Protestant Postmodernism:
Theory and Theology, Affect and Art

BY

Caleb D. Spencer

BA Wheaton College, 1999
MA University of Illinois Chicago, 2002

DISSERTATION

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Chicago IL

Defense Committee:

Walter Benn Michaels, Chair
Jennifer Ashton
Nicholas Brown
Rachel Havrelock
Roger Lundin, Wheaton College
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Chapter One: Introduction

"the definition of postmodernism itself [is that] spirituality virtually by definition no longer exists"

--Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism (387)
Protestant Postmodernism examines the connections between (primarily) protestant theology and postmodern aesthetic and literary theory. It argues that both in theory and in practice—from novelists like Chuck Palahniuk and Don DeLillo to theorists like Stanley Fish and Eve Sedgwick and to art critics like Douglas Crimp and Rosalind Krauss—American postmodernism functions on the model of a Protestantism stripped of its theology but committed to retaining its structure.

Thus, for example, I show that Palahniuk’s Fight Club emerges from a model of the spiritual autobiography that insists on the importance of right feeling to both right action and belief, but that it makes its own distinctive contribution precisely by disconnecting feeling from belief. Along similar lines, I argue that Stanley Fish’s neo-Pragmatism produces a characteristically Protestant emphasis on the power of belief while producing a just as characteristically postmodern disarticulation of belief from truth.

More generally, the extraordinary success of the conversion narrative in contemporary culture—whether in the memoir like Anne Lamott’s Traveling Mercies or the vampire novel like Twilight—itself suggests not only that postmodernism has a significant protestant component, but also that the religious revival that is
sometimes called the Fourth Great Awakening has a significant
postmodern component.

Thus Protestant Postmodernism seeks to analyze a set of
problems and not-always-successful solutions that define a range
of writing, from memoirists like Anne Lamott, novelists like Don
DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Palahniuk, to theorists like Fish,
Sedgwick and Slavoj Zizek, and even to theologians like Stanley
Hauerwas and the Emergent church’s Tony Jones.

I suggest that where the First Great Awakening succeeded by
linking experience to knowledge of doctrine—so that for Jonathan
Edwards "having religious affections" mattered only insofar as
they were accompanied by "actual knowledge" of "divine things"
(164)—the current religious awakening has mainly succeeded by
unlinking what Edwards worked to keep together. Thus for example
Anne Lamott, in her popular spiritual autobiography Traveling
Mercies, is much more interested in her "strong" "feelings" about
"Jesus" than she is in any particular dogma of Christianity.

And this unlinking of doctrine and feeling can also be seen
in Fight Club (about as different a text from Traveling Mercies
as is possible to imagine) where Palahniuk speaks of Tyler
Durden’s “dogma” while exemplifying that dogma not finally in any
set of beliefs, but in Pentecostal “experiences” of “hysterical
shouting in tongues like at church” which make you “feel saved”
(51). Just as Lamott replaces “believing” with strong “feeling,”
Palahniuk replaces “Tyler’s dogma” with how fight club makes you
“feel”: for both it’s finally the affects and not the “actual knowledge” that matter.

In effect then, what I argue is that although a scholar of postmodernism as influential as Fredric Jameson has suggested that "the definition of postmodernism itself" is that "spirituality virtually by definition no longer exists" (Postmodernism 387), spirituality is in fact at its center, albeit empty of belief and made even more powerful by that emptiness. It’s no accident, for example, that one of the most influential contemporary literary magazines is called The Believer even as, which is to say, just because, it’s never made clear what The Believer believes.

Finally my argument explains Continental philosophy’s return to Christian theology—e.g. the work of Badiou, Zizek, and Agamben—suggesting that this return has more to do with an affection for the structure of experience highlighted in Protestant liberalism than it has with a commitment to the structure of belief found in Christian theology.

More fundamentally for English Studies, however, Protestant Postmodernism demonstrates just how deeply the shape of recent scholarship in English has been formed by preconceptions and arguments which only make sense in light of both the history and commitments of Protestant Christianity, even as those in the discipline move increasingly away from personal commitment to Christian faith.
In Chapter Two, “Protestant Liberalism and Artistic Postmodernism: Theatricality, Revelation, and Art,” beginning with Michael Fried’s enigmatic use in “Art and Objecthood” of Jonathan Edwards’ claim that “the world exists anew every moment,” I demonstrate the degree to which postmodernists like Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens understood the Friedian modernism they rejected as a theological conception, what Crimp called a “transcendent condition” rooted in a “metaphysics of presence.”

I go on to argue that this theological critique of the postmodernist movement far from establishing it on a-theological ground reveals that, whatever else they were doing in overturning modernism, these critics and artists were not rejecting theology. It was rather Protestant theology itself, as shown in the art criticism of Paul Tillich in the 1950s, which initially insisted on the centrality of “experience” to art. Tillich called this experience “revelatory ecstasy,” while an artist like Robert Morris called it the “viewpoint of the spectator,” but for each it is the experience and not the work which really matters. I argue that Tillich embraced the very things—the rejection of the work of art's autonomy, the valorization of the viewer's experience—that Fried critiqued and which the postmodernist critics and artists came to valorize. This suggests that even if postmodernism and minimalism were critiques of one kind of theology (the “metaphysics of presence”) they were located within another (the logic of “revelatory ecstasy”): if with the rise of
postmodernism one theology was rebuffed, it was only because another had been embraced.

Chapter Three, “Stanley Fish’s ‘God’: the Theology of the Interpretive Community,” focuses on the emergence of normativity as a central problem in literary criticism and theology. Its particular literary focus is upon the work of Stanley Fish and its theological focus is on evangelical protestant pastors and theologians including Tony Jones, a central figure in postmodern evangelicalism. The crucial moment in Fish’s career—the development in his theory with which he is still most identified—is the idea that his readings are just “superior fictions” which “relieve” him of the “obligation to be right” and replace this obligation with the demand to be “interesting” (Text 180).

But in Fish’s later theory this turns from a solution to a problem and comes to seem an indefensible position since it requires that one believe that other people’s beliefs are “not inferior but merely different” (368) from one’s own. I argue that Fish finds the intrinsic rejection of normativity in his own theoretical apparatus untenable and goes on, as he has recently done, to reject the strongest claims of his theory of the interpretive community.

Thus, Fish is paradigmatic of the kind of shift that I trace throughout the project, the shift from what it means for beliefs to “sound true” rather than be true, the shift from beliefs about texts to experience of texts (and in Fish’s case back to beliefs). This I argue is a distinctly Protestant
emphasis and I go on to show its reception among evangelical
Protestants with particular respect to Fish’s theory of the
interpretive community. I demonstrate that some Protestants have
found a “friend” in Stanley Fish (Downing 196), as one
evangelical put it, because they see his theory of the
interpretive community as enabling a “generous Orthodoxy,” a set
of religious convictions that they can hold as true, but without
demanding that others commit to their truth.

In Chapter Four, “From Traveling Mercies to Fight Club:
Spiritual Autobiography and the Postmodern Age,” I argue that
recent nonfiction and fiction have worked to replace the
conventional drama of religious conversion that rigorously binds
conviction, affection, and practice to one another with a
conversion of affections alone. Thus Anne Lamott, Chuck
Palahniuk, Lauren Winner, and even some popular, evangelical
Christian authors, have all worked by borrowing conventions from
conversion narratives like Paul’s Damascus road experience in the
Book of Acts, Augustine’s Confessions, Bunyan’s Grace Abounding
and various Puritan writers. But rather than displaying
conversions of beliefs or ideology, these texts focus almost
exclusively upon what Lamott calls strong “feelings,” and
Palahniuk “experiences.”

I suggest, in turn, that while these spiritual
autobiographies in the postmodern mode do not display the
constitutive traits of theology, they are both the byproduct and
demonstration of one direction theology has been heading since
the Protestant Reformation (inward, anti-propositional, non-normative, and affect-oriented).

What is more, I suggest that, in spite of the emergence of postliberalism, radical orthodoxy, and narrative theology, theologians themselves have largely been responsible for this replacement. They have accomplished this by attempting, since Schleiermacher, to found theology on “feelings” of “certainty” (Pioneer 116) rather than on doctrine (Schleiermacher’s most famous work On Religion was subtitled “speeches to its cultured despisers”). This focus upon feelings and experience has at the same time had the effect of making theology more about persuasion than about truth, that is about the normativity of beliefs and doctrine. This replacement of doctrine with profound affect has led quite easily to the replacement of theology with narratives of strong conviction, spiritual autobiographies bereft of doctrines, stories of people being converted with little interest in what they are being converted to.

Finally, Chapter Five, “The Varieties of Apocalypse: Revelatory Experiences and the End of Belief,” concludes by engaging the development of apocalyptic literature in the last 40 years in American fiction and film. I argue through readings of novels like Cormac McCarthy’s The Road and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ Left Behind series that the lens of apocalyptic literature is revelatory for an understanding of the loss of “believing” described by DeLillo in White Noise, and of “ideology” discussed by Pynchon in Gravity’s Rainbow. But I also
suggest that the transformation of believing into feeling, affects into action, can be seen in both the numerous apocalyptic films made in the years 1999-2009 (eg. “Armageddon,” “Deep Impact,” “I Am Legend,” “War of the Worlds” and “The Matrix” films) and even in the contemporaneous, enormously popular (50 million copies sold) evangelical novels written by LaHaye and Jenkins for the Left Behind series. It is in these latter novels—like Kingdom Come: The Final Victory, The Remnant, Glorious Appearing and Armageddon, fictionalized accounts of the basic tenets of dispensationalism, the return of Jesus Christ, those left on earth after the rapture, and the end of creation—that one might expect to find an emphasis upon Christian beliefs about the end of the world, but one finds instead descriptions of torture, military engagement, and intrigue: in short, the stuff of pulp fiction. I explore the question of whether this absence of doctrine is designed more to instill terror than prompt a conversion of belief, or perhaps, more sinisterly, to prompt conversion as a response to that terror? In the end, a genre predicated upon the unveiling of knowledge has been reassigned the cultural role of justifying a kind of skepticism, on the one hand, and protecting an unjustified, but purportedly pragmatic and necessary, form of violence on the other.
Chapter Two

Protestant Liberalism and Artistic Postmodernism: Theatricality, Revelation, and Art

I happened to visit the Berlin Museum and stood before a round picture by Botticelli and had an experience for which I do not know a better name than revelatory ecstasy.

--Paul Tillich “Art and Society”

This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done.

--Tony Smith “A Night Drive”

Presentness is grace

--Michael Fried “Art and Objecthood”
Against Theater

When Michael Fried ended his most famous piece of art criticism, his 1967 “Art and Objecthood,” with the words “Presentness is grace” (169) Protestant theology was not principally what he had in mind. For Protestants “grace” is that gift granted by God’s favor, and fulfilled by the saving work of Jesus Christ in his Incarnation, life, death and resurrection, which prevents humanity from bearing the burden for their wrong doing. Thus the most famous American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, describes grace in his “Treatise on Original Sin” as “the free mercy and kindness of God” which “interposes to prevent” the immanent destruction of all people for their “deserved ruin” (225), a description of grace that aligns with Edward’s most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he repeatedly implies that grace is “the mere pleasure of God” which “holds back” the “fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God [which] would rush forward with inconceivable fury” were it not for that grace (97). And although Fried does mention Jonathan Edwards in a prominent epigraph (more about this fact in a moment), there is no mention in “Art and Objecthood” about Modernism saving people by God’s mere pleasure from His fiery flood of fierceness and wrath. So what does Fried mean in his final sentence when he says that “presentness is grace”? 
We can begin to answer this question by starting with the other term in that sentence, “presentness.” Fried suggests in “Art and Objecthood” that there are several attributes peculiar to modernist works of art which make it possible to distinguish these works from the new “literalism” emerging in the art of the late Sixties. “Presentness” is perhaps the most important of these attributes for Fried. Further, as alluded to above, “Art and Objecthood” begins with a quotation from Jonathan Edwards, but this quotation has nothing to do with grace. Fried quotes Edwards’ journal in which he says “it is certain to me that the world exists anew every moment; that the existence of things every moment ceases and is every moment renewed” (148). Why is this quotation important to Fried? In it we see Edwards’ sense of the absolute autonomy of every moment, the refusal of the idea that the world exists in temporal unfolding or duration. Instead, Edwards implies that the world is created and recreated every moment, and this conception of the autonomy of every moment is for Fried relevant for understanding modernist art. In short, Fried understands Edwards’ model of the world’s recreation to be a model for modernist art, what he calls its “presentness.”

Thus at the end of “Art and Objecthood” he describes “presentness” as the quality wherein it seems to the beholder that a work is a “perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in
all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it” (167). It is as though the absolute autonomy of every moment of existence is like the absolute autonomy of the (ideal) modernist work, as though it is completely independent of everything around it (including its spectators), and it is this state of total independence which Fried describes as producing the effect of “presentness.” For Fried the modernist work is “wholly manifest” at “every moment” in the same way that the world is new and yet the same in every instance for Edwards.

In this state of being wholly present, the modernist work exists outside temporality and has for Fried no duration. Further this sense of being “wholly manifest” connects presentness to temporality (as the word presentness clearly implies). Commenting on the meaning of Edwards’ quote, Perry Miller describes how in Edwards’ conception of the world it is the “continuity” of time that allows the world to be constantly recreated and yet remain the same (Miller 329-30). Fried’s sense then of modernist works as producing a sense of “instantaneousness” is of this same type of continuity. It makes the work exist in something like a continuous present, that is, exist without temporality or duration. For Fried the presentness of the modernist work, and it would seem the work of great art in general, inheres in a refusal of duration, and above all the refusal that the great work of art involves the experience of its beholder; instead it exists in a state of continuous presentness,
in a transcendent condition which instills within its viewers a sense of conviction about its value.

Presentness is defined throughout “Art and Objecthood” in contrast to what Fried calls “presence.” Presence is the conception of the work of art as existing within time (having a duration), where the temporal experience of the artwork is central to its meaning and value. Fried is quick to connect “presence” to what he calls literalism’s “theatricality,” asserting that “the presence of literalist art, which Greenberg was the first to analyze, is basically a theatrical effect or quality—a kind of stage presence” (italics mine, 155). Presence and “theatricality” are thusly interchangeable. Fried explains that “the literalist preoccupation with time—more precisely with the duration of the experience—is...paradigmatically theatrical” and he continues “theater confronts the beholder...with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of time” (167).

It is worthwhile here to emphasize that the literalist preoccupation with time is connected for Fried with the dependence of the work upon duration for its existence. Where the modernist work was defined by its autonomy and a kind of instantaneousness which makes the duration of the experience unimportant—and in turn created the experience of presentness in its beholder—the literalist work was defined by its dependence upon the experience of its beholder and the duration required for that experience to happen. As a result Fried insists that the literalist work’s “presence” or “theatricality” cannot elicit
conviction from the beholder—whereas the modernist work’s primary operation is to create within its beholder an instant conviction of its identity and value. Instead the beholder experiences the literalist work as “being able to go on and on indefinitely,” a duration which in turn makes a judgment about the work’s identity and value impossible (159). “Theatricality” then, suggests the incompleteness of a work in itself, its dependence upon the external conditions of its audience for its existence, of its having duration, a particular location and context where it exists such as a gallery or other performance space (“site-specificity”), and its resulting inability to strike an audience with the utter conviction of its greatness through its autonomous, instantaneous, and “perpetual creation of itself” (167). Whereas the literalist work of art, in order to be complete, requires its viewer, their context, and the passage of time (making the work dependent rather than autonomous and making duration rather than a temporal instantaneousness central), the modernist work’s presentness entails its total completion without the participation of its audience, their location, or temporality. Presentness stands for Fried in opposition to what the literalists call presence.

