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Sacred Reading: From Augustine to the Digital Humanists

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When Max Weber suggested in 1917 that the world had been disenchanted, he meant that modernity was best understood by the expansion of “technical means” that controlled “all things through calculation.”¹ The real power of these technical means lay not in the techniques and technologies themselves but in the disposition of those who used them, in their unshakable confidence that there were in principle “no mysterious, incalculable forces” they could not calculate and control. Such a technical rationality had replaced the “magical means” premodern people had used to placate gods and spirits. In Weber’s account, which was both elegiac and supercilious, when the “technical” superseded the “magical,” wonder disappeared from the world. The confident, calculating scientist, the intellectual hero of the modern world, was incapable of “wonder” and inured to “revelation.” Nothing surprised him, and nothing could be revealed to him.

Having conquered everything else, the calculating machines of modernity are now coming for our books. Or at least that’s what anxious writers in the *New Yorker*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the *New Republic* have suggested as they warn of the cultural collapse being ushered in by the digital humanities.² These critics rarely discuss what most scholars do with their digital tools—marking, annotating, visualizing, and collecting texts as our literary archive gradually moves from print to digital form. They focus, instead, on the grandiose pronouncements of Franco Moretti, a professor of literature at Stanford University and founder of Stanford’s Literary Lab. “The trouble with close reading,” Moretti claims, “is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon.... At bottom, it’s a theological exercise—very solemn treatment of very few texts taken very seriously.”³ In place of “close” reading, Moretti proposes a “distant” reading, in which gradually emergent and long-term patterns in literary history are studied through the application of computational and quantitative methods to the analysis of massive numbers of texts. To critics of the digital humanities, Moretti has come to represent all humanities scholars who use a range of computational and quantitative methods to model plot structures in novels, analyze literary periods, map metaphors, track lexical changes, and, yes, read texts.⁴

For instance, writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the novelist Stephen Marche argues that these new computational ways of reading are not the incidental quirks of a few misguided English professors.⁵ Rather, they are symptoms of a larger cultural tragedy that began when the Google Book Project and the Hathi Trust started to digitize millions of printed books in the early 2000s. The data-fication of books represents a cultural shift not only in what counts as a *book* but in what counts as *reading*. Lamenting the leveling effect of digitization on literature, Marche claims that turning books into data treats all literature “as if it were the same. The algorithmic analysis of novels and of newspaper articles is necessarily at the limit of reductivism. The process of turning literature into data removes distinction itself. It removes taste. It removes all refinement from criticism.”

In their opposition to machine reading, Marche and his fellow critics join the melancholy moderns who, in similar fashion, bemoaned the loss of coherent and fully integrated forms of life. To Friedrich Nietzsche’s last man, Max Weber’s disenchantment, and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s lament for a lost *Lebenswelt* (“world of lived experience”) we can add the loss of “literature” and the reduction of reading to a rationalized, technically determined process bereft of meaning.

Just as Weber’s elegy for a lost, magical world presupposed a specific form of knowledge, so too does criticism of “distant” reading presuppose a particular form of reading. And just as Weber’s disenchanted modernity needed its enchanted premodernity, so does Marche’s distant reading need its close reading. But what is so sacred, so solemn about reading a few books so intensively? And if close reading is, to quote Moretti, a “theological exercise,” what kind of exercise is “distant” reading?

Judging from the jeremiads against Moretti and his colleagues, “distant reading” is a profane, disenchanted exercise, a technological intrusion into an ethical practice. When we read, our eyes should move line by beloved line, page by precious page. Such immersive, personal reading makes possible emotional and intellectual experiences of recognition that transform us. Distant reading treats books as though they were elements in the regular, law-governed order of nature—particles to be calculated and measured.

