Freudian analysis sheds a good deal of light on a poet who is all too often condemned for his convoluted syntax, his complex imagery, and his “obscurity.”

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**“Passions That Were Not My Own”:  
Critique and Preservation of True Pastoral Life in  
Wordsworth’s “Michael”**

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In “Michael: A Pastoral Poem,” William Wordsworth presents an old shepherd, Michael, who sacrifices his only son, Luke, to the city in a futile attempt to save the family’s land. The poem’s central symbol, the stones of Michael’s unfinished sheepfold, represents the broken bond between father and son, the death of the family’s lineage, the symbolic decay of old-fashioned values in the face of “modern” industrialism, and the general decline of a rural community. Further illustrating this sense of decline, the stones have blended back into nature, “beside the boisterous brook of Green-head Ghyll” (l. 16), and human beings no longer “notice” the stones or recognize their significance (482). Upon reading the poem, one contemplates the state of such families and communities;

is there any hope for rural values in a modern age or will they be entirely forgotten? While Wordsworth does not advocate retrogression in “Michael,” the poet does admire old values and attempts to reconcile them with new values. In bringing the story of Michael to urban readers, he is perpetuating, to the best of his ability, the memory of that shepherd and his rural community.

First, the fact that Michael, as a character, is a mixture of values implies that Wordsworth is not entirely retrospective. The poet admires Michael’s older agrarian values of love of the land, ancestry, community, and hard work. For example, the line “those fields. . . had laid strong hold on his affections” illustrates Michael’s love for his property (74-75). In the general traditional sense, the love and ownership of property link to feelings of independence; Michael’s cottage, “The Evening Star,” “[standing] single with large prospect,” and the subsequent description of the land’s boundaries seem to embody this independent ideal (133).

Unlike the growing materialism of the nineteenth century, “a little landed property is not only a matter of secure material welfare but it is also important in strengthening of family affections” (Wuscher 133). Moreover, as critic David Collings notes, these “affections” extend beyond the present family members, thereby uniting them with ancestors and future generations. Notably, Michael’s fields are inherited from his parents as they themselves received the land from their forefathers (224, 368). His son, Luke, represents a means to continue the tradition and the family’s con-

nection to the land through his descendents (Collings 559). Emphasizing this cycle of rural life, Michael states, “I but repay a gift which I myself / Received at other’s hands” (363-64). The creation of a shepherd’s staff for young Luke and Michael’s comment at Luke’s departure, “I wished that thou should’st live the life they lived,” further represent his commitment to ancestry and tradition (371).

In further relation to Michael’s love of family and ancestry, Wordsworth commends the old-fashioned sense of community that he represents. In the area surrounding Greenhead Ghyll, the people seem close-knit and considerate. For example, Isabel, Michael’s wife, relates how the town raised money for a “basket . . . filled with peddler’s wares” in order to send a boy, Richard Bateman, to the city, and “all the neighbors” bid farewell to Luke when he left for the city (262, 428). Additionally, Michael’s family and property become symbols of the locality and its values. For instance, the shepherds shear their sheep under the solitary oak near his cottage; this “Clipping Tree” becomes known and recognized in their “rural dialect” (168). Michael’s house also receives the name “Evening Star” due to the “constant light” produced by its revered, old lamp (136). Generally, Michael lives in a rural world with its own community and culture.

Furthermore, in keeping with the rural value of independence, Michael values hard work. Due to “an unusual strength,” Michael has the physical ability and mental dedication to perform hard work (455). The entire family is a paragon for such efforts,

and they spend the majority of their waking days performing the tasks needed to maintain the farm. Specifically, Michael indoctrinates Luke into hard work at an early age, and soon the boy, “not fearing toil, nor length of weary ways,” accompanies his father in all of the shepherd’s tasks (194). In addition, the family always persists in their labors, despite bad weather or the arrival of unfortunate news from abroad. For instance, after the news of his nephew’s debts, Michael “to the fields went forth,” and Isabel, his wife, begins preparations for Luke’s journey (284). Even in the farewell scene, Michael promises to “do his part” in the operation of the farm and continue with “all the works which I was wont to do alone, / Before I knew thy face” (395-396). After Luke’s desertion of the family, work becomes a means of emotional survival to the aged Michael, who persisting “as before/ Performed all kinds of labor” (457-58). Generally, “[his] lot is a hard lot,” but he remains “diligent” and dedicated to his shepherd’s duty until his death (233, 234).

In addition, the old shepherd also possesses a few “Romantic” traits, which develop from and enhance his older values. Specifically, Michael, through his daily career, has an intense, Wordsworthian link to nature. In addition to the pride of property in a traditional sense, he knows the landscape “like a book” and interprets the warnings from the “subterranean music” of the winds (70, 51). Like the poet, Michael has learned emotional lessons from the natural world which were “impressed. . . on his mind” (77-

78). Additionally, his traditional notions of family combine with Romantic beliefs. While Luke represents a “gift” and “hope” in the sense that he is an heir to the land, Michael seems to take a more emotional interest in his son than permitted by rural culture (146, 148); as the poet notes, his love was “exceeding” (151). The arrival of Luke, an infant with a “natural tune,” enhances his love of nature and makes the “old Man’s heart seem born again” (347, 203). As he teaches Luke the shepherd’s career in the fields, the two “played together” or had emotional experiences in nature (355). By including some Romantic traits in the character of Michael, Wordsworth shows his respect for the shepherd’s tradition, yet also demonstrates that the two value systems share some elements.

Yet, despite his admiration for older values, Wordsworth seems to voice his doubts about these rustic customs and their survival in a modern world: after all, “Michael” takes a social system’s collapse as its central theme. A close reading of Wordsworth’s poem thus reveals a more nuanced analysis of country life. Instead of simply defending rural culture, the poet suggests that, in addition to industrialism’s advent, flaws inherent in rural culture contributed to its own decline. To illustrate this downfall and expose possible causes, Wordsworth refutes several assumed conditions about rural culture and subliminally questions the system of familial obligation.

First, conditions in the poem undermine the presumptions surrounding the value of rural tradition. For example, the small farming town appears more dependent on the city than readers would first assume. On one level, the settlement is isolated “from the public way,” and the shepherds quietly tend their sheep in “a hidden valley,” surrounded by the natural world (1, 7). Yet, despite the seeming independence of Michael’s community, the story of Richard Bateman and Luke’s departure show a relationship with urban areas. Ironically, Luke must turn toward that “public way” in order to earn the money needed to save his family’s land and their way of life (427). Seemingly aware of this problem, Michael tells his son, “but it seems good / That thou should’st go,” and as Isabel’s testimony about Bateman hints, the family’s situation is not unique (381-82). Because “there is little money in the country,” small farmers must look to urban areas for support during this period of rapid economic change (Collings 570).

Further refuting a somewhat mythical status quo of proud families maintaining property over many generations, Michael reveals to Luke that “These fields were burthened when they came to me” (374). His admission is “news to the reader” because it undermines the legend of rural culture (Collings 555). In actuality, yeoman farmers, such as Michael, constantly fought to keep their property between the generations, and land holdings were always problematic. Specifically, Michael only owned “half” of his family’s land as a young man (376). He finally secured his holdings after a

hard struggle at age forty. Thus, the current threat to his land is not unusual and suggests a repetition of the events surrounding Michael's own inheritance.

More subliminally demonstrating the relationship between urban and rural areas and a break with tradition, Michael, as a character, is implicitly literate, despite a supposedly oral culture-based environment. Although David Collings notes that "literacy makes the ritual of oral transmission unnecessary" and contributes to the family's downfall, a sense of literacy was already apparent in the community because the written word plays an important role in Michael's story (568). He arranges the plan to save his land via a letter to a relative in a distant city. After Luke's departure, Michael and his wife anticipate a "good report" and "loving letters" from their son and kinsman (431, 433). Thus, literacy, as a form of communication, tacitly has a place in Michael's rural life.

Wordsworth not only undermines assumptions about rural areas but also cites concrete flaws in the rural tradition of obligation. Specifically, Luke travels to the city because he will work for a merchant relative in order to earn the money. A "friend in this distress," Michael's relative participates in an old system of familial obligation (248-249). In a rural bartering economy, families retained the medieval ideal of reciprocity. Despite the kinsman's "kind assurances," the very system of obligation has created Michael's predicament: Due to such traditions, he must pay the debts of a certain "brother's son," who has experienced

“unforeseen misfortunes” (307, 213). Although Michael later hints at the nephew’s hypothetical “evil choice,” the old shepherd is still obligated to re-mortgage his land in order to obtain the cash, regardless of his relative’s actions (237). Vowing that “the land / shall not go from us,” Michael decides to substitute Luke’s labor in the city to gain the money (244-245). Although “obligation . . . turns back into a source of support” through the merchant’s acceptance of Luke, this system constitutes the heart of Michael’s problems and forces the painful decision to send Luke away (Collings 560).