So for example, Fried understands the sculptures of Anthony Caro to possess “presentness.” Caro’s sculpture is thus juxtaposed in Fried’s conception to the “theatrical” work of Tony Smith, Donald Judd, or Robert Morris before which the beholder experiences not instantaneous presentness, but rather “the
experience...is one of endlessness, or inexhaustibility, of being able to go on and on letting, for example, the material itself confront one in all its literalness, its ‘objectivity,’ its absence of anything beyond itself” (165). The thing “beyond” the work for Fried is the relationship between presentness and meaning. In essence the significance of meaning for Fried lies in its instantaneousness and unchanging nature, which, like a modernist work’s presentness and autonomy, and in direct contrast to a literalist work, has no dependence upon the experience of the beholder or its duration. So if for Fried the work of Caro is grasped and intuited once and for all in an instant, by contrast then, the meaning and existence of literalist work is a function of experience and duration. Thus Fried explains that whereas Caro’s work, in possessing “presentness,” seems to “essentialize meaningfulness as such—as though the possibility of meaning what we say and do alone makes his sculpture possible” (162), the work of the literalists, their objects, “do not represent, signify, or allude to anything: they are what they are and nothing more. And what they are is not, strictly speaking, something that is grasped or intuited or recognized or even seen once and for all” (165). These works possess a type of “theatricality,” because like theater they exist in their possessing a duration—an unfolding in time—and in their being experienced in that duration.

“Presentness” here is again “autonomy,” and in this case the work is autonomous because it stands outside of time and the
beholder’s experience and exists completely without the participation of either. Against the theatricality of literalist works stands the autonomous modernist work which, as Fried indicates by his emphatic italics, is the kind of art in which “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest” (167). So if for Fried “presentness” is the highest value of modernist art and it is also “grace,” then grace seems to be a quality through which the work will be wholly manifest. The art work’s identity will be experienced as totalized and absolute without participation from the experiencing agent. Thus grace for Fried is not about divine favor, but is instead a state of ontological fullness and manifest-ness which is intimately tied to the art work’s autonomy and meaning.

Thus although grace is not for Fried a term of Protestant art, it is associated with a language of totalization, of absolutes, and of complete indifference to the beholder which to many of his readers did seem to have a theological fervor and self-confidence which they resisted—here we must recall that God has often been understood as the unmoved mover and as indivisible (the Protestant emphasis upon the Trinitarian identity of God not withstanding). Some of these resistant readers included the artists who styled themselves Minimalists (Fried following Greenberg called them Literalists), the same artists and theorists we now call postmodernists. Their resistance to this language of totalization grew in the years following “Art and Objecthood” and Fried’s use of theologically loaded language did
not stop with "grace." For example in the same 2000 article where he describes his "unshakeable conviction" about the quality of Anthony Caro’s sculpture (his use of "conviction" here, as in "Art and Objecthood" comes close to the Protestant emphasis upon sola fide—"faith alone"), Fried describes his experience of Caro’s *Midday* saying "Midday, seemed to me stupendous (the conviction that this was so was instantaneous, a total spiritual and bodily event, as vivid and unforgettable as any I have every known), and in fact *Midday* remains for me an absolute touchstone of greatness for abstract art" (Commitments 14). It was Fried’s conception of presentness and his insistence upon the autonomy of art coupled with this kind of theologically loaded language—"total spiritual and bodily event" and "instantaneous" "conviction" about the "absolute...greatness" of works—that caused postmodernists to suggest that Fried’s conception of art was religious and rooted in a theology. Thus Branden Joseph describes Fried’s conception as filling art with a "metaphysics of presence" (Joseph 26) and Douglas Crimp says that Fried understands art to exist as a "transcendent condition" (Crimp 77). Crimp and Joseph insist that the language of autonomous existence, of instantaneousness, and of presentness involves a theological conception of the work of art, a "transcendent condition," and they, with the rest of the postmoderns, were emphatic that this was what they were rejecting. In effect, their insistence upon the importance of time, duration, and the beholder’s experience was a refusal of the perceived religious,
metaphysical, and theological conception of art in modernist theories like Fried’s.

But if, as we have seen, there is a sense in which modernism, at least Fried’s, can plausibly be understood as Protestant modernism, there is, I want to argue, an even more fundamental sense in which the postmodernist critique of it must be called Protestant postmodernism. What I will label Protestant postmodernism, by which I mean simply postmodernism, is this purported refusal of the “transcendent condition” of art. My purpose here is not to finally determine whether modernist art or the theorization of that work by its defenders is theological or religious. Instead I begin with this discussion because seeing the ways that postmodernists understood the modernism they rejected as a theological conception, a “transcendent condition” rooted in a “metaphysics of presence,” demonstrates the (supposed) theological critique that begins the postmodernist movement; that is, this discussion demonstrates that, whatever else they were doing in overturning modernism, the postmodernist critics saw themselves as rejecting the irreducibly theological conception of the work of art inherent in modernist notions like “autonomy” and “presentness.” The art that they made and championed was not to be rooted in a “transcendent condition,” or to be theological, in either a Protestant or any other kind of way. But In what follows I will argue that regardless of whether modernism is or was theological, postmodernism certainly was not a rejection of theology. Indeed, I will suggest that
postmodernism in art is inextricably theological, and that it is rooted in a distinctly Protestant theology. It will be the burden of what I am arguing in this essay to show that postmodernism from its inception in the earliest valorizations of Minimalism in the plastic arts was profoundly—if unacknowledgely—theological to its core and that, what is more, even before the term postmodernism emerged in these discussions its conceptualization was already in the method of engaging art works forwarded by the liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. By looking at Tillich’s theological engagement with modern art, I will suggest that, far from being a return to theological concerns, the postmodernist project has been integrally theological from its inception.

Revelations and Theatricality

Paul Tillich’s writing about art is amorphous and spans a period of nearly 50 years, yet art was central to his theological project and the experiences given by art, especially painting, were central for his theological conceptions of revelation and metaphysics. At the height of his fame as a theologian, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, he was regularly called upon to discuss the religious and theological “dimensions”—his preferred term—of modern art. He was renowned for his insistence that all cultural productions possess a theology and a “religious dimension,” which he sometimes called its “ultimate concern.”
Because of the ubiquity of ultimate concerns in art the theologian, the logic went, was justified in teasing out the religious dimension within works assumed to be secular or non-religious. In discussing art Tillich consistently returned to the theme of the “revelatory” power of art, implying that works of art had the power to be what he described as “mediums of revelation” (Systematic I 121), suggesting that a work was potentially “a vehicle, pointing beyond itself” (Systematic I 13) toward metaphysical and spiritual phenomena normally not experienced in ordinary life.

Figure 1—Sandro Botticelli Madonna and Child with Singing Angels
The revelatory experience that predates Tillich’s own systematic theory of art, and simultaneously grounds it, is his encounter during World War I at the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin with Botticelli’s *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels*. Tillich describes this experience repeatedly and variously in his art writings; the repetition of, and transformations to, the story are an indication of the significance of the experience for his theories of art. Tillich mentions the experience in his earliest American art lectures given at the Minneapolis School of Art in 1952, the first of which was titled “Human Nature and Art.” He explains that he saw at the museum “a round picture by Botticelli [Madonna and Child with Singing Angels] and had an experience for which I do not know a better name than revelatory ecstasy” (On Art 12). Tillich’s statement is revealing, but what is also revealing is the context he sets up around the experience. He tells us that he saw the painting—which was located high on an entryway wall—and then had an “experience” which he names “revelatory ecstasy.” It’s worth noting that he mentions no more about the materiality of the painting, nothing about its colors, or any other formal features, nothing even of its style—which we could surmise from his other writings about art would have at best been tolerated by Tillich given his dislike of ordinary “religious,” and particularly representational, works. In each of his discussions, what he calls at one point “a moment of beauty,” is recounted primarily as an exemplary experience of divine revelation conditioned, it
would seem, by the work of art. What then is so central about this “moment of beauty,” is not the Botticelli, but the “revelatory ecstasy” it occasions.

While Tillich is fuzzy about the details of the painting, he is very clear about the religious qualities of the experience: that what was ecstatically revealed to him was “a level of reality” which “was opened...[and] had been covered up to this moment, although” he concedes he “had some intimations of its existence” (12). Setting aside the peculiarly philosophical tone of the noun phrase “level of reality,” what does Tillich mean that the experience produced by the Botticelli was ecstatic? He tells us in the Systematic Theology that ecstasy is the condition of “standing outside one’s self” (111) so that one is no longer bound by “subject-object structure” which then in turn implies the “state of having the god within one’s self or being within the god” (112); in other words, standing outside oneself ecstatically means one is connecting to the ontological “ground of being” which Tillich calls “God.” In short then, ecstasy is the experience of what you most deeply are, even as it turns out (paradoxically perhaps) that your essence is irreducibly connected with that from which you have been derived—being itself, or God. Tillich encountered God in his experience before the Botticelli.

Thus the experience Tillich describes is “theophany”—divine manifestation or appearance—which is memorably exemplified in Moses’ encounter with the burning bush, the various encounters of
the Prophets with Yahweh throughout the Hebrew Bible, and reiterated in the New Testament in the account of Saul’s revelation and conversion while on the road to Damascus. It follows that the “level of reality” revealed by the painting, the experience of God’s presence, was clearly not an ordinary experience. (This is what it is entailed by its needing to be revealed.)

Perhaps more strangely, the revelation of the painting doesn’t seem to have much to do with the details of the painting itself as in none of the various descriptions of the experience does Tillich ever mention anything concrete about the painting—and this absence of formal descriptions or details remains throughout Tillich’s art writing. Even if we grant that Tillich was not an art historian or a critic, it is striking that he would say nothing about what the Botticelli was, considering how much he had to say about what it did. He does not mention what in the painting moved him nor what was so powerful about the painting. However in a later address when Tillich returns to the Botticelli experience he says that he can “think of no other name than that of inspiration” and continues saying that the Botticelli “opened to me the meaning of what a painting can reveal” (On Art 204). For Tillich’s account it’s the experience that he had which is central, as is demonstrated when he says “it [the experience of the painting] can open a new dimension of being, but it can do so only if it simultaneously has the power to open the corresponding level of the soul” (204). What this
suggests is that the painting was the medium of revelation, the vehicle of the experience, even as the details of the painting—possibly even the painting itself—were somewhat beside the point.

The insignificance of the painting to the experience is suggested not only by the absence of details about it, but also by the fact that Tillich moves from the experience of revelatory ecstasy before the Botticelli to another experience that was identical in character—that is, produced the same ecstatic feeling—but which was caused by what Tillich calls an “abstract conception of being” (12. By, in other words, some thoughts about philosophy he was having. This second experience seems to have been conditioned by no external stimuli and was instead simply a matter of thought and thus the experience of revelatory ecstasy was possible without the presence of any exterior prompt like the Botticelli. Thus the “artistic and the philosophical” were unified for Tillich in their production of the identical experience of revelation. And this demonstrates that the experience Tillich had was not in any necessary sense a function of the Botticelli painting, even as the experience taught him that art was of enormous importance and trained him to value it above nearly all earthly things. There is thus a tension here between the intense value of the experience and the painting which enables that experience. What I mean is that, while the painting seems at first to be important, if an experience produced by the “abstract concept of being” is the same, the
value of the work of art is diminished, since art’s not the only thing that can produce “revelatory ecstasy.”

As a theologian who studies the nature of God and a Protestant, Tillich was concerned with the nature, scope and power of God’s revelation. Protestants have been historically very concerned about the ways that the knowledge of God is mediated to believers, as demonstrated by the intense interest in Scripture as a mediation of God’s intentions and the concern with images in the iconoclastic debates within the tradition. In his conception, both textual revelation (in the form of the Bible) and other types of revelation (such as the Botticelli) were the precondition of any knowledge of God and God’s salvation in the “final revelation” of the Word (logos) Jesus the Christ. Tillich like many Protestants believed that natural law was sufficient only for knowledge of our own isolation from God and for knowledge of our own sin and he saw this highlighted by what Saint Paul describes in the Letter to the Romans as the perspicuity of God’s “eternal power and divine nature” which can be seen in the “things that have been made” and which in turn entails “the wrath of God” alluded to by Edwards above. Where for Fried presentness was grace, for Tillich revelation is grace. (Or at least revelation is one of the surest signs of that grace because without it we could not know God at all.) Tillich argued that God’s manifestation of Himself was a simultaneous manifestation of His grace towards humans, which meant that to
the degree that art was a vehicle for the divine self-manifestation, it was also a vehicle for grace.

The primacy of revelation to Tillich’s theology can be seen in the fact that he dedicated much of the first volume of his Systematic Theology to a discussion of the nature of revelation and its relationship to human knowledge about God—a knowledge which most importantly (for my purposes) is always mediated even when it is of God himself as in theophany. For Tillich “[r]evelation is the manifestation of the mystery of being for the cognitive function of human reason. It mediates knowledge—a knowledge however, which can be received only in a revelatory situation, through ecstasy and miracle” (Systematic I 129). The Botticelli experience is the exemplary moment of such “ecstasy and miracle” in his own life, but it is important to note here that implicit in Tillich’s definition of revelation is the situated and dependent character of such knowledge: revelation is a manifestation, but it is by definition limited to a “revelatory situation” and is hence dependent upon that situation and experience. The cause of this revelation is in one sense obvious, divine self-expression (divine intention, God’s will to make Himself known), but the simplicity becomes complicated by the fact that the divine is in an important and definitive sense always hidden—hence revelation: “removing the veil”. Therefore, in these situations of divine self-expression, God (who Tillich describes as “being itself”) reveals Himself through various “preliminary concerns” (what he sometimes calls “symbols”). And
the art works themselves therefore become what Tillich describes as the “bearers and vehicles” of revelation (13) through a mode of symbolization.

Tillich is emphatic that there is always the danger of overvaluing the preliminary concerns, making them into idols—elevating a preliminary concern to an ultimate concern is Tillich’s definition of “idol.” Rightly appreciated, these “bearers and vehicles”, these preliminary concerns, should matter to the degree that they are able to get out of the way and allow the power of being itself to move through them to the subject. What matters is therefore not the bearers and vehicles, not the works—in the case of art as a mode of revelation—but rather the situated experiences of God’s being that they are able to mediate, transfer, conduct, and otherwise convey to the beholder of these bearers and vehicle.