On the other side of the debate, arguing for distant reading, we have scholars such as McGill University’s Andrew Piper. To read “topologically,” as he terms it, is not to begin a personal transformation but to discover patterns and scrutinize relationships among not several but dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of books. Readers in a modern close-reading tradition read syntactically, sentence to sentence, and regard words and sentence as authoritative “keys” with the potential to transform readers themselves from a state of humble incomprehension and distanced curiosity to one of privileged clarity and critical insight.⁶



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When Piper reads topologically, by contrast, he uses computational methods to map relationships among multiple elements (such as lexemes, morphemes, and phonemes) and categories (genre, format, publication information) of multiple texts. Reading, in his account, is less an exercise in fixing meaning (x means y) than in discovering the ratios that constitute texts and bind them together. Topological reading eschews traditional reading's focus on the sentence and embraces, instead, the lattice-like structure of language itself. Instead of attempting to provide a lexical meaning of "love" in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Piper says simply that "love" is "equivalent to 0.00109 (the percentage of times it appears relative to all of the words in the novel) compared to 0.00065 in Faust." Reading in this way undoes the attachment to individual books and the expectation that they will change readers in a particular way. Piper is looking for patterns, not a better self. Reading with numbers, he writes, "privileges the latency of the manifest ... all of those words that have historically resisted our attention through their over-familiarization, their presence, and their over-availability."⁷ Computational reading reveals a "lexical unconscious," and every new graph or diagram constitutes a distinct "totality," a different way of seeing the whole of literature.

So for its critics, "distant" reading is a desecration because it does not treat individual books as precious objects worthy of the devotional practice that reading is. But where did this notion of reading as transformative, even sacramental, come from? And is "distant" reading such a radical departure from it?

Reading as Ascent

When Augustine of Hippo recounted his conversion in the *Confessions* in 398 CE, he challenged an ancient ambivalence about writing and tied reading to self-transformation. In Book 8 of the *Confessions*, distraught and tormented by an internal battle of wills, he leaves his friend Alypius on a garden bench in Milan to seek solitude under a fig tree. There, weeping and crying out to the Lord, Augustine hears the repeated words of an unseen child that would echo beyond the garden in Milan and throughout the history of reading in the West: "Pick up and read, pick up and read."⁸ The child's refrain sets off in Augustine a series of memories of other conversions by book. He immediately recalls how another Christian was "amazed and set on fire" while reading *The Life of Antony*. This conversion story had been related to Augustine by his friend Ponticianus, who, in turn, began his account after picking up a Bible to discover that it was opened to one of the Apostle Paul's letters.⁹ The unseen child's hortatory refrain incites a series of memorable scenes of reading and ultimately prompts Augustine to interpret the refrain as a divine command to "open the book."

Augustine then hurries back to his friend Alypius and grabs his Bible. "I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit," he writes. He reads Romans 13:13–14, in which Paul exhorts his Roman brothers and sisters to turn away from their past lives of sexual excess and debauchery and be made anew, to "put on the Lord Jesus."¹⁰ This brief, glancing reading, which begins in the middle of the text and lasts but a minute, changes Augustine forever. It allows him to attend to an internal state apart from the external world, and thus to avail himself of a "light" that comes from beyond himself and the text itself. When he opens the book and turns its pages, he opens his soul and prostrates himself. Here reading is a vulnerable act. A word, a verse, a page—all are potentially transformative.

Augustine's autobiography is also a bibliography.¹¹ He recounts his conversion through a series of bibliographic events: He cried over Dido while reading Virgil's *Aeneid*, fell for philosophy while immersed in Cicero's *Hortensius*, attained new intellectual heights while perusing the Neo-Platonists, and, finally, became a Christian by reading the Bible. Augustine understands reading to be a process of identification, in which readers witness their own actions in the events of a story, in the life of another, and are compelled to change their lives. Narrative is a divinely inspired activity that makes a self possible.¹² When Augustine finally reaches for his Bible in the Milan garden, reading has already transformed him, many times over. And this is why he intends the *Confessions* to be a similar site of transformation for his readers.

But what made Augustine so confident in the transformative potential of reading? In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates expressed deep doubts about writing, and thus reading, because of the "promiscuous" nature of writing—the writer can never control how and to whom his words might be disseminated.¹³ For Augustine, however, words are a divine gift given to all in common. And they needn't be jealously husbanded: "What do we possess that we have not received it from another? And if we have received it from another, why give ourselves airs, as if we had not received it?"¹⁴ Augustine argues that spoken words "cease to exist as soon as they come into contact with the air."¹⁵ Words recorded in texts live on and bear the imprint of divine and human intention. All texts, and particularly the Scriptures, are laden with intention and purpose. They are the transcription, however imperfect and distant, of the divine will framed as narrative.