Moreover, the system of obligation in the rural tradition also leaves families in a static condition, with little progress across the generations. Although Michael “toiled and toiled” and the family embodied “a proverb in the vale / For endless industry,” they do not seem to benefit from their dedicated efforts (377, 94-95). Despite the passage of time, the family remains “neither gay perhaps / Nor cheerful” (373, 120-121). For instance, Michael laments the “little gain” that he has accomplished in over sixty years of labor, implying a need for progress beyond the work of his ancestors. Furthermore, Charles Rzepka has noted the symbolic use of the number zero in “Michael,” specifically the intended sheepfold’s shape, the “simplest form of which is a circle, an ‘O’” (210). In another sense, this feeling of emptiness could connote the lack of gain or progress inherent in rural traditions.

In further critiquing the rural notion of obligation, Wordsworth demonstrates the breakdown of ceremony and familial

affections through Michael's farewell to Luke at the site of the proposed sheepfold. Although it represents a coming of age and inheritance ritual for Luke, Michael must first dismiss the son from the land in order for him to eventually possess the property. According to Susan Eilenburg, Michael has, on a psychological level, actually alienated Luke from a family by rashly declaring at the moment that he hears of the nephew's debts that "the Boy should go tonight" (282). Through Michael's choice to help his nephew first, the system of obligation forces the old shepherd to displace his own son's interests in favor of a "rival child" (qtd. in Collings 556). Luke's "evil courses, ignominy and shame" (445) in the city typify his revenge, as "the true child, abandoned, takes on the characteristics of the rival" (qtd. in Collings 556). Thus, in spite of his good intentions for the extended family, Michael remains somewhat brainwashed by traditional beliefs and, therefore, does not realize his decision's negative impact on Luke, the family member who is closest to him.

Unaware of the psychological ironies, Michael carries out the ceremony in a typical manner, talking of his ancestors, warning Luke about the city, hoping for the future, and employing sentimental phrases such as "But, lay one stone . . . lay it for me" (386). He mentions "links of love" and a "covenant" (401, 414). Yet, other comments detract from Michael's seemingly upbeat tone and intimations of a father-son bond. For example, when describing the sheepfold, he states, "This *was* a work for *us*, and now, my Son, /

It is a work for *me*” (emphasis added 385-86). The shifting tenses and pronouns imply a broken bond and a one-sided action. Now that Luke is leaving, the sheepfold merely becomes another project for the old shepherd alone. Additionally, the “covenant” mentioned later in his speech is hypothetical (414): Providing that Luke returns from the city, he “wilt see” the proposed sheepfold, “a work which is not yet here” (413, 415). Therefore, the farewell ritual at the sheepfold seems to accomplish little for the father and son.

In general, Wordsworth’s “Michael” presents a system of rural conditions and values that “proves to be the source of its [own] undoing” (Collings 555). Ironically, familial obligation catalyzes Michael’s current problem, thereby threatening his land and alienating Luke as a means to save it. The family toils but gains little benefit, and each generation fights to keep the land. A ceremony fails to produce the expected results. Even Michael expresses a few doubts about his rural culture. Therefore, the mixture of values in the protagonist and ultimately flawed traditions demonstrate that Wordsworth does not wholeheartedly advocate these values nor does he have the intention of “promoting [...] plans for reactionary social reform,” in the form of a “back to the land” movement (Pepper 377).

On the other hand, Wordsworth seeks to raise “greater awareness of [...] ‘human nature’, and an intensification of certain ‘affections’” in urban audiences who have been dehumanized by industrialism, thus fulfilling his promise in the preface to *Lyrical*

*Ballads* (Pepper 371). Instead of political action, he intends to activate the audience's sympathetic imagination through "aesthetic education" in the story of Michael (Pepper 379). Wordsworth hopes that the readers will extend their specific sympathy in a fictional situation to a generic sympathy for humanity. Thus, for the poet, the universal sympathy represents a form of recompense for the individual tragedy in the poem. In his view, poetry is the solution to revive emotions and preserve the memory of rural communities.

As the poet, Wordsworth serves as an intermediary between the oral, rural past and the literate, urban present. First, the memories and traditions of rural peoples seem to be in decline. Since Michael, overcome with the grief at Luke's desertion, was unable to build the sheepfold, his piles of stones remain beside Greenhead Ghyll. The unhewn stones rapidly return to the natural environment "by the streamlet's edge," and any human connection with them vanishes after Michael's death (327). Moreover, when the land changes hands, the new owners tear down the cottage, and "the ploughshare has been through the ground / On which it stood," indicating that the site of the house becomes a field (477-478). Although the oak tree still survives, a symbol of nature, it, too, seems to have lost all cultural significance as the "Clipping Tree"; the poet simply refers to it as "the oak" at the end of the poem (479). As the older generations die and younger people, such as Luke and Richard Bateman, leave the area, the oral, rural traditions are lost; through geographic isolation and change, once-prominent local

landmarks become meaningless to the newer generations and outsiders.

Thus, the poet's task is to interpret these landmarks for others removed from the original events by time and place. The phrase "And to that simple object appertains / A story" directly implies the poet's interpretation and role in relating Michael's life to the audience (18-19). Supporting this role, Rzepka compares Wordsworth to a modern archaeologist (207). However, unlike a scientist who simply reports events, he also wishes to convey the values and emotions of the people through the landmarks, as part of the aesthetic education: "The poet, by reading this symbol, gives us the narrative which contains the conservative ideology" or the rural values of Michael (Pepper 377).

Wordsworth acts as the audience's "tour guide" to the isolated valley and land surrounding Greenhead Ghyll. Addressing the reader in the poem's introduction as "you," he directs the visitor's footsteps and attention to the stones of the unfinished sheepfold. Furthermore, he aspires to be a knowledgeable tour guide. Deviating from the stereotypical "Pastoral" of the poem's title, Wordsworth wants a more accurate story of the rural people's laborious lives and suffering in the wake of the Industrial Revolution: "In the place of poetic swains piping tunes on oaten flutes while tending picturesque sheep, Wordsworth supplies a family of quite real country shepherds" (Bradshaw and Ozment 18). Therefore, he hints at his knowledge of the area, identifying shepherds as "men /

Whom I already loved” (23-24). Striving for further accuracy, a gloss confirms Isabel’s memory of Richard Bateman and the location of a specific chapel that Bateman built with his fortune. Lastly, Wordsworth mentions that he “conversed with more than one who well / Remember the old man,” thereby providing testimony through interviews (451-52).

Yet, although phrases such as “our rustic dialect” and “our ancient, uncouth country style” as well as his childhood connection to the “Tale” support the poet’s inclusion in the rural community, Wordsworth does attempt to distinguish himself, as the artist, from the actual toiling shepherds (168, 111, 27). Fosso argues that “‘Michael’ does not assert an easy equivalence between poetic and manual labor,” and Bruce Graver similarly describes the connection between the two states as “ambiguous and necessarily uncertain” (qtd. in Fosso 160). One prominent example of this distance is the poem’s written form itself. Although David Collings protests that “the fact that oral tradition is sustained here in *written* form allies the narrator [...] with the forces that would destroy it,” a written poem is Wordsworth’s best attempt and only realistic means to convey Michael’s story to a literate, urban public (574). Wordsworth, an educated poet, strives to link himself and readers with the feelings of a fairly uneducated rural shepherd, in order to understand “passions that were not [their] own” (31). Politically, he recognizes that the Industrial Revolution is inevitable and a return to the past way of life is impossible, and since he cannot personally

give everyone a tour of Greenhead Ghyll, the written version of “Michael” represents an attempt to reach a larger audience.