To the degree then that art has the power to reveal “the mystery of being” it has such power only in a particular situation and to the extent that such a power of revelation is what makes art quintessentially of value, it would seem that in an important sense a work’s substance is dependent upon the experience of its audience and the specific situation of revelation—for Tillich it was Botticelli’s Madonna, but it might have also have been some other painting, or, as he explicitly says, caused by an ordinary thought that he had. (Here then Tillich’s emphasis upon experience begins to echo the model of presence rejected as literalist and theatrical by Fried.) Art
therefore enables an experience of revelation, as also does Tillich’s cognition, so then this experience is not unique to art; it is not something that art alone can do. The reason why is clear: in both cases the art objects do not determine, even though they generate and convey, the effect. And in both cases it is not the objects but the experiences they generate that are valuable. It's not, in other words, the Botticelli itself that matters but the experience that Tillich has in its presence. (And there can be no requirement that the same painting or same thought produce the same effect on someone else because the experience isn’t part of the work or thought; it is Tillich’s.) So where, for Fried, the defining quality of the work of art was its ability to render the experience of the beholder—his “situation”—irrelevant, for Tillich, it is precisely the difference the work can make to the beholder's situation, the effect it can have on him, that makes art important. If art were autonomous and couldn’t produce an experience of “revelatory ecstasy” it would be of little value to Tillich. Which is just to say that the very things that Fried criticized in minimalism—the critique of the work of art's autonomy, the valorization of the viewer's experience—are the things Tillich most values.

Autonomy without Consequences

And these are, of course, the same things that the minimalists themselves valued and that the postmodernists who
followed in their wake would most insist on. We can begin to see this in descriptions like the one the minimalist sculptor Robert Morris gives of his own work in his 1966 “Notes on Sculpture.” There he discusses the scale and shape of his “gestalts” and is concerned, I am tempted to say emphatically, with the relationship between the subject of these gestalts and the works themselves. The idea of perception in gestalt theory centers on the notion of objects in the world as unified and whole because humans perceive them. For the Gestaltists context was critical to the definition of an object, such that how an object was perceived was dependent upon external conditions rather than, as in Fried’s conception of the autonomy of the work, upon conditions internal to it. Therefore calling his sculptures “gestalts” underlines the fact that Morris sees them as being fundamentally related to the contexts in which they are experienced, which would include the perceptions and experiences of their audience. Thus he comments that “it is the viewer who changes the shape [of the sculpture] constantly by his change in position relative to the work” (Battcock 234). Morris argues that his sculptures shapes are different relative to the subject’s position—he could simply think that they appear different, not that they are different (a semblance versus reality issue).

The effect of the work changing shape is even heightened in Morris’ work by the fact that the irregular polygons he creates in three dimension “allows this awareness to become so much more emphatic...than in previous works” (234). In other words, by their
very shape, Morris’ gestalts draw attention to the ways in which the experience of the work is important. The many sides of Morris’ gestalts serve to highlight how different the experience of them is depending upon the beholder’s position relative to them and in Morris’ own opinion this serves to indicate the primacy of the various positions in experiencing the work. (We must here recall it was this sense that the work could be seen from an infinite number of perspectives, and be different from each of them, that lead Fried to say that works like Morris gave the viewer a discomforting sense of “endlessness,” which was counterpoised to the presentness of modernist works.)

While he emphasizes the role of the spectator in the perception of the gestalt, Morris does however retain a place for the autonomy of the work so valued by Fried. Thus he explains that “the work must be autonomous” by which he means it needs to be “a self-contained unit” (234). This autonomy is necessary in Morris’s conception “for the formation of the gestalt” which he glosses as “the indivisible and undissolvable whole,” but he then asserts that even though the autonomy of the work is necessary to elicit the experience of the beholder “the major aesthetic terms are not in but dependent upon this autonomous object” (italics mine 234). In Fried’s conception the autonomy of the work meant that the major aesthetic terms where assuredly “in” the work (this was what constituted the work’s autonomy), but Morris insists that you can have an autonomous work and the aesthetic experience can be dependent upon this work, even as the aesthetic
terms themselves are not in the work but instead “exist as unfixed variables that find their specific definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator” (Battcock 234). In other words, the major aesthetic terms exist between the work and the beholder, not in the work itself. If the major aesthetic terms exist between the work and the beholder then the beholder’s experience, where these aesthetic terms reside, becomes of increasing value and importance. Thus Morris’ conception of the value of the work is like Tillich’s: for Tillich the work was important for the revelation, but the revelation occurred between the subject and the work and was never (in principle) part of the work itself (if it were part of the work it couldn’t be a revelation of God).

Morris insists that the “specific definition” of the work is a function of the “viewpoint of the spectator” and the immediacy of the “apprehension” of the work—a conception which seems to entail the work of the beholder. Thus it would not be incorrect to say that in Morris’ terms the work’s shape is itself a function of the beholder’s experience, this after all seems the most plausible way to understand his insistence that the work appears different from different vantage points. Morris’ gestalts become a kind of minimalist catechism, serving to train their beholders that the perspective they occupy is indispensable to what the work is for them (which is what really matters) and his art theoretical writings serve to buttress the importance of that experience. If he is right that “only one aspect of the work
is immediate: the apprehension of the gestalt,” and “apprehension” means what the beholder experiences, then it would seem to follow that even as an autonomous work is a necessary structural condition of the aesthetic terms of a work, this autonomous work is at best no more important to the formation of the gestalt than the subject position, perceptual framing, and unique experience of each of the sculpture’s beholders.

**Ghostly Presences**

Where Morris argued that the autonomy of the gestalt was necessary for the experience that it conditioned, Douglas Crimp, in his 1979 *October* articles “Pictures” and 1980 “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” was comfortable dispensing with that autonomy altogether, demonstrating the degree to which the proponents of postmodernism focused upon the place of the beholder’s experience. In the latter article he continues the discussion he had begun in “Pictures” about the nature of postmodernism in art by describing a central aesthetic value of this art. He calls it “presence,” revaluing Michael Fried’s conception of theatricality and the corresponding conception of art as object.

In “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” Crimp makes it clear that the experience of a work’s “aura”—described by Benjamin as the “unique existence of the work of art,” what Fried would have called its autonomy—is no longer possible.
Where for Fried theatricality was the death of quality in art and objecthood was the end of art as such, for Crimp both, theatricality and objecthood, are where current art’s value is found, if it can be found at all. In both of these articles the types of art works that Crimp discusses are ephemeral, transient, and appear only as what he describes as “presences”—by which he means something like an apparition or ghost. We might then say that Crimp reverses the evaluative polarity of Fried’s terms and argues that it is precisely in being objects that require the theatrical experience of the spectator that these postmodern and minimalist works succeed. Crimp sees Fried as still committed to Benjamin’s notion of “aura” in his “transcendental” conception of autonomous works and the experience of “presentness” (97). Instead Crimp argues in the article that what the absence of aura in photographs teaches us is “the subjectivization of photography” (97), and by extension we learn about the primacy of the “photography...whose source is the human mind” (97). Of course these photographs which come from the human mind are none other than the perceptions that governed the shape of Morris’ gestalts, but whereas Morris believed the autonomous work itself, with its many sides, was a condition of the experience of the work, Crimp is more cautious about the enduring identity of the work. In short, Crimp suggests in this article that if, as Benjamin argues in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” reproduction depletes the aura of works, then the only thing that will be left will be the experience of beholders.
Turning to discuss the ways that he sees contemporary art as embodying this turn to experience, which he calls “subjectivization,” Crimp recalls how in “Pictures” he had traced the genesis of their [the group of younger, postmodern artists] concerns to what had pejoratively been labeled the theatricality of minimal sculpture and the extension of that theatrical position into the art of the seventies. I wrote at that time that the aesthetic mode that was exemplary during the seventies was performance, all those works that were constituted in a specific situation and for a specific duration; works for which it could be said literally that you had to be there; works, that is, which assumed the presence of a spectator in front of the work as the work took place, thereby privileging the spectator instead of the artist. (italics mine, Crimp 92)

When Crimp says that these are the kinds of works of “which it could be said literally that you had to be there; works, that is, which assumed the presence of a spectator in front of the work as the work took place, thereby privileging the spectator instead of the artist” he seems to be almost quoting Fried. Of course, even though he sounds like Fried, Fried would have been evaluating these works very differently, since Fried wasn’t at all interested in works where you needed to be there to appreciate them. However for Crimp, as for Tillich, being there in the “specific situation” for the “specific duration” is everything. This is because it is only in the particular situation and duration that these works exist at all.

And so Crimp defends these minimalist works against the charge of inferiority, arguing that it is the very absence of “aura” that these works both display and, thereby, thematize that makes them so powerful. Jack Goldstein’s “Two Fencers”—
performance piece that, in Crimp’s opinion, had the presence of a photograph even while it was a performance—is a work about which one might say “that you had to be there” (78). The two fencers in question “appeared as if deja vu, remote, spectral, yet just as certainly present...they were there performing in the space of the spectators, but they nevertheless looked virtual, dematerialized, like the vivid but nebulous images of holograms” (78). The consequence of this nebulosity is to emphasize the significance of the beholder being there as a witness to the work. This happens even as the work itself, in its spectral-ness and hologramic qualities, undermined the spectator’s certainty about their experience. (It will come as no surprise that where Crimp’s lexicon is largely about valorizing impermanence, Fried’s thematizes the permanence and endurance as the qualities in works—as evidenced by his use of words like presentness, continuous, and perpetual throughout “Art and Objecthood.”) Without that witness, the work simply has no durability. This is what Crimp suggests when he says that the work becomes a “mnemonic experience,” helping (it would seem) to remind the beholder of their experience. Goldstein’s work was performance, but it was performance that, through Crimp’s lens, should be better understood as “re-presentational” as a way of “‘staging’ a picture” (77). “Two Fencers” was present as a work only for those who were there to see it—even a video of the event would not be quite the same because (like Morris’ gestalt’s) these
works cannot be captured from one angle, from one perspective as any video would.

Furthermore, Crimp insists that Goldstein’s performances share similar qualities with the video installations of Peter Campus, Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman, and the sound installations of Laurie Anderson because they “not only required the presence of the spectator to become activated, but were fundamentally concerned with that registration of presence [the spectator’s] as a means towards establishing meaning” (77). Thus the excellence of Goldstein’s performance demonstrate to Crimp a model of what minimalist art can be: temporal, site-specific, and completed by the presence of the beholder. In Crimp’s mind it is this realization of the impermanence of art, the consequent valorization of the situation of the beholder (her experience), and the thematization of both, that makes these works valuable. Another way of describing this is to say that the value of these works lies in the way that they demonstrate the dependence of the work upon the experience of the beholder because it is the audience which makes the ephemerality of the work endure by making the work part of their experience: the works endure because they become “memories,” but to become memories for you, you “literally” have to be there!

The point here is that where Fried had “pejoratively” labeled this performance oriented art “theatrical,” Crimp wants to find the very aesthetic value of these works in that theatricality and incompleteness. So here, in Crimp’s account,
beholders matter as they never could to Modernism as theorized by Fried. The consequence of Crimp’s focus upon the temporal and situated nature of this art is to emphasize the importance of the beholder’s experience for the existence of that art. This is what he means when he says that these were “works for which it could be said literally that you had to be there.” It is the very fact that you have “to be there” for these works to be themselves that makes them so valuable. Their “specific duration” and “specific situation” are what make them fundamentally different than the work that precedes them and this in turn demonstrates to Crimp the way they privilege the spectator instead of the artist.

Who needs a work?: Night Driving and Experience

Where Robert Morris had retained a place for the autonomous work (even as he emphasized the experience of the work itself) and Douglas Crimp was willing to dispense with that autonomy altogether, Tony Smith was willing in an anthologized interview with Samuel Wagstaff to move away from not only the autonomy of the work, but from the work altogether. In the interview Smith discusses the significance of the beholder’s experience of the works he cherishes. Smith moves away from art works and does not seem to think that the work (autonomous or otherwise) is necessary for the kinds of experiences that he, like Tillich, is interested in. During the interview Smith turns from a
discussion of sculpture to describe a transformative experience he had on the as-yet-completed New Jersey turnpike in the early fifties. I see the passage as particularly illustrative of a change, an escalation or intensification of the positions of both Morris and Crimp, so I will quote from it at length. Smith explains that when

I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the fifties, someone told me how I could get onto the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by the hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn’t be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn’t know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there that had not had any expression in art.

The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that’s the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. (386)

Smith’s emphasis upon the power of experience here is consistent with some of what we have seen thus far in Morris and Crimp, but they thought the experience of the work served to highlight the importance of that work—even when it also highlighted the fragility and impermanence of the work as in Crimp. But Smith, like Tillich, and unlike Morris or Crimp, recognizes in this “artificial” experience an end to art. Here was something that art might “do,” but unlike accounts of aesthetic experiences in
the past, it was emphatically not something that only art could do. He like Tillich experiences a “revelation” about what art can do, but what he learns from this insight is that what art can do (what is valuable about art) is not something that only art can do. Rather, both Tillich’s “thoughts” which stimulated him to the experience of revelation and Smith’s revelatory drive, demonstrate to the minimalist theorist the significance of an experience that can be generated by art in Tillich’s case, but needn’t be, as is suggested by Smith’s saying that his was an experience of something “that art had never done” and that it was of something that “had not had any expression in art.” Smith does not suggest that art couldn’t create this experience—and certainly this is the experience that his subsequent work sought to produce, a reading that Fried certainly forwards—but he recognizes that once art begins to attempt to create an experience of endless pavement in the dark night that it will necessarily be seeking to overcome the traditional bounds of art. That is what he means when he says there will be “no way you can frame it” and that art, as it has been since at least the easel painting emerged, will in a very important sense end.

Instead of art, Smith will seek to create vehicles of experiences that are in principle boundless, that will, like Morris’ gestalts, be focused upon the generation of endless experiences for their audiences. Smith’s concern, like Tillich’s, is then finally about what works do and not what works are. But both recognize that if what matters about an object is
what it does to you rather than what it is independently of you then you have arrived at the moment where you are no longer ultimately interested in that object because you become (in principle, not necessarily empirically) indifferent to the actual work. Smith and Tillich come to the conclusion that the “end of art” does not only mean the end of the historically progressive model of art theorized by Hegel and continued down through Clement Greenberg (announced by Arthur Danto with his conception of the pluralization of art), but “the end of art” also is a recognition that other things can do what art does. Art then does not cease to have value, it ceases to have inimitable value because the experiences it makes possible are not exclusive to itself. Thus neither Tillich nor Smith give up on art: on the contrary both cherish it and seek to defend its immense value even as they recognize that the revelatory ecstasy it grants is something that can be experienced before (literally) any object—or even without an object as in the case of Tillich’s thoughts or without a work as in Smith’s night drive on the New Jersey unfinished turnpike.
Notes:

1.) I want to be clear that here, in Branden Joseph’s use of Derrida’s phrase “the metaphysics of presence,” Joseph’s use of “presence” means what Fried means by “presentness.” In other words, here presence and presentness actually refer to the same conceptionalization which Joseph (and Derrida) are rejecting as untenable and Fried is defending as the only acceptable conception of art. Literalist art was certainly created without reference to Derrida’s theory, and to Poststructuralism more generally, but the valorization of that art, most particularly by the essays in October certainly did not occur without reference to this Continental theory. Thus in Joseph’s essay we see him connecting Derrida’s critique of the “metaphysics of presence” and “logocentrism” in Of Grammatology (49) with the theorization of Fried which took place before Derrida’s work had even been written, and thus before it had any influence upon the American theorization of art.