Before his garden conversion, Augustine underwent, as he tells it in the *Confessions*, what might be termed a readerly conversion. While still under the influence of the Manichaeans' doubts about the legitimacy of the Old Testament, Augustine had long considered the Christian faith "defenseless" against commonsense arguments that pointed out undeniable contradictions and conflicts between the Old and New Testaments. It was only when Bishop Ambrose of Milan, the biblical scholar who helped convert Augustine, taught him that such difficult passages had to be "figuratively interpreted"—that is, read not *ad litteram* but *spiritualiter*—that he could become the mature reader we meet in the *Confessions*.¹⁶

Had God so intended, wrote Augustine, he could have given "the gospel to man even without human writers or intermediaries."¹⁷ But God didn't. Augustine explained the ontological difference between humans and angels through their different relationships to books and different ways of reading. Unlike their mortal kin, angels read without mediation. They read, Augustine said, without "syllables requiring time to pronounce, they read what your eternal will intends... Their codex is never closed, nor is their book ever folded shut."¹⁸ The books of humans, by contrast, are closed, cut off from one another, and often illegible. Nevertheless, the book still serves as the medium through which God may reveal himself, and reading is a purposeful and deliberate practice in which the separation of the human and the divine can be gradually, if not fully, healed.

Augustine's account of reading doesn't fit into Weber's neat narrative of disenchantment. Humans are neither born nor divinely—or "mysteriously," to use a Weberian term—transformed into readers. Reading is a rational, methodical, seven-step technique that humans follow, a discipline they are formed into. In *On Christian Doctrine*, for instance, Augustine preemptively responds to those who may doubt the need for "rules" for reading and interpreting the Scriptures on the grounds that, as he put it, "all worthwhile illumination of the difficulties of these texts can come by a special gift of God."¹⁹ Augustine warns against the hubris of the presumption that mere humans, fallen and finite, can read without being taught language and the practice of reading. "The human condition," he writes, "would be wretched indeed if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency."²⁰ Augustine's ideal reader

progresses from docility to love and compassion to truth and finally to divine contemplation. The first step in the Augustinian practice of reading is a “fear of God,” which should prompt reflections on human finitude and mortality.²¹ An Augustinian reader is humble and full of wonder before he even takes up the text. Reading so conceived forms the self by a divine power that operates through the medium of the book and the practice of reading.

The Augustinian Legacy

Augustine’s model of reading had a lasting impact in the West. In twelfth-century Paris, Hugh of Saint Victor wrote a manual for students of the Paris cathedral schools on the rules of proper learning. In it, he describes reading as both a technical method governed by rules and a teleological activity aimed at the restoration of the human’s “divine likeness.”²² Practiced properly, he writes, reading “takes the soul away from the noise of earthly business” and offers in this life a “foretaste of the sweetness of the eternal life.”²³ Reading exercises the mind and prepares it for meditation, or what Hugh describes as concentrated and sustained thought “upon the wonders of God.”²⁴

Hugh embraces reading as a necessary and transformative technique, but, like Augustine before him, insists that reading has always had a purpose other than reading itself. The desire to read can even become inordinate, a form of *libido dominandi*, a desire unconstrained by anything but itself. There are, he writes, those who wish to read everything. But, he warns, “don’t vie with them. Leave well enough alone. It is nothing to you whether you read all the books there are or not. The number of books is infinite; don’t pursue infinity! Where there is no rest, there is no peace. Where there is no peace, God cannot dwell.”²⁵

Hugh’s counsel for avoiding information overload relies on a distinction between reading for knowledge and reading for ethical transformation. The pursuit of “infinity” through reading—acting on the desire to read everything—forecloses the possibility of a personal transformation, because it turns reading into ceaseless activity and precludes the meditative openness so central to an Augustinian tradition. The pursuit of knowledge through reading is good only when subordinated to the desire for that which exceeds the text and practice of reading: an encounter with the divine.

During successive centuries, however, reading for the sake of knowledge, or as an end in itself, progressively eclipsed the Augustinian conception. One of the perhaps paradoxical consequences of this gradual shift was the sacralization of the text itself. For Augustinian readers, the book or text always gestured beyond itself, never simply toward itself. Its very materiality was a constant reminder of the difference between humans and God. The Scriptures were sacred because they bore traces of God’s divine word and will, but they were a finite and ambiguous medium.