Hence, in addition to his poetic purpose of eliciting sympathy for “man, the heart of man, and human life,” Wordsworth indirectly preserves the story of Michael and his community (33). The written form of the poem reaches an increasingly literate audience, thereby giving a voice to a fairly silent rural people. In reading Michael’s story, readers would sympathize with the old shepherd and likewise remember him. Just as Michael attempts to pass the land and shepherd’s profession to Luke through his supposed “covenant” at the proposed sheepfold, Wordsworth attempts to share the traditions of their ancestors with modern readers. Emphasizing this preservation and memory, Susan Wolfson explains that “we [the readers] join the community that can tell the tale”; the poet makes a “covenant” (qtd. in Fosso 160) with the readers in sharing the story of Michael’s decline. However, Wordsworth fears that “only a few natural hearts” will appreciate Michael’s story (36). At best, he wishes to record the memories of a rural community for the sake of his true “heirs,” the “youthful Poets” (38). Therefore, “Michael” serves as an inspiration for poets so that they may further share the stories of other rural people or “the concrete experiences of the Michaels of Northern England” (Wuscher 134).

Wordsworth’s “Michael” is not a reactionary nostalgic poem; although the protagonist possesses a mixture of admirable rural and Romantic values, the poet acknowledges that some of

these values caused the old shepherd's downfall. In writing Michael's story and acting as its narrator, Wordsworth represents a link between the rural past and the industrialized present; he serves as a tour guide, or interpreter, of local landmarks and events. By choosing to turn the material of an oral tale into a written poem, he hopes to reach a larger audience and thereby increase knowledge of rural traditions. While eliciting sympathy for general humanity in the Romantic tradition, Wordsworth becomes a type of historian, preserving the story of Michael and his way of life.

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## **A Contemporary Reading of Augustine's *Confessions***

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Using the technical language and conceptual framework of contemporary literary theory, Michel Foucault's *Discipline & Punish* defines medieval torture as a mechanism of domination that is reconstituted in modern penal practices. He writes that torture "traces around, or, rather, on the very body of the condemned man signs that must not be effaced," adding that the "tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime" (Foucault 34-35). Through terms such as "traces," "signs," and "inscribed," Foucault characterizes the body as a textual space upon which physical marks become linguistic "signs" that signal discursive "truth." Through the repetition of "must" and the phrases "legal ceremonial" and "open for all to see," Foucault attests that these signs whose locus is the prisoner's body

are part of both a visual display and a communicative act. Commanding intent must inform the message and an audience must observe it in order for meaning to occur. In other words, Foucault conceives of medieval torture as a ritual that establishes and records public meaning.

Foucault's assumption that meaning is contextual challenges a foundational belief in medieval Christendom, namely that truth is located in God. Faith in God as the ultimate arbiter of truth informs public rituals such as the torture Foucault describes. Foucault's discordant viewpoint suggests the question of whether theory's terminology may accurately address all performances and texts, particularly those that themselves employ specialized terms for signification and representation. One such example of a problematic pre-modern text is Augustine's *Confessions*, which contemplates the nature and function of representations gesturing toward divine Truth. Though Augustine proceeds from an antithetical assumption, his terminology in translation and organization of ideas are remarkably and perhaps deceptively similar to those of contemporary literary theorists such as the Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida. Parsing Augustine's intended meaning and the connotations of terms such as "sign," "image," and "the Word" may offer insight into the extent to which contemporary theory may improve or detract from understanding of the *Confessions*.

Signification in Augustine's view begins with a God who is coincident with the Holy Spirit, Truth, "the Word," and Christ "the

Word made flesh” (226-27). “The Word” specifically connotes the infinite performative by which, on a mortal level, creation originates and passes through time. Human language imitates God’s Word yet produces only imprecise, sequential auditory “images,” or representations, of the objects God continuously pronounces into being (Augustine 225-26). Christ too has special connotative status because he takes human form. Augustine believes that Christ’s sacrifice lies partly in the self-debasement or “humility” to express the Word in human terms (219). Scriptural language gestures toward the Word by virtue of Christ’s unique status, as well as by the multiplicity of meanings for a given utterance, layering many simultaneous truths upon a single word (266-71).

Discussing meaning in the living absence of Christ, Augustine makes a distinction between foreknowledge of God – an innate yet inchoate awareness of divine grace – and the objects of thought and memory, which are “images” of God’s Word. Expressing the Platonic axiom that the impulse to self-preservation constitutes “a mark of [God’s] profound latent unity from whence [Augustine] derived [his] being,” or an early awareness of God’s grace, Augustine writes that “an inward instinct” bids him to value truth and “take care of the integrity of [his] senses” (22) even in childhood. The phrases “profound latent unity,” “inward instinct,” and “take care of the integrity” suggest an intelligence of the origin of being, and its wholeness in the eternal, concealed within the human mind. Affinity for truth and unimpaired judgment is instinctual in that it asserts itself

as an “inward” or subjective drive without being willed or understood. Augustine suggests that a person’s most private self is something motivated by God and partially understandable as such.

In Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine situates foreknowledge of the Word in human memory – a Platonic conception whereby thinking “gather[s] together ideas which... [previously] lay hidden, scattered, and neglected” (189), drawing insight through the process of recollection. Depicting memory as the domain of the “hidden,” as well as a “huge cavern, with its mysterious, secret, and indescribable nooks and crannies” – or inscrutable contents and workings – defines truth’s inaccessibility as a problem of language. In particular, the pairing of “mysterious” and “secret” with “indescribable” relates memory’s unintelligibility to the impossibility of articulation. Despite language’s extreme diminution and remoteness from the Word, unmediated at present by “the Word made flesh,” Augustine maintains that a person’s spiritual state and the understanding permitted by God may nonetheless guide him toward Truth through the Bible and human intermediaries.

Much like Augustine, Jacques Lacan envisions an origin of selfhood that is coincident with unconscious assimilation of a compelling ideal. However, his theory diverges from Augustine’s in ways that make it difficult to discuss the *Confessions* using Lacanian terminology. Lacan locates selfhood’s origin in the “mirror stage” or the developmental period during which a child first understands his reflection as his own. The moment when a child

“assum[es],” or identifies as part of himself, his mirror image generates both the “*I* function,” or subjectivity, and an “ideal-*I*” image or object. In other words, selfhood is “irreducibly” relational, the composite of an observer and his reflection. As the nearly helpless infant perceives a virtual space that obeys him, he foretastes maturation in the form of a “mirage”: the “ideal-*I*” who commands his space entirely. According to Lacan, this phantom self-image resides in the unconscious and manifests symbolically in self-projections, converses, and doubles (3-7).

For both Augustine and Lacan, the mind from its birth harbors an inconceivable ideal. In addition, for both thinkers, this ideal compels the subject to strive toward its origin. However, Lacan’s “ideal-*I*” is wholly imaginary and confined to the unconscious, constituting a reflection of a real object and prohibiting any transcendence of the human mind, both of which qualities mark it as beneath the “*I* function” in Augustine’s ontology. Lacan’s apparent alienation of consciousness from the unconscious echoes Augustine’s insistence that thought is far distant from foreknowledge of the Word. However, for both thinkers, these seemingly rigid distinctions fail on the subject of language. Lacan seats the language function in the unconscious, noting the complex relations among “signifiers,” or material components of language, that produce signification through shifting discursive context and associative links, such as metaphor and metonymy. A metaphor invokes two “equally actualized” or fully manifested signifiers, one of which is a “trace,”

or literally unexpressed marker, that exists metonymically in a text. The presence of this second term may be appreciated unconsciously, generating the infinite associative links that make up language (Lacan 145-48).

Treating the unconscious as comparable to Augustine's "secret" memories is itself problematic. Augustine relates language to the Word only partly in analogue to the Lacanian view that unconscious associations drive communication; an imperfect comparison has Augustine's divine foreknowledge direct the behavior of unwitting human subjects. Lacan's unconscious holds no attachment to stable, external Truth. If anything, it attaches merely to symbolic pre-language, a cognitive state more primitive than and internal to itself. Conversely, Augustine's consciousness seeks a potential reconciliation in Truth through external powers such as Christ "the Word made flesh," both redeemer and mediator for mankind, and the Holy Scripture. Both Augustine and Lacan assume a multi-sectioned mind, but only Augustine's components of memory are compatible and secured within a greater external entity. Lacan's emphasis on the dominion of the unconscious renders any Lacanian interpretation of Augustine difficult at best, since the *Confessions* expounds upon ways in which the mind's limitations may be transcended.