2.) Thus while clearly in the quote from “Art and Objecthood” Fried’s conception of grace does not seem to be consistent with the common Protestant explanation, it is not strange altogether that many postmodernists have understood Fried’s view of art to amount to a theological conception. And this is not changed by the fact that Fried, and various other champions of modernism (most notably Clement Greenberg throughout his Collected Works and Homemade Esthetics and in T.J. Clark’s criticism), have been emphatic that modernism in art is not, as has at times been suggested, a substitute for religion. I would suggest that it is quite plausible to suggest that modernism is in fact theological, as it is surely right to insist, as the postmodernists were quick to suggest, and that, even if the modernist conception of art is not supposed to be religious and the critics are emphatic that it is not, the language and metaphors that are used to describe and defend this art border on the religious. What is more the type of existence Fried at least understands modernist art to have surely could be compared to the theophanic experience of the Old Testament and classical literature. Returning again to the Fried that we have looked at thus far, it would be foolish not to note that even though his use of “grace” does not seem to be consistent with Jonathan Edwards’, the fact that he chooses the phrase “presentness is grace” still begs the question of why “grace” at all? Why not “presentness is a gift”? Or, “presentness is great”? Provocation alone could be the answer, but that only reinscribes the question of what would make such a claim count as provocation in the first place and the most obvious answer seems to be that Fried understood this art to possess a quality not unlike what Edwards’ had implied God’s bounty had freely provided to men by sparing them what they
deserved and granting them what they did not. We might conclude that though there are good reasons to argue that modernism is distinctly un-theological, there are at the same time also reasons to understand why some would suggest that it has theological overtones.

3.) In his most famous work on art, “Art and Ultimate Reality,” Tillich discusses his conception of the divine saying that

religion can speak of the divinity of the divine only if God is ultimate reality. If he were anything less, namely a being—even the highest—he would be on the level of all other beings. He would be conditioned by the structure of being like everything that is. He would cease to be God. (On Art 140)

What Tillich here is getting at is the very distinct problem that revelation will solve, the problem of God’s absolute otherness, which means that He (God) is not part of our ordinary experience, and therefore, not experienced directly in our ordinary affairs. Tillich continues:

From this follows a decisive consequence. If the idea of God includes ultimate reality, everything that expresses ultimate reality expresses God whether it intends to do so or not. And there is nothing that could be excluded from this possibility because everything that has being is an expression, however preliminary and transitory it may be, of being itself, of ultimate reality. (140–141)

It is interesting to see how here Tillich tries to explain a hermeneutics of divine expression that does not actually include a divine intention to speak, even as he takes away the necessity of the human creator intending to express anything about the divine for them to be doing so. The revelation of God here appears to happen because of the nature of reality metaphysically, not because of any desire upon the part of God personally to express himself. Elsewhere in Tillich’s work a personal and direct account of divine revelation, one in which God intends to speak, will appear as the model for the revelatory powers of art and other symbols.

4.) While Tillich’s writing and lecturing about art outside the university classroom did not begin until the 1950s, he had been involved in various artistic circles as a younger man in Berlin, even living for a time amongst the artistic subset of that city, and he gave various papers in the post-WWI years on topics related to art and culture, so I don’t mean to suggest that these lectures were the beginning of his public interest in art. These were just the first of his more public expressions of that long held interest and the first lectures that were given to students
that were not in his theology, philosophy or church history classes.

Michael Palmer in his *Paul Tillich’s Philosophy of Art*, the only book length study of Tillich’s art writings, explains in detail the early importance of art to Tillich’s theology including accounts not only of Tillich’s philosophical interest in art, but also his social engagements with artists and the bohemian world of Berlin in the 1920s.

5.) It would be difficult to overstate the centrality of the idea of the symbol for Tillich’s theological project, and to the degree that works of art are important to him it is often for their symbolic power. However, Tillich’s theory of symbols is more than simply representational and, like works of art, in his theory, symbols can often carry a metaphysical dimension. Tillich believes that knowledge of God is always in an important sense symbolic and this of course had important ramifications for his epistemology. Donald F. Dreisbach’s “Paul Tillich’s Hermeneutics” takes Tillich’s theory of symbols and explains its determinative role for his epistemology. For Tillich’s own writing about the symbol see the first volume of the *Systematic Theology* and his *Theology of Culture* (which is a collection of essays published elsewhere).
Chapter Three

Stanley Fish’s “God”:
the Theology of the Interpretive Community

My fiction is liberating. It relieves me of the obligation to be right (a standard that simply drops out) and demands only that I be interesting (a standard that can be met without any reference at all to any illusory objectivity). Rather than restoring or recovering texts, I am in the business of making texts

--Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text In This Class?*

Maybe orthodoxy has always been dynamic, fluid, open source?

--Tony Jones, “Whence Hermeneutic Authority”
In the middle of his first major theoretical essay, “Literature in the Reader,” Stanley Fish pauses to ask himself a question. He has been describing the complex responses he believes that readers have to literary texts—including being “decertainized” (Text 23), “actualizing” the meaning of a text which is an “event” (28), and, thus, participating in the formation of meaning by understanding what the text does to them. Given the complexity of these responses, Fish stops to wonder if, in treating them as if the authors of the texts intended readers to have them, he doesn’t “claim too much for the conscious control of their producer-authors” (51).

His answer is a quick, but, as we will see, equivocal one—in effect, it doesn’t matter—and then he returns to the main argument of the essay, which is about what readers do, not about what authors do. Indeed, what makes this essay theoretical is precisely its ambition to give an account not simply of readers’ response to individual texts (as Fish had done in Surprised By Sin) but to argue for the importance of readers’ response to all literary texts. Thus the various readings in this essay are meant to be examples of a “method” which Fish believe is preeminent for documenting “meaning” (28) and his main targets in the essay are not other critics with different readings of, say, Paradise Lost or Pilgrim’s Progress, but other theorists with different accounts of the importance—or unimportance—of the experience of the reader. The main targets, of course, are William Wimsatt and
Monroe Beardsley, above all their famous essay, “The Affective Fallacy” with its commitment to the difference between texts and readers’ responses to texts. Where Wimsatt and Beardsley had argued that “The Affective Fallacy” was a confusion between what a poem “is” and what it “does” (Wimsatt 21), Fish argues this is no confusion at all: a poem simply is what it does—at least when it comes to textual “meaning or understanding” (Text 22).

But the question I began with was about the conscious control of the author not about the reader, and has less to do with “The Affective Fallacy” than it does with Wimsatt and Beardsley’s other, even more famous and influential, essay “The Intentional Fallacy.” And it is Fish’s relationship to this fallacy that I have described as equivocal or, perhaps, more accurately, in transition. For the first thing he says in response to the question about authorial control is that in his own critical practice he has been drawn precisely to authors in whose texts “the evidence of control is overwhelming” (51). This answer clearly and happily commits the intentional fallacy. In other words, it commits Fish to what Wimsatt and Beardsley had described as the mistake of thinking the “design or intention” of the author was either “available or desirable” as a way for determining the value or meaning of a work (Wimsatt 3). So, to take just one example, Fish in Surprised By Sin writes that the reader is “encouraged” by Milton to “compare his perceptions and reactions and linguistic habits” (142) with Adam and Eve’s so as to see the similarity between their actions: that is, Milton
intends, on Fish’s account, to produce an experience in the 
reader. What the reader is responding to is precisely Milton’s 
intention. And even a quick glance through *Surprised By Sin* or 
*Self-Consuming Artifacts* reveals Fish regularly committing the 
intentional fallacy by assuming that the responses he describes 
are the products of Milton’s, Bunyan’s, Donne’s, or Herbert’s 
control.

But in “Literature in the Reader” Fish also goes on to 
point out that there’s an important sense in which, even if he 
himself is inclined to believe that the responses he has been 
descrying are responses to the author’s conscious intentions, it 
doesn’t really matter, since, as he points out, “one can analyze 
an effect without worrying about whether it was produced 
accidentally or on purpose,” which means the reader response 
method can be defended without “the assumption either of control 
or of intention” (51). And this answer, if it doesn’t quite 
count as a full-fledged embrace of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s 
repudiation of intention (since he is not claiming we *should* 
ignore intention and look only at response, but only that we *can* 
ignore it and still look at response), nevertheless does make the 
question of authorial intent a deeply irrelevant one. Wimsatt 
and Beardsley argued that neither the intentions of the author 
nor the response of readers had anything to do with the meaning 
of the text; Fish here is disagreeing vehemently about the 
irrelevance of reader’s response arguing instead that this 
response constitutes the meaning of texts where “meaning is an
event” which happens “in the mind, not on the page” (26). But he is beginning to agree—if not quite so vehemently—about the irrelevance of authors’ intentions.

And this agreement would quickly become central to the theoretical work for which Fish became best known. For in the essays which make up Fish’s major theoretical work, *Is There A Text in the Class?*, authorial intention would no longer be taken for granted or marginalized: instead, it would be entirely replaced by what Fish characterized as the constitutive activity of the reader. Where in “Literature in the Reader” Fish had been concerned with authorial “strategies” (51), in *Is There A Text In This Class?* Fish became concerned exclusively with readers’ strategies. And thus, for Fish’s theory, the “strategies” of “producer-authors” (51) are wholly replaced by the “interpretative strategies” of readers (168). And this means that the theory which had its origin in “Literature in the Reader” as an account of the reader’s activity in responding to the text and a passive acceptance of the unimportance of the author’s intention, would soon emerge as a full-fledged commitment to the primacy of the reader at the expense of the author in Fish’s theory of the interpretive community: Fish claims that “interpretive strategies” are not “put into execution” when one is done reading, but rather, “they are the shape of reading” (168). And if readers not writers make texts, authorial intention becomes just as unavailable for Fish’s readers as it was for Wimsatt and Beardsley’s.
My goal in this essay will be first to trace this development in Fish’s thinking and, second, to explain Fish’s evolving theoretical commitments not only in terms of literary theory, but also in terms that go beyond it. That is, I will argue that although there is an important discontinuity between Fish the intentionalist literary critic and Fish the anti-intentionalist literary theorist, there is an important continuity as well, one that has to do with what I will describe as the significantly Protestant content of both Fish’s critical practice and his theory. I will suggest that it is no accident that Fish’s critical work is on deeply Protestant authors, that there is continuity between their and Fish’s own emphasis upon what texts do (rather than what they are), and that their Protestant indifference to authorial intention—an indifference that is a fundamental component of any Protestant theory of scripture that takes seriously God’s intentions—mirrors Fish’s own developing indifference to authorial intention. Thus I will demonstrate that many of Fish’s literary theoretical commitments were first sown, then cultivated, and finally grew within the soil of Protestant theology.

I will go on to argue that Fish’s development of the idea of the interpretive community—which of course has historical roots in Pauline, Augustinian, and Protestant theology—importantly has parallels in contemporary Protestant theology. This is why I suggest that this aspect of Fish’s work has been taken up by contemporary Protestant figures as diverse as Stanley
Hauerwas, Nancy Murphy, Kevin Vanhoozer, Tony Jones, and Crystal Downing. Indeed I will explain how Fish’s theory of the interpretative community in fact provides both an analogue of and a basis for the theological and epistemological assumptions of Protestant liberalism over the last twenty years. But my point of course will not be to suggest that Milton or Donne were Protestant liberals, on the contrary. Rather, my intent is to show that the structure of the interpretive community, in which the reader replaces the writer, shares a striking correspondence with the commitments of liberal Protestants. Like Fish, liberal Protestants from Schleiermacher to Emerson to William James, placed the experience of the subject at the center of their thinking. And like Fish this orientation led them to imagine that theology could forgo normativity, prescription, and, ultimately, dogma, just as Fish thought his theory of the interpretive community “relieved” him from the “obligation to be right” about the interpretation of texts and required him to only be “interesting” (180). It is this epistemological commitment to “interesting” instead of “right” that I will suggest has made Fish a figure of significance for many contemporary pastors, biblical scholars, and theologians. What is more I will suggest that there exists between Fish’s thought and Protestant liberalism more than a formal homology, but that there is indeed an historical causation at work as well.

Furthermore, and finally, I will try to explain more recent and, to some readers, surprising developments in Fish’s
theoretical career which have him repudiating the anti-intentionalism of the interpretive community model and the replacement of writers by readers. For if in Fish’s earlier work authorial intention is something of an unexamined aside (taken more or less untheoretically for granted) and if in his major theoretical writings of the 1980s and 1990s it is rendered fundamentally irrelevant, it has recently returned to his writing with a vengeance. The Fish who used to say that his method didn’t require the “assumption” of “control or intention” (Text 51) and then went on to say that it was readers not writers who were “in the business of making texts” (180), now says that intention and meaning are “inseparable from one another” (633), “a text means what its author intends,” (649) and “if you are not trying to determine intention, you are not interpreting” (650) at all.

Indeed, in legal hermeneutics, Fish is now is identified along with Larry Alexander, Steven Knapp, and Walter Benn Michaels as one of the most diehard, uncompromising intentionalists. With them he now insists that the author’s intention is the only possible object of interpretive interest. Having abandoned both the individual reader and the interpretive community, Fish has now embraced authorial intention as the site of meaning, and I will show how this movement also has relevance for recent Protestant theology. For if the theory of the community of interpretation was not only consistent with but essential for Protestant liberalism, the present commitment to
intentionalism is constitutive not of Protestant liberalism, but of Protestant conservatism, indeed of evangelical protestant theology.

**History of Fish**

But before we get to all that let’s return to the question with which we began: Does reader response entail a commitment to the “control” of “producer-authors”? And if so, is Fish then claiming that the various reading experiences he outlines in *Surprised by Sin* and *Self-consuming Artifacts* are the experiences the authors meant for him (and the rest of their readers) to have? As we have already begun to see, the answer to this question is in a certain sense yes and a certain sense no. On the one hand, Fish says that he is drawn to texts for which “the evidence of [authorial] control is overwhelming” (51), suggesting his answer is yes, he is committed to the control of “producer-authors” and these are intended experiences. But then he also says that authorial control doesn’t really matter when it comes to an effect since you can analyze one “without worrying about whether it was produced accidentally or on purpose” (51), suggesting his answer is no, or at least you don’t need to worry too much about it. As I have already suggested, the second position, that it doesn’t really matter whether effects are intended or not, is theoretically far stronger than the first, depending as it does upon a general position about the essential
irrelevance of intentionality, not upon Fish’s psychological assessment of individual writers. And it’s the second position, the theoretical one, that is inevitably raised by the individual reader response interpretations Fish produces.