On April 26, 1336, the Italian scholar and poet Petrarch wrote a letter to Father Francesco Dionigi of Borgo describing his ascent of Mont Ventoux in southern France. Since at least the nineteenth century, Petrarch’s letter has been celebrated as the work of “the first truly modern man,” the product of a modern “individual personality.”²⁶ But Petrarch’s climb was also a key scene in the history of reading, and its Augustinian echoes are unmistakable: the ascent, the discussion of conversion, the inner eye, and the role that reading plays in forming a self.²⁷ Like the *Confessions*, Petrarch’s letter is a testament to a life lived with books and shaped by reading. He writes that he was prompted to scale Mont Ventoux by reading Livy’s *History of Rome*, which includes a description of the Macedonian king Philip V’s climb of Mount Hemus. The rest of the letter is filled with quotations from and allusions to Cicero, Virgil, the Gospel of Matthew, Psalms, Job, Ovid—and, perhaps most famously, Augustine’s *Confessions*.

In contrast to Augustine, who confidently took hold of his Bible, Petrarch opened the *Confessions* tentatively. It simply “occurred to” him to read whatever passage “chance” might lead him to.²⁸ He describes an almost mindless leafing through the pages of a book. For Augustine, reading was an encounter with the traces of a divine will; reading had a proper and certain end. But for Petrarch, reading was just as likely to be an encounter with the “surging emotions” and “vague, wandering thoughts” of an ambivalent and uncertain self—an encounter, that is, not with the divine but with the all-too-human stuff of books.²⁹

From Humanism to Modern Literature

With the rise of humanism and modern critical scholarly practices in subsequent centuries, texts began to be treated as material objects to be fixed and plumbed for meaning, even independent of divine (or human) intent. Scholars became concerned with ascertaining the intentions and meanings of authors and the reliability of the texts. Instead of merely pointing to or recounting the truth, books could, as Walter Ong put it, “contain truth, like boxes.”³⁰ The humanists who followed Petrarch treated the works of Cicero and other classics of antiquity as “clouded windows which proper treatment could restore to transparency, revealing the individuals who had written them.”³¹

Humanism raised a basic question about the ends of reading: Should readers be concerned primarily with “getting the text objectively right” or using it, as Augustine might have put it, for “obtaining what you love”?³² Their doubts about the power of reading to enable communication between minds and worlds—to relay the kinds of intention and purpose that Augustine understood to be at the core of reading and books—would only grow stronger.³³ But so too would the notion that books constituted an order or world of their own.

Humanist doubts and assumptions about reading and books reached an apotheosis of sorts in late-eighteenth-century German classical philology. Scholars turned practices and techniques honed on biblical criticism into advanced methods and applied them to ancient pagan texts. From the beginning, they assumed that modern philology’s demand for technical mastery was compatible with ethical cultivation. “By mastering and criticizing the variant readings and technical rules offered by the grammatical books and scholia,” wrote Germany’s greatest eighteenth-century philologist, F. A. Wolf, in *Prolegomena to Homer*, “we are summoned into old times, times more ancient than those of many ancient writers, and, as it were, into the company of those learned critics.”³⁴ The careful study of ancient manuscripts, scholia, and commentaries according to pre-established methodological conventions enabled a better understanding of the ancient world, which, in turn, facilitated an encounter with the moral exemplars of antiquity. But such study could also undercut the authority of the ancient texts, as did Wolf’s conclusion that the *Odyssey* was not the work of one author, Homer, but the product of textual accretion over time—a conclusion similar to the one biblical scholars had reached about the authorship of the Old Testament.

While biblical and classical philologists were worrying about the authority of ancient texts, a new generation of scholars began to raise similar concerns about more modern ones as well, the latter having been thrown into question by the destabilizing effects of the proliferation of print. In 1803, Wilhelm Schlegel, a German Romantic and one of the first scholars of literature in its more exalted sense, lamented the pitiful state of German reading and writing, invoking what

he termed “literature proper.”³⁵ Given the ready availability of printed texts, German readers no longer read with “devotion but rather with a thoughtless distraction.” To remedy this situation, Schlegel differentiated literature as a particular kind of writing that had been filtered and sorted from among the surfeit of all that had been printed. In his view, literature was not simply a “raw aggregate of books”; it was the manifest expression of a “*Geist*” (“spirit”), the expression of a common life. And it was this common spirit that gave literature its unity and made it a “store of works that are complete as a type of system.”