One such vehicle of transcendence is the Scriptures. Augustine sees genius in the Bible's apparent simplicity and insinuated complexity, "open to everyone to read, while keeping the

dignity of its secret meaning for a profounder interpretation” (96). The word “dignity” implies an elevated, perhaps untouchable status, while “profounder” connotes both the unfathomable depths of untapped memory and a conscious striving toward divine understanding. Augustine treats the “symbol” as a worldly matter on an even lower plane than the Bible’s surface meaning. He writes:

May [God’s] ministers now do their work on ‘earth,’ not as they did on the waters of unbelief when their preaching and proclamation used miracles and sacred rites and mystical prayers to attract the attention of ignorance, the mother of wonder, inducing the awe aroused by secret symbols. (Augustine 290)

Early converts suffer such “ignorance,” or privation of God, that they must be lured away from sin by spectacle. Augustine writes derisively of these performances, calling ignorance “the mother of wonder,” distinguishing, in other words, euphoria in God from mere excitement and curiosity. His ironic use of “sacred” and “mystical” reaffirms that language may have degrees of truthfulness, unlike the unchanging Word. Finally, Augustine contrasts the Bible’s “secret meaning” to the awe-inducing “secret symbols,” demonstrating his belief that external signs of faith are mere formalities, and “symbols” – suggesting vested secular meaning – signify little.

Augustine reiterates his low valuation of religious “symbols” when he condemns Christians who request “signs and wonders [...]”

desired not for any salvific end but only for the thrill” (212), apparently using “sign” and “symbol” interchangeably. The images placed contextually near “signs” and “symbols” in the above passages, such as “attract,” “inducing,” “aroused,” “desired,” and “thrill,” connote the onset of sexual excitement. These intimations convey Augustine’s reproof, tying signs and symbols not only to the secular but also to the puerile. The libidinal associations also imply a latent threat in spectacular practices, since sexuality is Augustine’s primary obstacle to conversion (152-53). Augustine further links public religious displays to privation from God by repeating “wonders” in the second passage and by lamenting, “Lord, my God... how many machinations are used by the Enemy to suggest to me that I should seek from you some sign!” As Augustine believes evil is a relative absence from God (43), the “Enemy” implies ignorance of the Word. Augustine contends that signs and symbols are not clear images of the Word and may indeed be obstacles to apprehending Truth.

Foucauldian thinkers may recognize in Augustine’s secularly charged, subtly menacing signs and symbols their own conception of public demonstrations of power. However, Foucault crucially omits religious motivation in his discussion of medieval legal ritual, while for Augustine no activity is fully secular because God alone provides form or being (67). Secular power for Augustine constitutes a detraction from the Word, or relative lack of spiritual substance, as opposed to meaningful active mechanisms. Augustine and

Foucault's theories nonetheless converge in ways that may attract a Foucauldian reading of the *Confessions*. For example, much like Foucault, Augustine involves the sign in public performances. Both thinkers also attribute to such spectacles a secular power and an implied threat; and both Augustine and Foucault believe the truth-value of signs is contextual, contingent in part upon the spirit of the audience.

Presenting a general challenge for contemporary theorists, the "sign" has evolved in conventional usage to mean something unlike Augustine's definition. Ferdinand de Saussure defines a linguistic "sign" as the arbitrary union of a "signifier" and a "signified," or a particular conceptual meaning (66-67). Contemporary theorists have subtly altered this definition to reflect their own theories, but Foucault appeals partly to the conventional sense when he analogizes torture to inscription using linguistic signs. He uses the term metonymically for all communicative acts, rendering his "sign" comparable to Augustine's public rituals. However, the relationship between Augustine and Foucault's "sign" becomes more complex in light of Foucault's peculiar definition of the term. In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, Louis Montrose synthesizes post-structuralism and New Historicism – the schools of thought with which Foucault self-identifies – when he expresses that "every human act is embedded in an arbitrary system of signification that social agents use to make sense of their world." A discursive

matrix “embed[s],” or subsumes, its constituents and co-creators, the “social agents” who are but one subject and many objects.

Foucault thus treats the sign as born of and contingent upon a network of authoritative mechanisms. Similarly, Augustine perceives a secular energy that informs and empowers signs with an implicitly puerile affect. Foucault’s assertion that signs fall within a matrix of domination appears to cohere with Augustine’s view that all meaning arises from on high. However, to the extent that signs present an active threat to faith, they appeal only to the basest temptations, which are potentially transgressive for Augustine rather than binding as in Foucault’s system. In addition, signification for Foucault is “arbitrary,” whereas for Augustine the closest parallel is observers’ relative distance from the Truth. Augustine believes that language’s relation to the Word is unchanging; only interpretation moves closer to or further from the Word.

Augustine narrates his conversion experience largely in terms of an evolving understanding of Truth in religious language. For example, he writes that in his late Manichean stage he cannot conceptualize “spiritual substance” as something outside space and time (Augustine 89-94). Describing a moment of great spiritual trial, he writes:

My heart vehemently protested against all the physical images in my mind and by this single blow I attempted to expel from my mind’s eye the swarm of unpurified notions flying about there [. . . He fails

to exorcise the images]. My eyes are accustomed to such images. My heart accepted the same structure. (Augustine 111-12)

Augustine depicts his overly physical imagination of spiritual “substance” as a “swarm of unpurified notions” emanating from his “mind’s eye.” Augustine’s observation that images of material substances constitute a “swarm” implies proliferating, irritating thoughts uncurtailed by Truth-directed reason. In addition, “mind’s eye” connotes a special compartment of memory for storing sensory images apart from interpretation. The word “eye,” in particular, juxtaposes a bodily image with Augustine’s false conception of a “spiritual” object, relating Augustine’s preoccupation with corporeal matters to his distance from the Truth. Finally, Augustine underscores the synonymy of God and Truth by characterizing the false images as “unpurified,” stressing that all human knowledge is sanctified by God.

The description “physical images” anticipates Augustine’s extended discussion of Platonic categories of representation in relation to memory. The basest images are “all kinds of objects brought in by sense-perception,” or images of physical sensations that are catalogued unreflectively by memory, while more elevated memories involve intelligent altering of “the deliverance of the senses,” or rational interpretation of sense-perceptions to create meaning. The highest memories approach “the invisible things of God... [in] the things which are made,” acknowledging sense-

perceptions merely as expressive images of the Word (Augustine 184-85). These memories are the most “inward,” and Augustine writes that in his most transcendent memories “[t]here also I meet myself” (186), reasserting the connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of God.

Augustine’s manipulations of sense-perception evoke both Lacanian and Derridian theories, but his conceptualization of memory defies contemporary theoretical terms. Augustine clearly distinguishes between imagination of “the invisible things of God,” or spiritual substance, and rational interpretation of sensory phenomena, as does Lacan. Both theorists also believe that imagining ideal entities relates more closely to the origin of selfhood than does apprehending spatial reality. Lacan’s “mirror stage” invokes alongside the “ideal-*I*” a virtual reflective space that conditions future relations between the “*I* function” and physical space. The infant assumes and anticipates an ideal space over which he will possess absolute subjectivity, so the reality of social and natural space constitutes a disappointment and discordance (Lacan 6). Crucially, Lacan treats the ideal-*I* and its virtual space as figments that adhere to a fractured self and exacerbate inner discord, whereas Augustine believes that unity with God is precognizant and something to be reacquired through “the invisible things of God.” According to Augustine, the faculties that transform sense-perceptions into intimations of the Word resolve “inward” conflict and enable progress toward divine comprehension.

Likewise, Jacques Derrida echoes Augustine's preoccupation with hidden meaning. Both Augustine and Derrida believe that images simultaneously express a direct meaning and a suppressed, dissimilar meaning. For Augustine, sense-perceptions are rationally apprehensible, but they also stand for "the invisible things of God" that are far removed from physical matter and rational thought. Similarly, Derrida's linguistic sign comprises both a direct meaning and intimations of the converse. According to Derrida, a "privileged signifier" constitutes the external marker for a sign's direct signification, comparable to Augustine's rational interpretation of an image. The privileged signifier provides an automatic interpretation, as opposed to the converse, whose signification is implied rather than represented – just as, for Augustine, God's Word imperceptibly infuses all things. Despite these complementary views on the presence of hidden meaning, Augustine and Derrida hold antithetical beliefs about the nature of representation. While Augustine trusts in a stable Word, Derrida contends that language has no fundamental structure or orientation.

In what ultimately becomes "Deconstructionism," Derrida identifies the converse of a privileged signifier and restates both terms in a relationship of difference (967), proposing an alternative conceptual arrangement that avoids the delimiting power of "truth." In Derrida's methodology, hidden meaning assumes equal importance to that of the privileged signifier, whereas Augustine affirms Truth's unchanging preeminence and treats its secret emanations as

greater than the objects of rational observation. Crucially, Derrida's "truth" is not Augustine's "Truth," and Derrida envisions an ideal rather more like the latter in that Deconstructionism makes manifest all concepts and undermines linguistic boundaries. Derrida's "truth" refers to a consensus viewpoint reached within discourse and reflects to some extent the truth-value Augustine assigns to "signs" and "symbols." However, even in their shared hope for a whole consciousness, Augustine's theory remains quite unlike Derrida's because he locates Truth in an ordered space while Deconstructionism proposes something immediately disordering.