For example, in “Literature in the Reader” Fish produces a narrative of his reading of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress which focuses on two short lines of the story. Here Christian—the name of Bunyan’s eponymous pilgrim—in the midst of his journey stops, asks a shepherd, “Is this the way to the Celestial City?” and receives what Fish suggests is a puzzling answer “You are just in your way” (Text 41). Why does he find Shepherd’s response puzzling? The obvious answer Fish explains is that Shepherd’s reply to Christian’s question is ambiguous because of the “inescapability” of the “pun” on “just” which “forces the reader” to “respond” to his own assumptions about the meaning of a “way” (41). On the one hand, “just” could mean “alone” or “solely,” and on the other it might mean “correct” or “right,” but it is the very space between these two very different meanings of “just” that produces the readers confusion and which therefore forces the reader to react to their own responses—either to choose between them, or respond in a way that takes both meanings into account. For Fish this complex of responses typifies the “destabilizing” effects that he is consistently (and self-consciously) drawn to throughout his critical career. What I mean is that it is because of the multiple meanings of the pun that the lines are able to do the work Fish believes they do.
Furthermore, for Fish these effects are not merely destabilizing but in the act of destabilization they “gesture,” he argues, at a “worldview in which spatial configurations have moral inner meanings, and being in the way is independent of the way you happen to be in” (41). Finally then the experience of the pun on “just” captures the meaning of not only these sentences, but of the whole of Pilgrim’s Progress since the pun repeats its “basic experience”: being caught in “temporal-spatial forms of thought” which “prove unable to contain the insights of the Christian faith” (42).

But now let’s suppose that I, like Fish, am reading along in Bunyan and come across Christian’s question—“Is this the way to the Celestial City?”—but when I read Shepherd’s—“You are just in your way”—unlike Fish, I see no pun on “just.” In this case, I do not have the same experience Fish had, I experience no reading problem along the lines Fish did, and do not find, as Fish had, a destabilizing, “decertainizing,” and, finally, “self-consuming,” artifact. When Fish read these lines he experienced what he called “progressive decertainizing” (an experience of uncertainty about the adequacy of his perceptual abilities), but since I missed the pun (perhaps “missed” is already to beg a certain normative question and it would be better to say “since I saw no pun”) when I read the same lines I didn’t get destabilized. Since for Fish the “narrative” of “responses” is what constitutes the interpretation of the text, and since my narrative of response differs from Fish’s, we appear to have two
different response-based interpretations. And here then we can see a question emerging for Fish’s theory: How are we to understand these differences in experience? Is one of our readings better than the other? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Or, are our responses just different, and equally right?

One way to answer these questions—the way suggested by Fish’s declaration that he prefers texts where “evidence” of authorial “control is overwhelming” (51)—would be to look for and then appeal to Bunyan’s intention, what Fish calls his “strategy.” Thus I could claim that my experience was right because it was the experience Bunyan intended me to have, and of course Fish might do the same and then we would both set out to prove our experience was what Bunyan wanted by a reading of his text and by producing evidence of his intention (which might or might not extend beyond the text itself). At times it sounds like this is exactly what Fish would say since he talks about being able “to chart and project the developing response” (the italics are Fish’s own 47) to a text and if he is talking about a singular, emphatic response, “the response,” it seems implied that it is the right one. But what criterion would make it right? One answer, the one we have just given, is that it’s the intended response. This same logic is at work when he insists throughout the essay that you should concern yourself with the “strategies” of authors or indirectly (and, as we shall see, problematically) when he invokes the “strategies” of sentences, words, and poems.
And yet, we must recall that our whole discussion here began with Fish’s statement that we needn’t worry about the author’s intention since we can analyze the experience of a work without concerning ourselves with what the author was trying to do to us. If it is true that we can do reader response criticism while ignoring the author’s intention then the appeal to Bunyan’s strategy is no longer relevant to help us to answer the question of what makes our experience of the text the right one. What then keeps a response from being merely idiosyncratic and personal, different from, but not better or worse than, anyone else’s? Fish anticipates this question when he insists that his narratives of reader response are based upon public aptitudes shared by all speakers of a language. He also insists in “Literature in the Reader” that when he discusses the problem of which readers’ response he is writing about “the reader” he is writing about is “not really…himself” (44). His point is to address the criticism that when he is talking about responses to author’s strategies he is just talking about his own, idiosyncratic, responses and then retroactively allegorizing them as the author’s intentions.

Rather than these narratives being just his own eccentric responses to texts, Fish insists that they are based upon public competences possessed by all language speakers—he calls them “linguistic” and “semantic” competence. He also resolves that the presence of these competences in all speakers “make response…predictable and normative” (45). “Linguistic
competence” is the shared “linguistic system” which makes understanding “uniform” by its “internalization”—it is the shared play book of any language, its “set of rules” (45). Alternately, “semantic competence” is not the rules, but “backlog of language experience,” how the rules apply in actual usage. Since every reader has both of these, the logic goes, then presumably, when confronted with a text a reader will actualize their knowledge with a combination of their knowledge of the “set of rules” here at play and their other experiences of similar linguistic situations. The result will be “predictable and normative.” So then what makes your reading right is not that you are doing what the author intended you to do, but that you are following the rules of the language.

But if this were the case and if reader response were both “predictable and normative,” then what would explain the fact that Fish and I did not have the same response to the text “You are just in your way”? There are at least two ways to answer: one of us must have deviated from the “set of rules” that we should have used to respond to Bunyan’s text, or our “backlog of language experience” of similar linguistic moments must have thrown us off. But how are we to decide which one of us is right? What metric do we invoke to determine which of our two “linguistic” and “semantic” competencies produced the correct response? We cannot look to Bunyan and say the right of “set of rules” was the one he used, since the whole point of our discussion is to do reader response without “worrying” about
whether our responses were “produced accidentally or on purpose” (51). In other words, if we need to appeal to Bunyan’s intent to determine which is the right set of rules to use when we respond then we are in fact relying upon the author as an agent of “conscious control” and this is precisely what we gave up when we assumed that we could do reader response without “worrying” about whether our response “was produced accidentally or on purpose” (51).

And so it turns out that even the appeal to the “set of rules” seems to require an indirect appeal to the author as agent of “control” since how else are we to decide which “set of rules” we should use? But appealing to our “backlog of language experience” won’t help us either, since, after all, our “semantic competence” may be different (as is obviously the case with Fish and I in my example), but we don’t have a criterion by which to determine which is the right “backlog of language experiences,” and so this appeal returns us directly to the realm of idiosyncratic and subjective difference that Fish is trying to avoid. But even if we can’t use our backlog of experience to determine which of our responses was right (what Fish here calls a “normative” response), it might help us to explain the causal chain of our response (what Fish here invokes as prediction). Yet being able to explain how we came to have the response we did does nothing to help us argue that it is the right response—the one that someone else should have—as Fish suggests by his conception of a “normative” response. So linguistic and semantic
competence do not seem like sufficient “constraints on the range...of response” and they certainly don’t seem to make it “predictable and normative” (45).

But if we are really appealing to Bunyan’s intention when we appeal to linguistic and semantic competence, and we have determined in advance that we don’t need that intention, then to what can we appeal to defend our experience as the right one? Either we are appealing to Bunyan’s intention by appealing to the rules of the language, or we are appealing to our idiosyncratic differences and that just tells us how we came to be the people that we are, not whether we should be those people or whether we should have the responses that we have had. It would seem that in both of these responses we have not really answered our initial question. The same problem reemerges: how do we deal with our different responses? Appealing to the differences preexisting in readers as an explanation of how different readers have different experiences does not really answer our fundamental question—which of these experiences is right and which is wrong?—it merely produces a causal account of how the different experiences happen: our responses as readers are different because we are. Now to be sure that causal account is important and the appeal to different subjectivities as the origin of different texts will be crucial to Poststructuralism (and postmodernism more generally), but this causal account still does not answer the question of which experience is better, or even preferable. Rather it simply reinstates that question with a
more subtle narrative of how the difference emerges in the first place. Thus we are left to wonder if it even makes any sense to think that reader response could be “normative,” that either of our experiences are, or even could be, “right”? After all, if what matters is the experience, what can it mean to think one is right and another isn’t? Perhaps the very idea of a right interpretation of the meaning of a text disappears once you are interested in the experience the text creates.

Stanley Fish: Just in his way

Paul de Man for one thought that this was in fact Fish’s view. Writing about “Literature in the Reader” in his 1972 article “Literature and Language: A Commentary,” de Man argued that Fish was trying to have it both ways. On the one hand Fish seemed essentially “unworried” about “the truth value” (189) of his reader response interpretations, and in this mode didn’t seem to want to claim that one response was better than another. If interpretation is simply the narrative of the experience of the reader, and if Fish wants to insist that the only accurate conception of meaning is the idea of “meaning as an event” (Text 28, italics Fish’s own), then there doesn’t seem to be anything to make one reader’s response preferable to another readers. But on the other hand, de Man saw that Fish’s entire critical project turned on the assumption that there was a right response to a text, the “normative and predictable” response Fish had
described as being the product of “linguistic” and “semantic” competence. De Man thought that Fish could not be simultaneously as “unworried” about the “truth value” of his narratives and committed to the idea that reading was “normative.” De Man saw that to embrace reader response meant that you had to give up on “normative,” although maybe not “predictable,” conceptions of reading.

De Man points out that Fish’s reader response criticism, like that of a number of recent theories of the “literariness” of literature, was predicated upon the “possibility of misreading and misinterpretation” (184), that is, to a commitment to the “normative.” Or, to put the point a different way, these theories were produced with the assumption that interpretations, even when they were (as in Fish’s case) responses to texts, could be right or wrong, true or false. But he also saw what Fish had not: given these premises, the “truth value” of a “narrative” account of meaning “must arise” (189), for if meaning is only a response in a context then there doesn’t seem to be any way of asserting the superiority of one response to another. If in my context with my experiences I see no pun on “just” in “You are just in your way” and I respond accordingly, why should my response be any less true, beautiful, or good than Fish’s response? But if one response is no better than another, hasn’t the very idea of a “normative” reading disappeared? If so, then it followed that Fish could not afford to be as “unworried” about
the “truth value” of his responses—their rightness or wrongness—as he seemed to be.

Thus de Man concluded that Fish couldn’t see that his theory entailed two mutually exclusive propositions. If we return to our account of the work Fish thought that “linguistic” and “semantic” competences would do for reader response, we can observe this contradiction emerge in Fish’s very claim that his theory of reading would be both “predictable and normative” (45). It is easy to see how reader response could be “predictable,” if it was based upon the sociology of language, upon a knowledge of how a certain language group might respond to a particular linguistic phenomenon, but it is less clear how these empirical accounts of possible, or even likely, responses could become “normative.” A normal response is not the same as a normative response and there is no logical connection between the claim that person X is likely to respond in Y way and the claim that person X should respond in that way. Responses are “predictable” for various reasons, but for them to be “normative” there must be something (a criterion) to make them not merely, or even necessarily, predictable, but either right or wrong, true or false.

And it is precisely because Fish claims that you need not “worry” about whether an effect was “produced accidentally or on purpose” that de Man regards him as “unworried” about the “truth value” of his “reader response narratives.” This is just to say, as we have already seen in the previous section, that once
accidental effects are put on the same plane as intended effects, the question of which response to them is right and which response to them is wrong becomes in principle unanswerable. If, in other words, these effects can be “accidental” then it makes no sense to think that they are “normative.” In Fish’s terms, what reader response claims to provide are both “predictable and normative.” De Man claims that Fish, on at least one level, seems to have relinquished those things that would give a “normative” reading feasibility, since he had given up authorial intention when he said that you needn’t “worry” whether an effect “was produced accidentally or on purpose” and since he had rejected Formalism’s contention that the meaning of a text was determined by the syntactic and grammatical rules of the language. In short, de Man argued that Fish didn’t see that “predictable” and “normative” did not belong together in a theory of interpretation based upon response alone. He contended that Fish didn’t see this disconnect because he equated the “normative” and the “predictable,” equated an effect you could predict with an effect that was normative (one that could count as the right effect). But it is one thing to say you are likely to respond to a text (“You are just in your way” for example) a certain way, and quite another to say that if you don’t respond that way then you are mistaken. The difference is the difference normativity makes. In effect, de Man argues that Fish can be “unworried” about the “truth value” of his narratives—unworried about the question of whether they are “normative”—precisely
because he elides the distinction between “predictable” and “normative.” De Man’s point then is to ask how Fish’s reader response is “normative” and how Fish thinks he can maintain in his practice the very idea of “misreading” if Fish says that he isn’t doing Formalism and he also says that he isn’t doing intentionalism.

De Man had an answer. He argues that Fish, since he had failed to see how he had equated “predictability” with “normativity,” smuggles in an explanation of “normativity” by doing precisely what he denies, which is to say, by treating the effects of a text and a reader’s response to them as if they were intended. He argued that Fish did not have a mechanism by which to assert that a response was “normative”—a criterion by which to measure that normativity—and, yet, even as Fish had no criterion for a “normative” interpretation, he still maintained a commitment to “misreading” and “misinterpretation.” So, in “Literature in the Reader” what Fish can only really offer is an account of the “predictability,” not “normativity” of readers’ response, but, in the course of his essay, de Man goes on to suggest that what Fish tries to retain, without justification, is the “normative” and the “predictable.” De Man contends that Fish fails to appreciate this problem precisely because he has equated the “normative” and the “predictable.” Since Fish shows his commitment to “normativity” in his belief in the possibility of misreading, de Man argues he does so only by smuggling in a mechanism for that normativity. Fish’s instrument is authorial
intention. By his own admission, Fish was actually trying to smuggle intentionality out—or at least smuggle out the intention of the author. This is what he means by saying you can do reader response without “worrying” about whether the responses were produced on “accident or on purpose.” Thus, for de Man, what we have in “Literature in the Reader” is a Fish who by “linguistic” and “semantic competence” can explain “predictability,” but cannot explain his commitment to “normativity,” unless he really does wish to be committed to the intentionality of textual effects.

So for de Man, the source of Fish’s blindness was quite apparent: since he retained “normativity” in the possibility of a “misreading,” he had “displaced” meaning from readers’ response and located it in authorial intention in the very act of denying authorial intention. Where in some theoretical accounts meaning was based upon “the referent of the statement,” de Man believed that in Fish’s account it really inhered exclusively within “the author himself” (189), although, of course, de Man’s whole point was that Fish didn’t see this. So where Fish had thought his reader response was possible without an “assumption” of authorial “control or intention” (51), de Man argues in contrast that Fish’s practice, with his commitment to “misreading” and “normativity,” makes the author “the sole depository of meaning” (189). Fish’s description of textual effects as “strategies” or “effects” simply begs the question of causation—effects of who, of what agent?—and are thus simply displacements of authorial
intention, or, perhaps more sinisterly, mystifications of its omnipresence. For Fish wants to speak of a “text as performing strategically” without noting the way that this simultaneously produces a “metaphor of intentional consciousness or subject” (190). Here then is de Man’s point, either Fish is required to give this metaphor up or make it literal by committing himself to the idea that the objects of his analysis are effects that are produced by intention. In short, de Man concluded that you are either an intentionalist and keep “normative” in your account of responses, or you do reader response and have, at most, “predictable.” “Linguistic” and “semantic competence” could get you “predictable,” but without an “intentional consciousness” there is no “misreading” since there is no alternative to it, because, as de Man suggests, if you are doing response you have nothing against which to compare the response, nothing that would give teeth to “normative.” What de Man sees is that Fish can solve the problem of “normativity,” either by giving up altogether on the very possibility of a “misreading” or by appealing to the author’s intention.