Critics such as Schlegel made reading and literature a cultural problem that required its own practices, its own liturgies. In an age of media excess, reading had to be redefined as a practice, and literature has to be organized and fixed as an autonomous, distinct order. An entire genre of how-to-read books appeared, dispensing advice not only on what to read, but on how to read in order to become an active reader who approached books not with fear or wonder but with the confidence that his real task was to “assist” the author.³⁶

The counterpart to the active reader was the critical editor, whose role, as the German folklorist and philologist Jacob Grimm wrote, was to recover the “essence” of a text and “to purify” it of the “filth and corruption” of time, the unavoidable degradations wrought through textual transmission.³⁷ Philology fixed the boundaries and lineage of literature and made it an object worthy of solemn, devoted, close reading. These scholarly editors sought, as Karl Lachmann put in a discussion of the complex and fragmented manuscript tradition of the *Nibelungenlied*, to create an “authentic” text—a critical edition purified of all corruptions and transcription mistakes.

Animating this philological project was the assumption that literature was a second nature with its own laws, patterns, and order. Instead of the eschatological reading of Augustine in which the experience of divine wisdom was deferred to a moment beyond itself and the text—a moment of wisdom, contemplation of the divine—the philologists projected that meaningful potential into the text itself. Critical reading and editing did not begin with wonder, but they ended with it.

Yet for some, modern philology’s unchecked desire to recover a lost literature reduced philology, and reading more generally, to methodological pedantry. As philology detached itself from its objects and from questions about why one ought to read in the first place, wrote the great German philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, the “common method[s]” of modern philology came to stand in for the unity of knowledge and culture.³⁸ Modern readers were bound not by books or even the love of books, but by technical methods. The objects of the application of these methods were fungible or even incidental.

New Criticism, New Historicism, and Points Between

The scholarly commitment to the order of literature and method took new shape in the 1940s and 1950s with the “New Criticism,” a formalist literary movement that insisted that the meaning and value of a literary work derived primarily from a formal integrity that was intrinsic to great literature. In his manifesto for the New Criticism in 1937, John Crowe Ransom derided contemporary university teachers of literature as “learned but not critical men” who had reduced literary study to “moral studies.”³⁹ Modeling the literature professor’s now standard reprimand of non-scholarly readers, Ransom lambasted those who turned literature into a grab bag of ethical options and encouraged a facile identification with texts. He and his fellow advocates of the New Criticism were, in turn, accused of turning the study of literature into a science, a charge that typically meant denial of the subjective character and ethically transformative potential of literature.⁴⁰

The New Critics were not cowed by such characterizations.⁴¹ They were motivated by a particular relationship to the text and a notion of what reading ought to be. Reading poems or novels for their ethical content would, they believed, be like studying nature for moral guidance. More often than not, such reading would ultimately be little more than a self-centered imposition of one’s personal predilections. Ransom asserted that to constrain the contemporary compulsion to read like a consumer, the critic

should regard the poem as nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical maneuver. The poet himself, in the agony of composition, has something like this sense of his labors. The poet perpetuates in his poem an order of existence which in actual life is constantly crumbling beneath his touch. His poem celebrates the object which is real, individual, and qualitatively infinite.⁴²

The object of wonder was the well-ordered literary object itself, but only as revealed by the work of the critic as reader of the organic order of literature.

As literary criticism careened during the twentieth century from the New Criticism to structuralism to deconstruction to the New Historicism, one assumption remained consistent: Literature had its own internal structure that required an autonomous discipline of study and an active, critical reader. When Jacques Derrida and his deconstructive epigones read against the grain, they claimed to unmask the hidden logics of substitution and metaphor, to reveal how literature conceals its relationship to an external reality. They desacralized the text, but sacralized reading: Reading, especially as performed by a smart reader, was revelation.

As scholars continue to hone and revamp their methods in the present century, readers of another ilk—public intellectuals, by and large, who cleave to a more practical criticism—cry heresy and charge their academic kin with vivisectioning literature and reducing reading to theory or science. With the rise and fall of each new method and theory, a chorus of critics accuses literary scholars of reading “scientistically” and lectures them on what reading really is. For instance, the critic Edward Mendelson asserts that literature is not written “to be read objectively or dispassionately, as if by some nonhuman intelligence.”⁴³ Here, “nonhuman intelligence” is intended to stand in for technique and technology—all forms of reading that aren’t grounded in personal experience. Interpreting a novel, in Mendelson’s view, is best done “from a personal point of view, not from historical, thematic, or analytical perspectives.”⁴⁴