Augustine moves toward Truth both by learning from the Bible and by interacting with other Christians. Just as the Bible intimates its meaning to beginners through simple language, Augustine writes that at first he listens only to Ambrose's "rhetorical technique":

Nevertheless together with the words which I was enjoying, the subject matter, in which I was unconcerned, came to make an entry into my mind. I could not separate them [...]. [T]here entered no less the truth which he affirmed, though only gradually. (Augustine 88)

In other words, memorable, true language supplants disorganized, "unpurified" notions despite the listener's resistant will. The phrase "make an entry into my mind" connotes stealth as well as sensible structure, in contrast to Augustine's false "swarm." Augustine

reasserts that thought and language are inextricable through the phrases “could not separate them” and “no less.” However, he grasps only a fraction of the words’ meaning since he cannot yet apprehend Ambrose’s life in the Word. The phrase “though only gradually” depicts the subjective truth-value of words, whose meaning varies with the individual’s spiritual state. Through Ambrose’s guidance, Augustine comes to reinterpret the Holy Scriptures, which are “no longer read with an eye to which they had previously looked absurd” (94). Augustine’s passive role in relation to the Bible, as in “came before me” and “were no longer read,” suggests that the text’s infusion with the Word itself compels greater understanding.

However, Augustine also believes that active linguistic exchanges can provoke spiritual progress though they must be guided by God’s grace in order to be productive. His own conversion draws upon an oral recounting of the life of Antony, the Egyptian monk, as well as a complementary tale of two men so moved by Athanasius’s “Life of St. Antony” that they convert at once (Augustine 142). The “Life of Antony” critically reappears at Augustine’s moment of conversion, when he recalls the transformative potential of language and “pick[s] up and read[s]” a randomly selected page of the Bible, which empowers him to avow chastity (153). Augustine seeks in his *Confessions* to write an analogue to the “Life of Antony,” a conversion narrative sanctioned by God such that it “stir[s] up the heart” (180) to intimations of a

greater, universal truthfulness. “I pray,” he writes, “that . . . [despite human misunderstanding] I may say what, occasioned by [Christ’s] words, [God’s] truth wished me to say” (272), acknowledging that ultimately the truth-value of any words uttered by humans must be accepted on faith.

In Augustine’s view, whenever Christians organize their raw impressions to make confession, they participate in an ascendant movement that intrinsically praises God (Augustine 3). Augustine’s most passionate remarks on the potential accessibility of God simultaneously underscore that knowledge and representation are subjective in relation to an objective Truth. In his above prayer, Augustine reconciles the social need to share “truth” with the seeming incommensurability of general human and divine understanding by accepting fragmentary truth and praying for further guidance. Contemporary theorists grapple with a similar problem in the absence of an ideal fixed Truth; discourse comprises a multitude of subjective voices, and the more personal an individual’s relationship to truth, the more difficult it becomes to meaningfully accommodate incongruous viewpoints. Augustine’s text may appear sympathetic to this challenge, but Augustine emphasizes that Christ enables all humans to someday fully comprehend God’s Word.

Augustine’s *Confessions* presents concepts and terms in translation that seem coherent with those of such contemporary theorists as Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, but the crucial points of divergence make theoretical readings problematic. This paper has

dealt mainly with linguistic representations in relation to Truth, but there are many other intriguing avenues of study. For example, the *Confessions* employs corporeal imagery in relation to the Word, which Foucauldians especially might find compelling. Applied with meticulous discernment, contemporary literary theory might augment our present understanding of the text, but the potential is great for slight misapplications of terms that would then confound two antithetical worldviews. The difficulties associated with the *Confessions* suggest that other pre-modern texts should be evaluated similarly before contemporary theoretical interpretations are attempted.

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**What Hath Wittenberg to Do with Stratford-upon-Avon?:  
The Protestant Reformation in *Hamlet***

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Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* may be analyzed with a number of critical approaches, focuses, and positions. In fact, some have claimed that "no other work in English literature has had as much written about it as *Hamlet* has" (Wofford 181). *Hamlet*'s flexibility stems from the diversity of thematic topics contained in its lines. Evidence of insanity, libertarianism versus determinism, the role of the conscience, the domain of the supernatural, and feminine autonomy are just some of the legitimately-targeted ideas from the play. Yet, one issue absent from many classroom discussions is the mechanism through which the entire plot moves. As the ghost of Hamlet's father inspires and even entices the action of the play's central figure, the explanation of this spiritual visitation, purgatory, requires

an in-depth investigation. Such an investigation reveals a number of dynamic positions toward the intermediate state of divine retribution. These positions coupled with the distinct relationships characters maintain toward the city of Wittenberg identify a veiled, but nonetheless important, discussion within the text: the Protestant Reformation.

Two distinct positions toward the Catholic doctrine of purgatory emerge in *Hamlet*. King Hamlet promulgates the reality of this place of purging and heavenly preparation as his entrance in the play is made possible through the doctrine. Upon the inquiry of his identity, he answers:

I am thy father's spirit,  
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confin'd to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purg'd away. (1.5.9-13)

The ghost's first substantial lines center on his purgatorial position. The position appears explicitly Catholic in that his confinement to the fires is "for a certain term," which will terminate when his "foul crimes . . . are burnt and purg'd away." Describing this place of confinement as a "prison-house" (l. 14) also implies a Catholic view. Old Hamlet's position on purgatory emulates that of Henry IV, formerly Henry Bolingbroke, in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*. Bolingbroke's motivation for crusading assumes a Catho-

lic purgatorial conception. The play's closing monologue displays this assumption:

I protest my soul is full of woe  
 That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow.  
 Come mourn with me for what I do lament,  
 And put on sullen black incontinent.  
 I'll make voyage to the Holy Land  
 To wash this blood off from my guilty hand.  
 (5.6.45-50)

Bolingbroke sees the necessity of restitution for sins, and such restitution is not found in the emphasized repentance and faith of Protestants, but on an accrument of virtue, precisely the ingredient for release from heaven's portico.

However explicit the purgatorial allusion appears in *Hamlet*, critics have still waged some debate on the imagery. Christopher Delvin chronicles the dispute between two mid-twentieth century literary critics: Roy Battenhouse and Dover Wilson. Battenhouse refuses to understand the ghost in Catholic terms for a number of reasons; chief of these reasons is the fact that King Hamlet did not haunt his family for the typical Catholic purposes of requesting intercession and warning of judgment, but rather for revenge (45). This purpose hardly reflects the character of someone in the process of purging. Battenhouse's interlocutor, Dover Wilson, anticipates this objection by describing the ghost not "as fitted out to the prescriptions of St. Thomas Aquinas and the

Council of Trent, but as fitting in with the average Catholic notions of the day [of Shakespeare]” (44). Stephen Greenblatt settles the matter by affirming the traditional Catholic motivations for “spectral visitations” and amending purposes for haunting not as common, including disclosure of “hidden wrongs” and exhortation of “the restitution of ill-gotten gains” (41).

King Hamlet maintains an obvious, static stance toward the doctrine of purgatory, but his displaced heir has a complex and dynamic relationship with this method of divine retribution. Initially, Prince Hamlet attests to the honesty of the ghost, affirming its purgatorial status. To Horatio, he swears by St. Patrick—the patron saint of purgatory (Greenblatt 233-4)—to the legitimacy of the spiritual visitor (1.5.136). In the same scene, Hamlet utters the Latin phrase *hic et ubique* under the compulsion of the ghost. This phrase, translated “here and everywhere,” directly quotes a Catholic requiem prayer for the alleviation of purgatorial suffering (Greenblatt 235). Yet, this affirmation comes under fire in Act 2, Scene 2:

The spirit that I have seen  
 May be a dev’l, and the dev’l hath power  
 T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me. (ll. 578-83)

Now Hamlet doubts the origin of the spirit: is it a familial spirit from purgatory or a tempting demon from hell?

This doubt subsides by Act 3, Scene 3—except for a few lines in the first scene of the act, wherein the Prince denies the possibility of ghosts, saying that from death “no traveller returns” (l. 79)—with Hamlet’s sparing of the King. Claudius bows penitently, and Hamlet enters with the perfect chance to fulfill the ghost’s commission. What prevents his retribution for Claudius’s crime? “And am I then revenged,” muses Hamlet, “To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and season’d for his passage? / No!” (ll. 84-7). He resolves to delay his revenge until the King is in the midst of some act “that has no relish of salvation in ’t” (l. 92). A clearly Catholic conception of the afterlife shapes Hamlet’s lack of action.