And in fact it might be argued that Fish himself had already begun to choose between these options. For in the theoretical essays that follow “Literature in the Reader” he becomes, as it were, more committed to denying the intentionality of reader responses than to rescuing the “normativity.” Indeed at this point it could be concluded that de Man had no idea just how “unworried” Fish really was about the “truth value” of his
reader response narratives, for by 1978, in “Interpreting ‘Interpreting the Variorum,’” Fish would proclaim that reader response was not, as he had originally described, a method, and made no claim whatsoever to truth. It was instead, he concluded, a “superior fiction” which “relieves” its adherents “of the obligation to be right” and replaces that obligation with the “demand” to “be interesting” (180). In other words, Fish was not only “unworried” about the “truth value” of his or any other reader’s response, but he was theoretically committed to the impossibility of the very idea of truth value. Where in “Literature in the Reader” linguistic and semantic competence provided the interpreter with “predictability”—and were meant to also provide the interpreter with “normativity”—in “Interpreting the Variorum,” and the theoretical essays Fish wrote in its wake, “normativity” is completely abandoned and “linguistic” and “semantic competence” are replaced by a new tool for explaining “predictability”: the community of interpretation.

This new version of reader response explains predictability precisely by explaining that, although readers make meanings, they do not do so individually or idiosyncratically. Rather readers are the products of communities and, Fish explains, these communities of interpretation are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read, rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (Text 171)
Fish says writers don’t write texts readers do, and they do so by deploying “interpretive strategies” that they get from groups which they are already members of before they ever begin to read. Thus, in the end, it is really these communities that create texts—not any reader/writer responding in a vacuum. And since the communities create the individuals who respond to the texts, the community of interpretation solves in a new way the basic problem of “predictability” that Fish had solved before in “Literature in the Reader” with semantic and linguistic competence. If, as we’ve seen, de Man insisted that Fish choose between predictability and normativity, here Fish makes that choice by producing a theory that only answers questions about predictability. These questions include,

[why should two or more readers ever agree, and why should regular, that is, habitual, differences in the career of a single reader ever occur? What is the explanation on the one hand of the stability of interpretation (at least among certain groups at certain times) and on the other of the orderly variety of interpretation if it is not the stability and variety of texts? (171)]

Fish’s answer is that when two readers interpret a text the same way they do so because they share the same assumptions which cause them to write the same text. Conversely, two readers who are confronted with the same “text” (it looks the same, is formally identical, etc.), but have different experiences have come from different interpretive communities which have taught them to construct texts differently. Thus agreement is a function of membership in the same community and disagreement is
a function of membership in different communities. As a consequence, interpretation can be predicted because, even though individuals differ, they are the products of communities which make their differences predictable. And, since interpretations create the texts to which they seem to respond—since texts are the products rather than objects of reading—interpretation will be predictable to the degree that the communities which produce them are. What's more, since communities of interpretation endure over time certain readings will also endure, and will in this way be predictable. So if de Man had charged that Fish failed in “Literature in the Reader” to produce a criterion for “normativity,” then the Fish of “Interpreting “Interpreting the Variorum’” had responded by relinquishing the very position that had made such a criterion necessary. Indeed, with the invention of the community of interpretation, Fish was insisting that the very idea of a criterion by which one might (justifiably) prefer one response to another was unthinkable. What all of this means is that with the community of interpretation, Fish hadn’t failed to produce an account of “normativity,” he wasn’t even trying. Rather, by the community of interpretation, he acknowledged the distinction he had before elided between the “normative and predictable” and gave up on the normativity of responses so as to commit himself to their predictability.

But if in 1978, with “Interpreting ‘Interpreting the Variorum,’” Fish had stopped “worrying” about the “truth value” of his “reader response narratives,” by 1980, when he published
the various essays that were compiled in *Is There A Text In This Class?* it was clear he had certainly began again to worry about normativity. Indeed he quite quickly saw that in abandoning “normativity”—that is, in abandoning the very idea that in reading there could be mistakes—he had himself made a serious mistake. In “Interpreting ‘Interpreting the Variorum’” Fish had said that his theoretical position relieved him of “the obligation to be right.” But, in the book’s introduction to the essay, he now claims that this was one of the “most unfortunate sentences” he ever wrote. And why is it so “unfortunate”? Because, he asserts, it implies a “relativism” towards interpretation that he had “long since repudiated” (174). (Just how much Fish had in fact abandoned that “relativism” will be precisely what we will be unpacking in the rest of this section.) Fish goes on to declare that rather than the “obligation to be right” dropping out—rather than, in other words, “normativity” disappearing—his theory only “drops” the argument that “a standard of right exists independently” of any community of interpretation (174). In other words, as fast as he abandons “normativity” for “predictability” Fish recuperates it, arguing that “normativity” does not disappear after all in the community of interpretation model. Rather, in so far as a community of interpretation is made up of people who share assumption and beliefs about the world, it cannot disappear. And why is this true? Because, as Fish (continually and variously) repeats, what it means to have a belief is simply “to believe
that what one believes is true” (361). And, Fish continues, "conversely, one believes that what one doesn’t believe is not true” (361), in other words, disbelieving is always to believe in the falsehood of beliefs which disagree with your own. Therefore believing and disbelieving are always normative. So then, the only way that normativity could ever disappear, Fish concludes, is if one could both believe and not believe in the truth of one’s beliefs. As a pragmatist, Fish declares such a schism impossible. In the second half of Is There A Text In This Class? Fish sets out to establish “normativity” on a new foundation: this foundation of belief.

And it is shared beliefs which is the foundation of the community of interpretation. Interpretive communities, Fish says, are made of people who share “standards of right and wrong” (174). Texts cannot exist without communities and, indeed, “follow from them,” and communities do not “exist apart from assumptions” (174). Since no one exists outside a community “we ourselves do not exist apart from assumptions,” Fish insists it follows that “a standard of right and wrong is something we can never be without” (174). In other words, a “standard” of “normativity” is built into the very logic of the interpretive community, but instead of being a universal standard, this is a dependent standard. This is what Fish means by having “dropped” a commitment to an “independently” existing standard. The standard of an interpretive community is their shared “assumptions” that leads them to write texts in the same ways.
So interpretations are "normative" but they are "normative" only for those who share the same assumptions. And interpretive "determinacy and decidability" must also exist, but they "do not always have the same shape," that is, they may "change" (306). All readers are thus committed to the rightness of their reading by the "assumptions" that make their reading possible. And this then is the text’s "inescapable meaning" and it is to this inescapability that Fish refers when he says that a "standard of right and wrong" is something no reader can ever "be without" (174). It is that very standard which is entailed by the existence of the community and which brings the texts into being. But, even as the interpretation of a text may be different for different groups because of their different standards, and even as an interpretation of the same text may change within a certain group over time, the experience of interpretations as "normative"—as a right or wrong—never changes.

So Fish insists that the community of interpretation, which was initially advanced to explain predictability, can now be shown by the logic of belief to explain normativity. But that logic cannot, as Fish would eventually recognize, perform that function. And we can see pretty easily why if we return to our example from Bunyan. If we ask how the community of interpretation would have us understand the difference between the reader who sees no pun on "just" in "You are just in your way," and the reader who does see it, the answer is that it shows us that these two readers are members of different communities of
interpretation. Since in the example Fish and I read the text differently (I without a pun and Fish with it) we had different experiences, and therefore, following Fish’s theory, we know that we are from different communities. Writing different texts tells us that we are from different communities which also tells that we have different beliefs.

But how does this help us solve our earlier problem? How in other words, does knowing we are from different communities help us to understand normativity, help us, to know what it means for a community to produce a right response, to know what it would mean for it to get at the real poem and its real meaning? Can the community of interpretation even help us to make sense of the very idea that either of us could be right or wrong, closer or further from the real poem and its meaning? For if Fish’s theory of the community of interpretation explains that our interpretive strategies generate the meanings of the texts we read—after all these strategies are “not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties” (171)—then it makes no sense to believe that any one interpretive strategy is more true to the real poem (what Fish calls the “’true text’” (171)) and its meaning than any other—indeed, the very idea of the real meaning of the poem is the “illusion” Fish is trying to dispel. But our commitment to the idea that one of us must be right and the other wrong (our commitment to the normativity of our beliefs and our interpretations) is founded upon nothing other than the belief
that there is a real meaning—a meaning not created by our interpretive strategies, which exists apart from our interpretive work—and that one of us understands it and the other doesn’t. And this means that either communities of interpretation create textual meaning, in which case, no interpretation can be more or less right than any other, or some interpretation is right and some other interpretation is wrong, in which case the community of interpretation is completely irrelevant. And to say this is just to say that the community of interpretation cannot explain the normativity of our interpretations, even if it was designed for this; in fact, it does just the opposite.

It actually explains a way to understand the experience of our interpretations, the psychology of right and wrong interpretations. And this psychology of belief produces a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand we are required to believe that our beliefs are true, but, on the other hand, once we understand the idea of the community of interpretation, the idea that we create the texts we read, we are required to understand that our beliefs about the superiority of our interpretations aren’t really true—at least not if “true” means these beliefs are superior to anyone else’s or that they are normative—since two different texts do not disagree, they are merely different. And so what appears to be a theory based upon the logic of belief turns out to be an explanation of a psychology of difference. And if we return again to our Bunyan example understanding that Fish has really produced a psychology
of belief, we can see our earlier question—How does the community of interpretation help us to understand the reader who sees the pun on “just” and the reader who doesn’t see it?—differently. We can still say that, since I saw no pun on just and Fish did we are from different communities, since our different readings (different texts) are simply the byproducts of our membership in different communities. But now we can also say that when either of us experience the conviction that our interpretation is superior to the other’s we have experienced the inevitable outcome of belief—the experience of superiority—even as we simultaneously (and paradoxically) can say that this belief about the superiority of our convictions is a mistake. This is the necessary conclusion of Fish’s theory of the community of interpretation. And so while it surely is right to say that my belief that there was no pun on “just” in “You are just in your way” seems inescapably true to me because of my interpretive community, to say so doesn’t give Fish any reason to believe that he is mistaken for believing that there is a pun on just because my feeling of the “inescapability” is only that, a feeling.

Thus the community of interpretation is better understood to provide an account of the causal chain of conviction: it elucidates, in other words, how people come to interpret as they do, and so we might call it a sociology of interpretation and belief. But, in articulating my experience of conviction, I have not provided a logic (such as Bunyan intended the pun) by which to argue for the truth of my belief or the superiority of my
interpretation. Indeed, what we have seen is that embracing the
community of interpretation entails recognizing the inevitability
of the mistaken belief that our beliefs are superior and
accepting the consequent (and impossible) requirement to both
believe that one’s beliefs are true and simultaneously know (and
thus believe) that they are false. Thus Fish himself, as many
critics have pointed out, had not produced a theory of true or
false interpretation, he had merely created a causal account of
why and how we come to feel that our interpretations are true.
And while it certainly is true that we experience our beliefs as
true, that experience of conviction does not entail a theory by
which we might coherently assert that our beliefs (or anyone
else’s) are true. Indeed, Fish would have to assert just the
opposite, in as much as the beliefs in question are about the
meaning of texts. Since for Fish believing in the truth of your
interpretation has to be a false belief, not because your
particular interpretation was false, but because the community of
interpretation makes it so that no one could have true or false
interpretations. And thus the crucial issue is not the fact that
you are wrong to believe in the truth of your interpretation,
rather it is that no one can be right about their interpretation.

This means that even if the community of interpretation can
give you a causal narrative of how people come to write different
texts, and if it can also explain why they erroneously experience
their readings as superior, and even if it can predict
difference, it cannot explain what disagreement is. The logic of
belief can explain disagreement, but Fish’s theory explains different not disagreeing responses and different responses don’t disagree, they are merely different. For if every community produces a different text there is never an identical object (e.g. the real text or the author’s intention) about which two interpreters might disagree. And since Fish believes that responses constitute the texts they claim to interpret, the theory of the community of interpretation produces an account of textuality that cannot in principle account for disagreements in interpretation because every disagreeing interpretation is really correctly understood as a different textual production. If Fish is right then disagreements in interpretation are always illusory.

And this argument is of course a version of the critique of Fish forwarded by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in their essay “Against Theory.” They argue that in articulating his community of interpretation, Fish reproduces the “founding gesture” of “all theoretical arguments” (27) by assuming the possibility of a “position outside” belief from which an interpreter might survey all of their beliefs and recognize them as different, but no better than anyone else’s beliefs. Knapp and Michaels argue that Fish demonstrates this commitment when he suggests that, finally, the right account of the history of criticism is best understood as the byproduct of a series of “merely different” but not “inferior” assumptions (Text 361). They contend that for Fish to believe that the assumptions of an
earlier interpreter were “different” but not “inferior” to his own requires him to occupy a “position” from which “we can see our beliefs without really believing them” (27). Believing in the existence of a such a space outside of belief is, they argue, the “founding gesture” of theory and, once this position has been assumed, the only difference that matters is whether one thinks that such a position is possible or impossible. Furthermore, they conclude, this “position” would make possible a theoretical space Fish had repeatedly denied as it makes it possible for an interpreter “to see the truth about beliefs”–they are all ultimately false even though they seem true to us–“without actually having any” (27). And thus, they suggest, Fish’s theory entails the conclusion that the “normativity” of the interpretive community turns out to be ultimately only a psychological illusion, an experience of conviction about what is true whose force we cannot help but feel since it is precisely what allows us to see in the first place, even as the sophisticated among us realize that the experience is always a mistake. And thus the “superior fiction” inevitably returns.

The Theology of the Interpretive Community

Fish himself as we will soon see, would eventually give up the theory of the interpretive community for reasons that follow directly from the problems and questions we have been looking at here, abandoning the strong constructivist idealism of the
community of interpretation ("interpreters do not decode poems; they make them" (Text 327)) as he began thinking of it as merely a sociological account of the predictability of interpretation. He would in other words, come to agree that his theory couldn’t do the normative work it was supposed to do. Nevertheless it has been the theory of the community of interpretation which has been Fish’s most influential theoretical contribution, particularly among a group of theorists for whom the problems of belief, disagreement, and normativity had always loomed large. We will see that, thanks in part to the very transformations within his thought we’ve already seen, for some Fish’s theory has been influential not so much in spite of its failure to explain normativity as because of its refusal to commit to it, while for others Fish’s theory has been influential precisely because it has enabled them to explain their ongoing commitment to normativity even in the face of the breakdown of foundationalist justifications for such normativity. Among Protestant theologians, Biblical scholars, and pastors Fish’s community of interpretation model has been widely discussed, occasionally critiqued, and often embraced—in fact one evangelical Protestant literary theorist has called Fish “a friend of faith” (Downing 196).¹

Indeed in the eighties and nineties a number of Protestants, influenced originally by the concerns of both Protestant ecclesiology and theology, and inspired anew by Stanley Fish, came to adopt the model of the community of
interpretation. Their impetus to do so was produced by their sense that, on the one hand, theological “claims” and “beliefs” could no longer be “justified” by appealing to a universal “’foundation’ of beliefs that cannot be called into question” (Murphy 9) and their conviction, on the other hand, that theology nonetheless required some way of defending the claims of truth against the various forms of relativism associated with anti-foundationalism. The community of interpretation—purporting to show how a continued commitment to the truth of our beliefs was completely compatible with an inability to produce a foundationalist justification of them—was a perfect fit.