With their stress on the transformative potential of reading, public-facing critics echo a key conceptualization in the history of reading that extends from Augustine to the neo-humanists of the early nineteenth century. In its present reformulation, however, such a notion of reading is cast by Mendelson and myriad like-minded critics as an exercise whose ultimate end is self-discovery, though most certainly not through an Augustinian encounter with the divine. The best of these critics, however, Mendelson and James Wood included, base their essayistic style on an abiding skepticism about reading’s potential even to guarantee such self-discovery, much less serve as an entirely reliable source of ethical reflection and judgment.⁴⁵ “Fiction,” Wood writes, “is the game of not quite.”⁴⁶ In their skepticism not only about fiction but about language more broadly, they follow in the footsteps of Montaigne, the inventor of the essay form.

Without the promise of its consummation in wisdom or revelation, reading, like writing, is less transformative than therapeutic. Underlying this idea of reading

as therapy and self-discovery is a very modern anthropological claim, which Mendelson explicitly acknowledges: “The most intellectually and morally coherent way of thinking about human beings is to think of them as autonomous persons.”⁴⁷ Reading, as Wood writes, is a “secular version” of a sacred liturgical act, which reveals not a god or the impossibly foreign but a human personality struggling to calm her anxieties and craft a life for herself.

This way of reading is a complete inversion of Augustinian practice, the first step of which was humbling oneself before a fearsome God. Reading required, to use a more modern phrase, a recognition that *personal experience* was insufficient to read well. What was needed was a radical openness to something that exceeded both the self and the text. And such a recognition and disposition required practices, methods, and theories that formed the reader before any particular experience of reading could be produced. Without Montaigne’s principled skepticism, or Wood’s, public-facing reading can become a form of moral consumerism in which literature is simply a means of uplifting identification. Instead of a shadowy realm of doubt and “as if,” literature becomes what the critic Mark Edmundson joyfully calls a “major cultural source” for choosing a way of life.⁴⁸ After the death of God, literature, on this account, is our only hope for a “secular rebirth.” Read Plato, Jesus, or Whitman, and choose who you’d like to become.

Wonder in a Digital Age

In some respects, computational reading is a refreshing corrective to modern tendencies to turn literature into liturgy, bearing burdens it cannot possibly sustain. And this is why, in response, the most vociferous critics of machine reading consider it a heresy. When scholars such as Piper, Ted Underwood, Tanya Clement, or Matthew Jockers read with numbers, they loosen reading’s attachment to the particular book and, thus, “our emotional attachment” to the idea that reading a book must change our lives.⁴⁹ Some of the hyperbolic reactions to “distant” reading have helped disclose the enchanted status literature still holds for some readers.

And yet, “distant” readers embrace another modern shibboleth. When Schlegel and Ransom invoked the autonomy of literature, they claimed a distinct ontological status for it. Literature was no longer merely a medium marked by the traces of divine intent or cultures past. It was a distinct order on par with nature, one worthy of a particularly modern form of wonder.

Just like their method-preoccupied predecessors in nineteenth-century philology and twentieth-century literary theory, scholars exploring the potential of computational methods and quantitative analysis for the study of literary texts have continued to shift the object of wonder. Whereas for Augustine reading began with wonder, for digital humanists reading ends in wonder: The object of interest and wonder is less a particular literary text than a visual or diagrammatic unity produced through a method.⁵⁰ Unity is not given; it is revealed through technologically enabled assembly. This dislocation of wonder from the beginning to the end of reading might explain the predilection in much computationally based scholarship for graphs, maps, and diagrams that visualize what was once hidden. The *distance* of distance reading is a function not just of machines but of these new diagrams and graphs that intervene in the reading of literature. They are themselves texts to be read, interpreted, and marveled at.

When readers encounter the work of digital humanists such as Piper, Underwood, Jockers, or Clement, they are awed not by Augustine’s awesome God or the possibility of encountering and engaging the spirit of a past culture but by the process that reveals, as Lorraine Daston puts it, the “deep unity underlying apparent miscellany.”⁵¹ For critics of distant reading, that sounds like heresy, but it is also the epitome of a modern enchantment. Computational reading is the culmination of a long tradition in the West in which knowledge-seeking curiosity outweighs transcendent longings. We are awed by our human capacities to organize, reveal, and explain what seems so radically particular and discrete. What is revealed is an order unbound by individual books and, as Piper observes, the “nostalgia...for bibliographic reading.”⁵² The wonder of literature is exemplified not by Augustine grasping his Bible but rather by the scholar mining and then explaining an order that exceeds the bibliographic, an order as regular, as universal, and as beautiful as nature itself. When joined with the irrepressibly human desire for comprehensiveness, the skepticism about reading the single precious book holds out a nonhuman possibility. To read, as Piper says, “without the material boundaries” of any one book, is to read like the angels for whom, as Augustine wrote, “the codex is never closed.”