Hamlet settles his vacillating position on purgatory in the final two acts of the play. After the murder of Polonius in the third act, Claudius demands of Hamlet the whereabouts of his courtier’s corpse. Hamlet’s answer clearly precludes the possibility of purgatory: “In heaven, send thither to see; if your messenger find / him not there, seek him i’ th’ other place yourself” (4.3.32-3). Hamlet upholds a clearly Protestant conception of the afterlife, by focusing on two possible locations: heaven and hell. He further upholds this conception in the play’s final scene. Whereas the early portions of the play were marked by Hamlet’s commission to avenge his father’s murder, Hamlet omits the fulfillment of this commission in his

final words to the king: “Follow my mother” (l. 309). Rather than positing an Oedipal explanation to this phenomenon, the importance of these words lies in the complete lack of mention of his father.

Although Hamlet eventually settles on a single purgatorial position, the reader must question why his position wavers throughout most of the play. A decent conjecture rests on the insanity of Hamlet; the absence of coherence in his theology stems from his mental instability. The problem with this hypothesis consists in its assumption of Hamlet’s madness. One can build a case that Hamlet feigns madness for personal and political leverage. Instead of developing the negation of this hypothesis, alternate explanations merit investigative energy.

A historical approach to this question solves much of the quandary over Hamlet’s vacillation. Shakespeare composed this great tragedy in an Elizabethan England that formally denied the idea of purgatory. The Thirty-Nine Articles, an Elizabethan religious confession, called the doctrine “a fond thing vainly feigned, and grounded upon no warrant of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God” (Matheson 385). Yet, this formal repudiation would not entirely eliminate the belief in England or in Shakespeare’s audience (Greenblatt 235). Delvin notes that “prayers for the dead lingered nostalgically in England long after their official prohibition” (31). In fact, Shakespeare’s father, John—who probably died in 1601, the same year *Hamlet* was produced—left a written request

that the Catholic traditions aimed at alleviating purgatory be used in his case (Greenblatt 249).

Even prior to the Anglican denial of purgatory, Protestants attacked the concept of purgatory. Simon Fish's 1529 anonymous publication *A Supplication for Beggars* criticized the Catholic clergy of the day, focusing on their extortion and rapacious sexual behavior. Accordingly, "in Fish's account their place at the center of the vast system of pillaging and sexual corruption relies upon the exploitation of a single core conviction: Purgatory" (Greenblatt 13). Similar attacks came from Protestants in subsequent years, including William Tyndale and Barnibe Googe (11, 24). Yet, even in context of these clear denials, the political and theological head of the Reformation maintained an intellectual relationship with the doctrine of purgatory congruent to Hamlet's. In the 1520s, Luther left open the possibility of purgatory, while confessing it was not provable from scripture or reason (33), but by 1530 he rigorously denied the idea. This historical data suggests that post-Reformation theological categories are not as simple as Anglican, Catholic, and Protestant. With this suggestion in mind, Devlin concludes: "As to young Hamlet's religious views, the impression that one gets is that they were typically Elizabethan; he was a conforming Protestant, with Catholic inclinations counterbalanced by an increasing tendency to skepticism" (50).

Another set of data adds a layer of meaning to Catholic and Protestant representations in *Hamlet*. The play makes frequent

reference to the seat of the Reformation: Wittenberg, Germany. Before specific relationships to this city are explored, it must be asked if these references are necessarily Protestant-minded. Wittenberg could be a city known simply for the educational prowess of its academies; therefore, Shakespeare could use this reference without the intention of alluding to the Reformation, and his audience could also hear the name of the city without making Protestant connections. However, evidence exists that the Reformation is key to these Wittenberg references.

First, Matheson argues that Hamlet's intended Wittenberg education "may be Shakespeare's original contribution to the story, since there is no mention of this in the surviving sources" (391). If Shakespeare includes these references without inspiration from the sources, then it is pertinent to ask why such an inclusion is made. Furthermore, the Wittenberg references make use of an important sociopolitical religious event:

Shakespeare may also show a knowledge of recent history in associating the university with sixteenth-century Danish politics. After spending time at Wittenberg, the Danish monk Hans Tausen returned home to preach Lutheran doctrine in 1525, and the Reformation movement in Denmark was furthered by King Charles II (another visitor to Wittenberg), who ordered the production of a Danish Bible. (391)

Historically, Wittenberg's connection to Denmark reflects the spread of Reformation Protestantism.

A third piece of evidence deals with an allusion to a significant early Protestant moment. The confrontation between Hamlet and Claudius concerning the body of Polonius produces this allusion. Hamlet tells Claudius that Polonius has gone to supper, and the King asks where Polonius dines. "Not where he eats" answers Hamlet, "but where 'a is eaten; a certain / convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet [...]" (4.3.19-21). Hamlet's answer forms both an allusion and a pun: Polonius is the diet of worms, which is also the name of an early council that launched the political revolution associated with the Protestant Reformation. This allusion, the political and historical impact of Wittenberg on Denmark, and Shakespeare's original inclusion of the Wittenberg references make them assuredly Protestant.

With this base, one can then go on to examine the specific relationships to Wittenberg. Three characters maintain three distinct views toward the city of Luther's famous 95 Theses. Horatio receives his education in Wittenberg, and throughout the play, he comes to represent a thoroughly Protestant mindset. For instance, upon hearing the report of the ghost, Horatio maintains, what Greenblatt calls, a "skeptical distance" (208). Furthermore, Hamlet assumes Horatio's skepticism toward a ghost from purgatory: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are

dreamt of in your philosophy” (1.5.166-7; Devlin 33). Horatio’s philosophy is one preclusive of purgatory, which is expected of one educated in Wittenberg.

Hamlet and Claudius present two different relationships with Wittenberg. Hamlet wishes to follow his friend Horatio to Wittenberg. Claudius, however, intends and pleads otherwise:

For your intent  
 In going back to school in Wittenberg,  
 It is most retrograde to our desire,  
 And we beseech you bend you to remain  
 Here in the cheer of our eye,  
 Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.  
 (1.2.112-17)

Claudius prevents Hamlet from going to Wittenberg. With these relationships in mind, these three characters can represent Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Horatio obviously images the Protestants, being educated in Wittenberg and skeptical of purgatorial ghosts. Hamlet may represent Anglicanism in that the influence of Catholicism (Claudius) prevents its (Hamlet’s) unity with the Reformed Protestant tradition stemming from Luther (Horatio). This Hamlet-Anglican equation hinges on the fact that prior to the 1534 Act of Supremacy and the Anglican separation from the Catholic Church, British Catholics spoke dismissively of Luther’s movement.

Amalgamating the above material on attitudes toward both purgatory and Wittenberg produces a relevant discussion on the trichotomy of Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Horatio, as discussed above, in his educational and theological identification with Wittenberg represents the Luther-lead Reformation. The Danish kings with Claudius's prevention of Hamlet's journey to Wittenberg and King Hamlet's purgatorial standing represent Catholicism. Finally, Hamlet's eventual rejection of purgatory and inability to journey to Wittenberg align him with the British contribution to the Reformation: Anglicanism. Notably, only one of these three representations survives the murderous rage of the play's final scene.

Some questions concerning Hamlet's non-Catholic tendencies may linger. Do not Hamlet's vacillations on purgatory cast doubt upon the Anglican label? If Protestantism appropriately subsumes Anglicanism, then demonstrating general Protestant tendencies in Hamlet will secure the case for his non-Catholic worldview. In the fifth act, Hamlet comes to endorse Reformed and early Protestant views on divine sovereignty. Early in the second scene of this act, Hamlet reflects upon his vicissitude, particularly his exile to England by Claudius. Rather than continuing to mourn the ill fate which he has endured, Hamlet sees a lesson to be learned in his lot:

let us know

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well

When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn  
 us  
 There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
 Rough-hew them how we will. (ll. 7-11)

Hamlet's claim is that humans may "rough-hew" their ends but divinity is the truly directive force in human affairs.