And not only did it seem to provide believers with a new epistemology, it also provided them with a new way of understanding their relation to the beliefs of others. For, at the same time, as these Protestants were abandoning foundationalism and looking for alternate ways to justify their work, they were simultaneously dealing with what William Lane Craig calls in his contribution to _Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World_ (entitled “Politically Incorrect Salvation”) the problems of “religious diversity” and “relativism” (Phillips 76). They were working in a context where, according to Gordon Kaufman (a theologian at Harvard), a “striking change” had occurred and the substance of that change was the shift from thinking of theology as a discipline which makes “definitive normative claims about ‘Christian truth’” to a context where what was “required” was not “polemical pronouncements” but “careful and appreciative
study” of the theologies of others (Phillips 76). According to Craig these “calls for a response of openness” to other theologies, are calls which are “incompatible with the normative truth claims and polemical pronouncements” of Christianity (76). And yet, as Craig, Kaufman and other have shown, such calls for an open response are nonetheless difficult to overcome if one does not have a theoretical warrant (such as the foundationalist claim that Christianity’s truth and superiority could be based upon either “propositions” or “experience”) for preferring one set of theological convictions to another.

It was precisely such a warrant that these Protestants found in Fish’s community. Indeed, its constructive idealism provided simultaneously an account of how and defense of why one might claim to know without foundationalist epistemological assumptions (through the enculturation of the community of interpretation), and then it simultaneously offered an account of the implausibility (and finally impossibility) of relativism through the logic of belief. Fish maintained that “no one can be a relativist” as “no one can achieve the [necessary] distance from his own beliefs and assumptions” (Fish 319). And since these Protestants were confronted with the charge of inadequate justification for their commitment to Christianity’s superiority to other theologies on the one hand, and the charge that they must be relativists if they were not committed to some form of foundationalism on the other, Fish’s community of interpretation seemed appealing.
And what is more, in the community of interpretation they thought that they had found not only a way of continuing to practice theology in an antifoundationalist mode, but a better theoretical justification of and model for what the Yale theologian and Biblical scholar Hans Frei called a more “generous orthodoxy.” Frei is often cited as saying “generosity without orthodoxy is nothing, but orthodoxy without generosity is worse than nothing” (McLaren 14). A “generous orthodoxy” solved both the problem of Christianity’s “superiority” and its apparent need to be “open” in the changed context Craig and Kaufman described. For these theologians “orthodoxy” in itself was too exclusive but absolute openness—generosity without orthodoxy—was “incompatible” with the exclusivity inherent in correct opinion or right belief and so it was finally incompatible with the idea that theology ought to deal in “normative truth claims” and “polemical pronouncements” (Kaufman 76). Too theoretically sophisticated to think that the critique of foundationalism should lead to either skepticism or relativism, these protestants thought that in Fish’s literary theory they had found a model for being simultaneously generous and orthodox. Like Fish they believed simultaneously that their beliefs were true and that others beliefs were “not inferior but merely different” (368) than their own and, they thought that believing this meant that they could be (justifiably) described as generous and orthodox.

Crystal Downing, a Professor of English and Film at an evangelical college and a member of the emerging church
conversation, explains in *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith*, that Fish is "a friend of [Christian] faith" (196) because his theory of the interpretive community makes this generous orthodoxy possible. It allows Christians to "honor the truth claims of each community" while encouraging "each community to stay committed to its version of the truth" because all of these "versions of the truth" are "'true' to the interpretive communities that assert them" (91). And since the community of interpretation explains that every religious community is defined by constitutive beliefs which allow it to make its own orthodoxy, this orthodoxy is, by the logic of belief, binding upon that community’s members. A community of interpretation’s members must assert that "the doctrine" they "emphatically proclaim" is "true" (196) but "truth" is only "an expression of belief formulated by an interpretive community" (222) and so "dogma" is understood as the product of an "interpretive community whose members believe with all their hearts, souls and minds that their shared opinion is truth" (223). And thus the "dogma" of Fish’s community model is different: where an ungenerous orthodoxy could not be "open" to the dogma of another community without giving up on itself and ceasing to be an orthodoxy, an orthodoxy built on the model of the interpretative community could be both correct opinion for its members and make no claims on those who are outside the community, and, in making no such claims upon them, it could be generous towards them. From Downing’s standpoint the value of Fish’s community of interpretation is how it
demonstrates that no faith can have “greater access to universal truth than any other” (196). It replaces that universal concept of truth with an account of truth as what the community produces. And it follow from this conception that not only should each Christian “emphatically proclaim” that their “doctrine…is true” but so also should “people of all religions do the same” (196). And for evangelicals like Downing this is good news compelling them to be open and generous towards those whose current theological opinions are incorrect, even as it doesn’t mean that it makes their standard of judgment simply (and naively) relative and even as it also doesn’t mean that their dogmas aren’t true and binding for them.

And Downing isn’t alone in believing that Fish’s model will allow Christians to “honor” the different “truth claims” of other communities even as it encourages these Christians to “stay committed” to their own “version of the truth.” Tony Jones echoes Downing’s interest in Fish’s “authoritative interpretative communities,” seeing in them a model for “church” (Jones 1). He sounds like Murphey when he says that his is a sphere where both liberal and conservative “expressions of Protestantism are based on modern [foundationalist] epistemology and, as such are running out of gas in a postmodern world” (Jones 3). In such a world he says, echoing Downing and Craig, that he wishes to construct a theology which allows Christians to be “robustly and distinctly who” they “are” and yet is still “authentically open to and respectful of the other” (156). Jones’ emphasis is upon how the
interpretive community can explain the “rightness” of the church’s opinions even as he wants to be “respectful” of and “open” to the “other.” And so he, and a group of other emerging church leaders, write that they “truly believe there is such a thing as truth and truth matters” and that “radical relativism is absurd and dangerous” (229). Here they sound just like Fish when he insists that beliefs are always “normative” because a “standard of right and wrong is something we can never be without” (Fish 174) and they are insisting that orthodoxy, as Fish would say, is “inescapable.” So even as Jones proclaims that the church’s production of orthodoxy must be completed by “open sourc[ing] their biblical and theological content” (185) to make it more generous, he doesn’t think it follows that an open source orthodoxy will cease to be normative. To the contrary he insists that “nothing roots out heresy better than a group” and Fish would of course agree since, through its constitutive “assumptions,” it is always a group which creates dogma.

A former Congregationalist minister, Jones is a graduate of Dartmouth College who has a Master’s of Divinity Degree from Fuller Theological Seminary\(^2\) and is currently finishing his PhD in practical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He also is the “theologian-in-residence” at Solomon’s Porch, an “emerging” and progressive church in Minneapolis, which prominently claims on its church website that it wishes to “represent a generous orthodoxy” (Solomon). Jones has written numerous books published by evangelical publishing houses.
(including the required classic for current youth pastors, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*) and he is increasingly seen as an expert on the emergent church because of his most recent book *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*, where he defines the emergent church as “the new forms of church life rising from the modern, American church of the twentieth century” (xix). Jones serves as the national coordinator of Emergent Village, which represents a type of Christianity that defies (at times intentionally) definition. But scholars and proponents of emergent Christianity agree that it was born from a largely evangelical heritage and is essentially a reform movement within evangelicalism.³

“Evangelical” is as overdetermined a term as “emergent,” but it can be usefully defined by contrast with “liberal” Christianity. Jones and many others within the Emergent Village “conversation” count as evangelicals and not as liberals for at least three reasons. First, they say they are.⁴ Second, in addition to calling himself an evangelical, Jones holds doctrinal commitments which are consistent with basic evangelical orthodoxy and inconsistent with liberal doctrines. Where for example liberals characteristically believe that Jesus is not necessarily the only savior and sometimes doubt even whether a savior is necessary, Jones believes that “Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior of the Cosmos and no one comes to the Father except through him” (229) and thus his Christology (doctrine of the Christ) is consistent with the Lausanne Covenant (a major
evangelical doctrinal statement) which states that “Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people” (Lausanne). Given this account of the Christ, his evangelical soteriology (his doctrine of salvation) inevitably follows: he does not believe, as evangelicals have accused liberals (and indeed some liberals have openly exclaimed), that no salvation is necessary because there is no original sin from which we need to be saved, or that individual Christians can save themselves, as pietists and Wesleyans are accused of believing. Rather Jones in claiming that “Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior of the cosmos and no one comes to the Father except through Jesus” like most evangelicals, and as distinct from many liberals, believes in the supremacy and exclusivity of Jesus.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Jones believes not only in evangelical doctrines, but also in Christianity’s evangelical mission. Where liberal Christians often focus upon the ethical “teaching” and “acts of love” of Jesus and the ways that this can “bring blessing to the world” (McLaren 45), evangelicals tend to focus upon the proclamation of the evangelium (from which the term evangelical derives), the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, that, as McLaren puts it, “Jesus saves us by dying on the cross” and by thereby absorbing “the penalty of human wrongdoing through all of history” (45). Indeed Jones’ entire commitment to Fish’s theory, and the openness and the normativity he hopes to get from it—the way he hopes (above
all) that the model of the community of interpretation will allow him to rescue normative truth, even as it allows him to be generous to those from different communities who have different orthodoxies—is precisely in the service of the proclamation of the Gospel. Fish’s model of the community of interpretation salvages orthodoxy from what Jones understands as the morasses of relativism that follow the demise of foundationalism, even as it does not require Jones to become an intolerant, dogmatic, and ungenerous believer. But his is a pragmatic and profoundly evangelical decision, predicated on the assumption that in a “postmodern world” only such openness and generosity coupled with radical commitment to the truth of one’s orthodoxy will allow one’s proclamation to be heard. Thus even his choice to borrow Fish’s model is born from profound evangelical purpose and commitment. Taken together, Jones’ own self-identification, his doctrinal commitments, and his sense of the purpose of the Christian faith combine to secure him the designation evangelical.

Theoretically sophisticated and steeped in post-structuralism, Jones, like many of the members of Emergent Village, is deeply committed to antifoundationalism. He sees the problem with the current church in America as at least partly a product of “foundationalist” epistemology, an epistemology he believes is present within both “liberalism” and “conservatism” (5), is currently “running out of gas” (Post-Evangelicalism 3), and which has the deleterious effect of producing the belief in
“certainty” which requires one to believe that “all other viewpoints” other than one’s own “are wrong” (141). Wanting to avoid this position, Jones finds Fish’s community of interpretation helpful, for he believes that it aids the church in understanding the plurality of orthodoxies which emerge because “local communities shape how we see the world” and, perhaps more fundamentally for a pastor and theologian, “how we interact with the texts of scripture” (1).

In short, Jones believes that Fish’s model allows him to articulate a theology and an ecclesiology, an account of God and an account of church, that navigates between the “cocksure certainties of conservatism” (an ungenerous orthodoxy) and the “perceived tepidness of liberalism” (a generosity which relinquishes orthodoxy), without succumbing either to liberalism’s tepidness (Jones and his associates, as one of them explains, “really believe stuff, strongly”) or to a conservatism that could only be defended via a return to foundationalism. And an example will show how Jones thinks this might work. At the Wheaton College Theology Conference in 2007, Jones gave a talk titled “Whence Hermeneutic Authority?” addressing the conference’s themes of interpretive authority, orthodoxy, and the contemporary church. He begins his talk with an analogy from Fish that connects directly with what we have been discussing. Fish is retelling the famous story of an umpire named Bill Klem who once quipped when asked whether a pitch was a ball or a strike “Sonny, it ain’t nothing ‘till I call it”. For Fish this
demonstrates that balls and strikes are not “facts in the world” but “in fact balls and strikes come into being only on the call of an umpire” which means that they are “discourse-produced facts” rather than facts that “exist and have their own shape independently of any of the descriptions they might receive” (Fish xiii). The point for him is to demonstrate that just like a ball or strike, textual meaning is the product of interpretation, rather than the object of it: in short, it is a prototypical example of the interpretive community’s constructive idealism, showing how textual meanings are produced by interpretations. And it is at the same time a demonstration that meaning is always determinate within a context: just as a ball or a strike really is a ball or a strike when the umpire calls it, so also is a meaning really itself when a community of interpretation produces it.

For Jones, Fish’s strike zone analogy is a model of the way all beliefs, especially religious ones, work. And what Fish helps Jones to establish is that no “universal, a-contextual orthodoxy exists” rather “orthodoxy is a mess, a beautiful mess” (15) because it is produced within the context of “radical locality” (13). It is this “locality” which Fish calls the interpretive community and which maintains that, even in its radically local character, a “standard of right and wrong” is “something we can never be without” (174). Thus even if it’s radically local, orthodoxy still exists and it is nothing if it is not normative. And so even if this “radical locality” has
meant that “orthodoxy” is different at different times and that
the often quoted line by Vincent of Lirens that orthodoxy is
“Quod ubique, quod simper, quod ab omnibus” (that which “has been
believed everywhere, always and by all” (13)) is a mistake
because no such “consensus” has existed in the history of
Christian theology, it is nonetheless still the case that at each
of these times and in each of these localities there has always
been (as Fish might say) some orthodoxy even if it has not always
been the same orthodoxy. Consequently Jones thinks that
theological orthodoxy is exactly like the strike, it ain’t
nothing till the community of interpretation named the church
calls it. But even though orthodoxy is something the church
calls, and even though there are different strike zones for
different churches, within each church its strike zone is
binding, or as Fish would say “inescapable” for that church’s
members. And since, just as the strike zone will differ
depending on who’s calling the game, so also will what counts as
orthodox theology differ depending upon which church is calling
it—depending upon which “radical locality” we are in—but even if
it is local, it will still be true.

The advantage of this model is that the parties who hold
these differing accounts do not need to persuade one another of
the rightness of their beliefs, nor do they need to fight each
other or even dislike each other. A church can cling to their
orthodoxy, or as Downing puts it, “stay committed to its version
of the truth,” but others need not follow it. Indeed, on Fish’s
model different churches can’t help but cling to their orthodoxies since, as we have seen, those “assumptions” are what “constitute” and “enable” the very identity and “consciousness” of the persons who are members of those communities (Fish 319). For Protestants, with their (our) history of schisms and internal battles, this looks like good news since they now have a reason to be tolerant of what seemed to them the false beliefs of other. On the one hand then, the sharp edge of true and false orthodoxy, and the battles it has caused since at least Luther’s claim at the Diet of Worms, “Here I stand, I can do no other,” is dulled by this re-description and surely that is an intrinsic good. But on the other hand, even as the sharp edge is dulled and conflict avoided, orthodoxy and normativity of a type are rescued and set upon a new foundation, the “logic of belief” we saw earlier in Fish. Jones, like Fish, believes that whatever is true about scriptural texts and theology—and about orthodoxy more generally—it is a function of the creative power of a group (the church), but even as churches creatively produce new orthodoxies these orthodoxies continue to be normative and true for their members.