ENDNOTES

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3. Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000), 57.
4. See, e.g., Matthew Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods in Literary History* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Brad Pasanek, *Metaphors of the Mind* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2015); Andrew Piper, “Conversional Novel,” *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 63–93.
5. Stephen Marche, “Literature Is Not Data: Against Digital Humanities,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 28, 2012.
6. Andrew Piper, “Reading’s Refrain,” *ELH* 80 (2013): 373–99.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 152; see also Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electric Times* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1–25.
9. Augustine, *Confessions*, 143.
10. *Ibid.*, 153.
11. Charles Mathewes, “Theology as a Kind of Reading” (unpublished manuscript, Summer 2015), Microsoft Word file; see also Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Reading* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 53.

12. For a detailed account of Augustine and transformative reading to which I am indebted both here and in the following paragraph, see Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), especially pp. 243–80.
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14. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 32.
16. Augustine, *Confessions*, 88. See also Carol Everhart Quillen, *Rereading the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 46–47.
17. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 123.
18. Augustine, *Confessions*, 283.
19. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.
20. *Ibid.*, 5.
21. *Ibid.*, 33.
22. Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of Saint Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991), 47.
23. *Ibid.*, 93.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 130.
26. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1904), 300.
27. See Brian Stock, *Ethics through Literature: Ascetic and Aesthetic Reading in Western Culture* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2007), 26–29.
28. *Letters from Petrarch*, trans. Morris Bishop (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966), 49.
29. *Ibid.*, 51.
30. Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 313.
31. Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 8. See also Grafton, “The Humanist as Reader,” in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999): 179–212.
32. Mary J. Caruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 156; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 9.
33. Stock, *Ethics through Literature*, 39.
34. F. A. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer*, trans. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and James E. G. Zetzel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 55–56. Original work published 1795.
35. Wilhelm Schlegel, “Vorlesungen über schöne Literatur und Kunst [Lectures on Literature and Art],” in *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I* (1798–1803), ed. Ernst Behler (Paderborn, Germany: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989), 484.
36. Johann Adam Bergk, *Die Kunst Bücher zu lesen: Nebst Bemerkungen über Schriften und Schriftsteller* [The Art of Reading Books: With Observations on Writings and Authors] (Jena, Germany: Hempelsche Buchhandlung, 1799), 66.
37. Jacob Grimm, “Rede auf Lachmann [Speech in Honor of Lachmann],” in *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 1 (Berlin, Germany: Ferd. Dümmler, 1864), 151.
38. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Reden und Vorträge* [Speeches and Lectures] (Berlin, Germany: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1901), 132.
39. John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13, no. 4 (1937); <http://www.vqronline.org/essay/criticism-inc-0>.
40. I am indebted to Barbara Herrnstein Smith for highlighting how this entire pattern began in the New Criticism and for her discussion of Ransom in particular in “What Was Close Reading? A Century of Method in Literary Studies,” a lecture delivered at Columbia University, May 6, 2015.
41. See, for example, James Wood’s description of New Criticism and academic literary criticism more generally in *The Nearest Thing to Life* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2015), 77.
42. Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.”
43. Edward Mendelson, *The Things That Matter* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 2006), xii.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Stock, *Ethics through Literature*, 36–37.
46. Wood, *The Nearest Thing to Life*, 87.
47. Mendelson, *The Things That Matter*, xv.
48. Wood, *The Nearest Thing to Life*, 13; Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2004), 2–3.
49. Piper, “Reading’s Refrain.”
50. I am extending the argument of Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park about wonder in early modern natural science to modern notions of humanistic reading. See Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (Boston, MA: Zone Books, 1998).
51. Lorraine Daston, “Wonder and the Ends of Inquiry,” *The Point* 8 (2014): 105–11, <http://thepointmag.com/2014/examined-life/wonder-ends-inquiry>.
52. Piper, “Reading’s Refrain.”

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