The concept of divine sovereignty emerges later in the same scene. With the prospect of a duel facing Hamlet, Horatio offers to seek its cancellation or delay. He rebuffs Horatio with a biblical allusion: "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (ll. 202-3). The verse alluded to is Matthew 10:29, which reads, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father." Matheson contends that this "citation of the biblical text has everything to do with the relationship between the individual and God in Reformation Christianity" (394). He also points to the First Quarto's rendering of this line as reflective of early Protestantism: "there's a predestinate providence in the fall of a sparrow" (394). This manuscript also reveals that Shakespeare's acting company originally performed the play for universities, which adds significance to the original rendering: "*Predestinate* would be a resonant word in those settings—particularly at Cambridge, where advanced Protestant views were common" (394). Hamlet's reliance on the doctrine of divine sovereignty further aligns him with Protestantism.

From all this information about Anglican, Catholic, and Protestant reflections in *Hamlet*, a few relevant conclusions may be drawn. In light of the play's thorough discussion on purgatory, Greenblatt offers an intriguing synopsis of the plot: "[...] a young man from Wittenberg, with a distinctly Protestant temperament, is haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost" (240). For Greenblatt, the very character of Hamlet is shaped not just by the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy but by a conflict between the two major Christian divisions. Matheson presents another interesting implication of this religious material, claiming that "the history of Protestantism functions as a kind of subtext in *Hamlet*, surfacing occasionally in ways that are barely articulate" (391). For Matheson, the Catholic-Protestant conflict may not be as central to the character of Hamlet as Greenblatt argues. Matheson's conclusion, however, displays the complexity wherewith Shakespeare composed his plays. The Catholic-Protestant dichotomy provides one of a number of legitimate avenues of exploration and research. Detecting these strands requires careful attention to "barely articulate" intricacies.

Ultimately, this subtext of *Hamlet* points to Shakespeare's adroit playwriting ability. Members of the audience undoubtedly connected to Hamlet's religious evolution, even as many of them had waded through a similar doctrinal development. The Protestant Reformation also would have been indelibly imprinted upon the collective unconsciousness of the Elizabethan audience. After all, the Luther-led rebellion, and the consequent Anglican separation,

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## **Life Into Art: Solzhenitsyn's Bread of Life**

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I remember well the first time, as a child, that I became aware of the power of literature to pull a reader into physical and mental participation with a story. As I read Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy*, her sumptuous descriptions of rich fried doughnuts, fragrant pies, jellies, jams, crisp-skinned roast goose, and rich brown gravy left me physically hungry. There was some kind of literary magic at work; by the time I was done reading I was not only ravenously hungry, but the food passages had also created a setting of warmth and comfort, prosperity and security. I read the book many times over in awe of the discovery that mere words on a page could work such magic. No other literary description of food affected me as powerfully until I read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

As I read this work, I found Solzhenitzyn's portrayal of prison camp meals particularly gripping and moving. Solzhenitzyn writes in great detail about Shukhov's maneuverings to acquire food; he carefully describes the pitiful meals and even explains customs and manners concerning the eating of prison food. The food motif in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* serves to draw the reader into the novel, helping him or her to empathize with the prisoners and share in their plight both physical and, I believe, by analogy, spiritual. Additionally, and I think most importantly for Solzhenitsyn, by drawing attention to the base nature of the prison food he focuses attention on the harsh conditions in these camps and on a political wrong in need of correction.

Solzhenitsyn himself had experienced the Gulag prison system, knew its horrors first hand, and more than anything else, wanted others to know what was happening (Cismaru 99; Emerson 65). He writes in his 1970 Nobel Prize speech that "ingrained in Russian literature has been the notion that a writer can do much among his own people – and that he must" ("Nobel" 58). He believed that an author, through literature, had "the skill to make a narrow, obstinate human being aware of others' far off grief and joy [. . . where] propaganda, coercion, and scientific proofs are all powerless" ("Nobel" 57). Solzhenitsyn set himself the task of being an instrument of change for his country, but as a writer under the repressive Soviet System he never expected that he would ever see *One Day* printed in his lifetime (Hanne 151). He thought that if such

a work were published, he would want it to have broad appeal and to reach as large a readership as possible, and he believed that a short, vivid novel might do this more effectively and more rapidly than some scholarly, academic account (Hanne 155).

Solzhenitsyn immortalizes simple meals in his little novel because he knows first hand that food is the prime consideration of men struggling for survival and that, therefore, a food motif lends strength and realism to his story. This carefully chosen motif is of utmost importance in a novel of this sort because readers often find it easy to read a work and toss it aside mentally unless something in the text helps them to connect. Early in the story, Solzhenitsyn piques the reader's sympathy with a description of a labor camp breakfast that he himself must have eaten many times: bread, gruel, and kasha, which often consisted of coarse grass seed and not real buckwheat (Kern 7; *One Day* 17). The main character, Shukhov, describes the gruel as a thin fish and vegetable soup, the contents of which does not change much "from one day to the next" (*One Day* 17). Depending on the season of the year, it might contain salted carrots or even nettles; cabbage was the vegetable available on the day of the story. Solzhenitsyn tells us that Shukhov savors every scanty bit of fish, picking the rotten flesh from among cabbage leaves, eating scales and head with eyes intact and then crunching and sucking the bones (*One Day* 15, 17).

Gary Kern writes in "Ivan the Worker" that "the details of the prison camp's conditions are not thrust upon the reader in such

a way that will shock him, but rather in a way that will cause him to think – to add, subtract, and compare [ . . . ] if he goes on thinking and if he calculates, the impression will deepen” (8). Solzhenitsyn offers the reader food equations: lunch on the work site consists of two ounces – which works out to a scant one fourth cup of groats per man. At least that was the amount carried to the work site.

Shukhov reports that the trustees who helped the cook got an extra portion and that the health inspector and cook could eat as much as they wanted. And so, Ivan says, they were served a watery mush and no one dared ask “how much of the ration they’d really put in it” for to do so brought punishment (*One Day* 82). For the evening meal the cook serves four bowls from a ladle that holds a pint and a half of gruel. Thus, each man gets just three-quarters cup of watery soup skimmed from the top of the cauldron so that the guards and camp workers can have the solid foods from the bottom. This and another ration of bread doled out according to a man’s work output make up the meal that ends a strenuous day of work (*One Day* 167, 168). As Michael Hanne writes, Solzhenitsyn hoped that readers “drawn into intense participation in the details, the physical privation, the cold, [and especially] the hunger” might care enough to begin to work a change in the Soviet system (150).

Publication of *One Day* in the Soviet Union was nothing short of a miracle. Veniamin Teush, a friend of Solzhenitsyn, read the manuscript of *One Day* a year before its publication and predicted that if ever published, the novel would explode like an “atom

bomb,” changing Soviet life forever (Hanne 147). In 1962, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev also read a manuscript of the work and took it under his wing. He advocated with Glavlit (the official censorship committee) and the Presidium to have the work published, believing that the novel could be an important part of his de-Stalinization plan (Hanne 148; Medvedev 4, 9). Khrushchev assumed that readers would accept the story as an attack on Stalinism, a shameful period in Soviet history, and one he was trying to erase. Michael Hanne writes that Solzhenitsyn’s simple plan to pull the reader in proved so effective that Russian citizens waited in library lines for hours, sometimes returning daily for months, just to get a chance to keep the novel for forty-eight hours (147). As Teush predicted, the novel produced stunning effects: the story quickly slipped from Khrushchev’s control (Hanne 163).

Khrushchev did not anticipate the affective power of Solzhenitsyn’s story. First, the book brought attention to hundreds of thousands of former prisoners of the Gulag and made people sympathetic to them; it also encouraged many more of them to write about their experiences, thereby opening dialogue on topics that the Soviet leadership did not want discussed (Hanne 150). This heightened awareness led to a public expectation that something should be done about the camps, which were still in existence at the time *One Day* was published and were, by some accounts, actually worse than they had been under Stalin (Hanne 164). The book cast doubt on what Hanne calls the “Party’s own grand narrative” that

the people were in power. If the people actually were in power, many asked, why would they tolerate such oppression? (Hanne 165).

Soon, readers in other nations were taking notice. Early in 1963, translations began to appear in a number of other countries over which the Soviet government had no control. Hanne writes that, to the Western world, which tended to make little distinction between the governments of Stalin and Khrushchev, *One Day* became a symbol of the failings of Soviet Socialism. In allowing Solzhenitsyn publication, the Soviet authorities had almost handed over a weapon against themselves (168). While Solzhenitsyn's novel did not bring the immediate change in the camps that he had hoped for, critic Edward Ericson notes that *One Day*, in breaking a long official conspiracy of silence, became "the first crack in the Berlin Wall" (28). Because of the effect Solzhenitsyn wrought on Soviet history, David Remnick calls him the "dominant [Russian] writer of the twentieth century" (110). Indeed, Remnick notes that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* began a "cultural thaw" in the Soviet Union that so greatly disturbed leadership, they eventually "banned Solzhenitsyn from print" (118).

Writing for publication under the Soviet regime posed a particular problem for Solzhenitsyn concerning his expression of faith. *One Day* is partially autobiographical, detailing Solzhenitsyn's own experiences in the labor camps. Solzhenitsyn held a deep Christian faith but faced a dilemma in describing the prisoners'

spiritual plight. Shukhov has some rudimentary faith; he asks God for protection when he accidentally brings a scrap of metal back to camp, and he thanks God that he has made it to the end of another day (*One Day* 149, 195). However, Gary Kern writes that we must remember this was originally a Soviet text and Solzhenitsyn could not dare to make Shukhov an overtly Christian hero and expect to be published (27). Instead, using another food motif, Solzhenitsyn draws an interesting parallel between the faith lives of Shukhov and Alyoshka, his Baptist bunkmate. Early in the novel, Shukhov notes that Alyoshka begins each morning “whispering his prayers” (*One Day* 5,6). In contrast, Shukhov spends his waking moments thinking of ways to get extra food or worrying about whether he will get his fair bread ration that day (*One Day* 2, 5). Shukhov seems perplexed at the peace and joy of Alyoshka who lives solely on camp rations and nothing extra (*One Day* 49). While Alyoshka finds comfort and sustenance in his meditations on God, Shukhov finds his solace in bread. He lives for it, treasures it, hides it, and takes comfort in the thought of having extra stored away. Indeed, Shukhov’s meditations center on the size of his daily bread ration: “you checked every day to set your mind at rest, hoping you hadn’t been too badly treated.” He comforted himself with the thought that “[p]erhaps my ration is almost full weight today” (*One Day* 27). After washing floors, and before going off to work, Shukhov returns for his bread ration and finds Alyoshka lying on his bunk reading from a notebook in which he has copied half of the

Scriptures (*One Day* 26). One thing Shukhov greatly admires about the Baptist is the way he has managed to hide his Scripture from camp authorities for so long. While the Baptist reads aloud from his carefully hidden Bible notes, Shukhov breaks his bread ration in two, puts half in his hidden pocket, and sews the other half into his mattress hiding it as carefully as Alyoshka has hidden his own bread of life (*One Day* 27,28).

Solzhenitsyn was also quite concerned with portraying what he saw as a spiritual problem for both the prisoners and the Soviet nation as a whole. Ericson writes that “for all the bodies lost to the gulag, the greatest calamity [for Solzhenitsyn] is [the] spiritual devastation” (28). Around 1964, Solzhenitsyn wrote sixteen prose poems reflecting what he believed to be “the spiritual inadequacy of modern [Soviet] life” (Dunlop 317). His sketch “Starting the Day” relays Solzhenitsyn’s concern with a Soviet nation that has lost touch with spirituality and has become body-centered:

At sunrise twenty young people ran out into a clearing, lined up facing the sun, and started bending, squatting, bowing, lying face downwards, stretching their arms outwards, raising their arms above their heads, and rocking backwards and forwards on their knees. This went on for a quarter of an hour. From a distance you might imagine they were praying [ . . . ] no, they weren’t saying their prayers. They were doing their morning exercises.

No one in our time finds it surprising if a man gives careful and patient daily attention to his body. But people would be outraged if he gave the same attention to his soul. (qtd. in Dunlop 321)

Solzhenitsyn has Shukhov comment wryly on this loss of faith when he sees a young man sit down at the table and cross himself before eating. He says that the man must be a Western Ukrainian because “the Russians didn’t even remember which hand to cross yourself with” (*One Day* 15).

One might think that men struggling for their lives in a prison camp have every right to be self- or body-centered as their survival depends on it, and, in the process, they might lose touch with spirituality. In fact, Alfred Cismaru writes that the gulag prisoner struggling for daily survival gives little thought to the hereafter or earning rewards in the hereafter but only of the here and now and how to fill one’s stomach and stop the hunger pangs for awhile (103). Solzhenitsyn, however, hoped to bring attention to more than just the plight of the prisoners. He wanted change for his whole nation, and so he addresses the lack of faith and the focus on the physical, again through a bread motif.

Bread is on Shukhov’s mind all day, but unlike Alyoshka, who finds comfort and satisfaction from his spiritual Bread, Shukhov does not find fulfillment. His major concern is how to keep his stomach full; he worries constantly that someone may find and take his hidden hunk of bread (*One Day* 43). Upon returning to

camp at the end of the workday, he immediately checks to make sure his bread ration is still in his mattress (*One Day* 60). Late in the evening, Shukhov eats “his supper without bread”; he will save his portion for later because the belly always “forgets what you’ve just done for it and comes begging again the next day” (*One Day* 171). Near the end of the novel, Solzhenitsyn stages a confrontation of faith between Shukhov and Alyoshka. The Baptist tells Shukov that the only thing “the Lord has ordered us to pray for is our daily bread” – meaning spiritual bread (*One Day* 196). Shukhov comments simply, “You mean that ration we get?” (*One Day* 197). Critics have interpreted this comment as sarcasm or facetiousness on the part of Shukhov, but there is really no indication in the text that it is anything other than a manifestation of Shukhov’s concern with his own physical well-being.

The acquisition of food and preservation of self has become Shukhov’s religion, complete with a religious relic in the form of his ever-present spoon. He has carefully inscribed his culinary icon “Ust-Izhma, 1944,” perhaps the place and date of his conversion to this faith of self-preservation (*One Day* 16). Camp mealtimes now take on the aspect of acts of worship. Alyoshka spends time with God each morning and more time whispering with other Baptists on Sundays; but, in contrast, mealtimes are most sacred for Shukhov. He reverently removes his cap at the table for no matter “how cold it was, he would never eat with it on” (*One Day* 16). One must eat slowly and carefully, says Shukhov, “with all your thoughts on the

food [ . . . ] nibbling off little bits [ . . . ] turn[ing] them over on your tongue” because food is the focus of his being and because “apart from sleeping, the prisoners’ time was their own for ten minutes at breakfast, five minutes at the noon break, and another five minutes at supper” (*One Day* 17,54). At supper that night, Shukhov and another prisoner sit down to a double portion they have managed to wrangle, and Solzhenitsyn writes that they sat in total silence as “[t]hese minutes were holy” (*One Day* 169).

As threatening to life as the lack of food and the loss of faith is the loss of dignity for the prisoners, which could lead to mental and physical breakdown. Indeed, Shukhov seems to know the importance of maintaining a highly developed sense of dignity throughout his ordeal. He may resort to creative finagling in order to get extra food, but Solzhenitsyn tells us, never in his life has Shukhov ever given or taken a bribe from anyone and he “hadn’t learned that trick in the camp either” (*One Day* 48). This quest to maintain some form of dignity often shows up in the novel in the form of eating habits. Shukhov remembers the old gang boss who once told him that the men who go first are the ones who stoop to licking out other peoples’ bowls, and so he refrains from such behavior (*One Day* 2). Shukhov would eat fish eyes if they were still part of the head, but if they were floating loose, he wouldn’t touch them (*One Day* 17). Even in the filthy camp mess hall, spitting fish bones on the floor was “thought bad manners”; the prisoners carefully spit them on the table and then pushed them on the floor

before the next gang would sit down to eat (*One Day* 15). At the evening meal, Shukhov's attention is captured by the sight of an old man, a prisoner of many years, who sits straight and tall. Shukhov says admiringly, "You could see his mind was set on one thing – never to give in. He didn't put his eight ounces in all the filth on the table like everybody else but laid it on a clean little piece of rag that'd been washed over and over again" (*One Day* 172).

Finally, there is a single passage in which Solzhenitsyn almost echoes the sensations of comfort and prosperity that Laura Ingalls Wilder creates. Shukhov remembers the meals back home when, without a thought, they used to eat "potatoes by the panful and pots of kasha [. . . and] hunks of meat [. . . and] enough milk to make their bellies burst." Shukhov understands, though, that "in the camps this was all wrong," to have taken this bounty for granted (*One Day* 54). On this day he is thankful to simply have "finagled an extra bowl of mush at noon" (*One Day* 202). Rather than conjuring images of comfort and plenty, Solzhenitsyn works a kind of disturbing magic in raising food to literary art and turning our thoughts to the plight of the prisoners through his focus on their meager fare.



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