As a sociological account of knowledge, this is impeccable logic, since it is certainly the case (to paraphrase Locke) that every church is orthodox unto itself. But as we have already seen in our discussion of Fish, the question of whether the community of interpretation can understand its beliefs as true only for itself is a more complicated one. In fact, I have suggested above that there are deep problems for literary
criticism and theory that emerge from Fish’s interpretive community. Doesn’t theology run into these problems also? I think that it is fairly easy to see the problems that will develop for Jones from adopting Fish’s model since they are precisely the same as we have seen for the reader who writes the text in Fish’s theory.

Jones, like Fish, is vulnerable to criticism in at least two distinct ways. First, just as Fish had become unpragmatic when he exercises his “pragmatist” literary theory, so also Jones becomes un-evangelical (and hence liberal) in the theological application of Fish’s model. Evangelicals have always believed, in contrast to Protestant liberals, in the truth of their theology. And they have often been distinguished from liberals by the fact that they don’t think that their conviction about their theology’s truth is reducible to their psychological experience of the “feeling of utter dependence” (as Schleiermacher put it (Jones 20)), but rather they believe that their theologies actually make claims about the nature of the world, what Kaufman described as “definitive normative claims” (42). They have always believed, in other words, that the truth of their beliefs renders different beliefs false. And from this standpoint, Fish’s claim that the community of interpretation allows us to see that different beliefs are “not inferior, but merely different” (368) reinstates a liberal theology, while his sense that we hold passionately—“believe with all their hearts, souls and minds that their shared opinion is true” (Jones 223)—to
our dogma simply supplies that theology with an evangelical psychology, an account, that is, of why we can’t help but be enthusiastic about our beliefs even though we know they aren’t any better than anyone else’s. The contradiction between the evangelical commitment to the idea that our beliefs are universally true (both true for ourselves for everyone else) and the community of interpretation idea that our beliefs are just true for us is only papered over—not finally resolved—by the recognition Fish urges, that we can’t help acting as if they were true for everyone, even as we know they’re not. What Jones wants from Fish is a conservative epistemology so he can continue to believe stuff “strongly,” but what he really gets is a liberal epistemology with an evangelical psychology. And, ultimately, when Jones adopts that epistemology it requires him to surrender his evangelical identity.

And this leads to the second, and I believe deeper criticism, that Jones’ position, like Fish’s before him, is not really a position that anyone can occupy because no one can really possess that liberal epistemology. Here again we must return to the basic contradiction of Fish’s theory—that it requires one to both believe and not believe in the truth and superiority of one’s beliefs—and we will see that it must emerge again when utilized as a structure for theological inquiry. And now the objection I was making regarding Fish’s community of interpretation in the earlier sections of this article, about the simultaneous conviction that truth is always absolute and that
the denial of truth is not just a kind of skepticism about one’s convictions but is rather a necessary aspect of Fish’s theory, now returns and we see again that it requires a repudiation of the very idea that one has any convictions. Just as we saw of the community of interpretation earlier, Jones’ theory of theological orthodoxy ends up in a contradiction: on the one hand members of churches must feel that their radically local beliefs about theology are true, while on the other they must also recognize that they aren’t really superior to any one else’s. Jones and Fish are both talking about objects in the world—for Fish it is a text, for Jones, or any other theologian, it is the very essence of the world, what after all is theology if not a series of beliefs about the nature of reality—and for each the interpreter comes to these objects and, as Fish and Jones understand it, make claims about those objects which turn out to be creative rather than representational. The effect of this antirealism is to make it impossible for anyone to be wrong since no one is making claims at all. Instead “interpreters” are imagined as simply bringing the realities they are describing into being. We saw that a consequence for Fish was that the very categories of true and false interpretation, the real meaning, and true poem had to disappear altogether and this same disappearance reproduces itself in Jones: once the theologian seeks to be generous, both orthodoxy and the very concept of belief itself disappear.
This essay opened with a description of a moment in one of Stanley Fish’s earliest theoretical essays, “Literature in the Reader,” where Fish asks himself which responses to the text should be important and which shouldn’t be. Proceeding from and then setting aside the obvious answer—the responses that matter are those that the author intended—Fish points out that “one can analyze an effect without worrying about whether it was produced accidentally or on purpose” (51). As we saw this marked a crucial theoretical moment producing what first seemed to be a problem (what de Man called the problem of “truth value” and “normativity”) but this problem turned, almost immediately, into an opportunity. The problem was, if you aren’t focusing on the intended effects, how do you know you’re focusing on the right ones? And if you don’t know which are the right ones, why should you think your response is better than anyone else’s? And the opportunity engendered Fish’s solution, the realization that I shouldn’t think my response is better than yours (although it is less clear how I can stop feeling that mine is better). You should recognize instead that insofar as our responses are different, they are so because we belong to different communities of interpretation, that communities of interpretation are what produce the texts readers only seem to respond to (this is what follows from realizing that “there are no fixed texts...only interpretive strategies making them” (172), that readers don’t
really “read” texts, they write them) and that therefore no response—and hence no interpretation—really is any better than other, even though we can’t help thinking of our own as the best.

It is this last position—different responses (and beliefs) are “not inferior but merely different” (Text 368)—that I have been outlining and then criticizing both in its literary theoretical and its theological form, and perhaps the best place to begin this conclusion is by noting that Fish himself has become at least equally critical of it and that, as he has done so, he has become equally (indeed passionately) committed to the primacy of authorial intention, and hence to the idea that even though we certainly can analyze effects “whether or not they were intended,” if we focus on the unintended ones we are making a mistake in doing so. Thus, in “There Is No Textualist Position,” a 2005 piece published in the San Diego Law Review, Fish concludes unequivocally that intention and meaning are “inseparable from one another” (633), that “a text means what its author intends,” (649) and “if you are not trying to determine intention, you are not interpreting” (650) at all.

Fish’s turn to intention, as we can quickly see, solves the problem of which responses and interpretations to prefer (the intended ones) and provides a theoretically coherent account of not only why we feel our responses are better than other peoples’, but why it is logically defensible to believe they are. (As we will see, the question of whether in fact they are better, as Fish himself insists, is a separate problem.) This turn makes
it both unnecessary and, finally, indefensible to believe that the interpretations of others, in so far as they disagree with our own, are “not inferior but merely different” (Text 368) to our own. For if reader response is response to the intentions of an author than there is a right response, and if there is a right response, then responses that differ from this one are inferior to the right one. While it’s not clear what de Man would have thought of Fish’s reversal, it is clear that it solves the problem of the “truth value” of Fish’s “narratives” of response because it reinstates a criterion for “normativity.”

And if interpretive communities do not make meanings then the problems I outlined above are no longer problems. Indeed, at each stage of this argument intentionalism has alternative—and coherent—answers to the problems that emerge for Fish’s reader response criticism and his interpretive communities solution. Intentionalism doesn’t require Fish to abandon his reader response criticism in toto since he can simply argue that many reader responses are a function of authorial intention. And so while we may well be confused by the meaning of “just” in Shepherd’s response to Christian (“You are just in your way”), if we believe Fish’s new position we can simply ascribe this confusion to Bunyan’s intention. Our confusion about what Shepherd meant by “just” in “You are just in your way” counts as an interpretation of Bunyan’s text if, and only if, that confusion is what Bunyan meant for us to experience. In short its what Bunyan wants us to feel and experience that determines
the meaning of his text, not what the dictionary tells us “just” meant at Bunyan’s time (the position Fish called “Formalism”), and not what our interpretive community says Bunyan must have meant (Fish’s first theoretical critique of Formalism). And the advantage of Fish’s current intentionalism is that now he can explain (theoretically) what counts as a correct response—those which are intended—and give reasons for that explanation. Of course, as Fish makes clear, there is no methodological benefit to his intentionalism. What it does is only, albeit crucially, enable him to explain what it would mean to think that a response was correct (hence “theoretically” above). Once Fish insists that intentions are what you are after he is able to argue (again) that the reader’s response matters: recuperating intentionalism revivifies response, but it does so by making the interpretive community merely a description of knowledge is constructed and mis-constructed.

But if Fish could solve his problems by becoming an intentionalist—by giving up the idea that interpretation creates its object—what can evangelicals like Jones, Downing and the rest of their cohort do to solve theirs? They had come to Fish’s theory because they thought it offered an account of religious conviction that was not rooted in a foundationalist epistemology and yet did not (and indeed could not) devolve into relativism, but, even as it avoided the trap of relativism, still allowed one to be generous and charitable towards those whose beliefs were different than one’s own, even as one continued to “really
believe stuff, strongly.” Yet the problem that emerged was one of identity diffusion on the one hand (they couldn’t follow Fish and be evangelicals, at least as it came to what they thought about theory of truth) and internal coherence on the other (Fish’s position required them simultaneously to believe that they had true beliefs and that the truth about beliefs was that none of them was really true, since the very idea of a true beliefs was a kind of psychological delusion in his model).

It is clear that Fish’s intentionalism does not entail a return to any kind of foundationalism. As an intentionalist he still repudiates any idea that one could have a method that guaranteed the right interpretation and still believes that knowledge comes to us through beliefs. As to the problem of identity diffusion, accepting intentionalism of a kind would solve the identity problem for Jones et al precisely because it would give them a non-psychological account of normativity in interpretation, the very normativity they needed to be evangelicals and lost when they embraced the community of interpretation. And of course, just as we have already seen for Fish, they would no longer have the internal coherence issue: they would now believe that their own beliefs about theology were true and they wouldn’t need to add the caveat that they only, albeit inevitably, seem or feel true. And here we can see the down side for evangelicals like Jones, for the moment that their beliefs would have to not only seem and feel but be true is the moment that the generosity that they sought to extend to others
with disagreeing (ie. false) beliefs would have to be relinquished. “Generous orthodoxy” would then be an oxymoron in so far as that orthodoxy is an interpretation of the world and as such is an interpretation of an intention (God’s?) for one can (perhaps) be generous to a person who has false beliefs, but it is not at all clear what it would mean to be generous to the beliefs themselves. Hence Jones and company if they chose to follow Fish would end up with a model for theology that was non-foundationalist and it would be one that was consistent with evangelicalism, but inconsistent with generosity towards the orthodoxies of others. That is it would be inconsistent with everything about their Protestantism that seemed to them new. But it would not be inconsistent with Protestantism itself.

Indeed it would not be inconsistent with the Protestants Fish originally began with: John Donne, Paul Bunyan, George Herbert, Francis Bacon, John Milton, and St. Augustine. Although he can’t rightly be called a “Protestant,” the case of Augustine is exemplary. In this Church Father’s work Fish first found an account of what meaning is which subverted Formalism’s account (meaning is what the syntactical and grammatical rule say it is) and replaced it with a “‘rule of faith’” wherein the meaning of texts is there by “stipulation,” there that is because of the preconceptions (think “interpretive strategies”) possessed by the reader (Text 170). For Fish, even before he had developed his theory of the interpretive community, Augustine demonstrates how meaning is a product of prior orientation rather than “context”
or “conventional meanings” (*Artifacts* 22). But Augustine, as Fish notes, maintained that Christian interpretation was limited by God who has “informed Scripture with his true meaning” (22) and what this means is that unlike the reader who reads for response without worrying about whether these responses where intended or not, the Christian reading is always trying to nail down the interpretation that will “contribute to the reign of charity” (*Text* 170). For Augustine that interpretation doesn’t come from the formal features of the language, but is rather born from the internal “faculties” of “being”—what Fish calls “interpretive strategies—possessed by the interpreter (*Artifacts* 22). And the moral Fish drew from his engagement with Augustine while writing *Self-Consuming Artifacts* and *Is There A Text In This Class?* was that the preconception of the reader determined the meaning of a text, that beliefs rather than rules determine meaning, but it was the community of interpretation which teaches the beliefs that in turn enable its member to write the text. But this idealism was not the moral Augustine drew. The moral Augustine drew was that texts meant what their author’s meant, and their author was God. He did not believe the reader participated (or even constituted) the meaning of a text, rather he saw the reader’s prior orientation as making possible the interpretation of the intention of God (or impossible, in the case of the debilitating effects of sin). And so for Augustine a text meant what its author meant even as for him (as also for Fish’s Milton) the preconceptions and beliefs of readers were of
paramount importance, not because they made that intention, but only because of their capacity to reveal or hide it.

And if in the interpretive community model there was no intersubjective textual object, no texts that existed apart from a community’s reading, for the Protestant reading without regard to the intention of the author, there is still a normative object, still something that is being interpreted and not simply created, even though that object is not the intention of the author’s. Rather, just as when Augustine famously picked up the text of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans in his garden to “take and read” and was converted by the meaning transmitted to him through the text, a meaning which was clearly not intended by the original writer, the Protestant is fundamentally interested in the intention of God speaking through the text—an intention that can manifest itself, as in the example from Augustine, by the production of experiences which God intends, but which the writer of the text (St. Paul in this case) clearly could not have intended.

And of course an interest in God’s intention that simultaneously disregards the intention of the human author is a completely characteristic mode of Protestant reading. Thus Robert Grant explains in his A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible while expounding upon the transformations in hermeneutics which Protestantism brought that the Bible “is a book of life through which God speaks directly to the human soul” (129). Just as Augustine had read Paul’s letter
looking not for Paul’s intention but for God’s, so also did the Protestant look for this “direct” communication of divine intention. It was just this divine intentionalism that the Genevan Protestant John Calvin had in mind when he explained that the reader of Scripture experiences God’s intention “as if they heard the very words pronounced by God Himself” (133). For Calvin as one reads the words of Paul one is granted access to the intention of God (whatever Paul may have intended). And what all of this means is the Protestant reading, unlike the member of interpretive community, there is still an object guaranteed by an intention, it is just that this object is not the intention of the human writer, but is instead the intention of the Writer writing through the writer of the text. Of course it must be conceded that this theory of Scripture reading is not uniquely Protestant, as my example from Augustine makes clear. However, what is uniquely Protestant is the emphasis upon this kind of interpretation to the exclusion of other forms (such as allegorization and reliance upon the Fathers of the Church). Protestants, following Calvin and Luther, would come to see what Calvin calls “the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit” (134) as the primary foundation for determining the accuracy of one’s exegesis. And what this means for the theory of Stanley Fish is that one can abandon the intention of the author, and focus on non-intentional effects of the work, if “non-intentional effects” refers to effects that the author of text did not or could not have intended, so long as one has a theory of divine
intentionalism whereby the ontology of these effects is rooted in God’s strategy.

To return to Fish then, this theory of Scripture and divine intention was clearly present for the Protestants whose aesthetic Fish began with since Milton everywhere espouses just such a view, which Fish ably explains throughout his Milton criticism and Milton’s view of God’s pervasive intention extended not only to texts but to the entire world. That is, for Fish’s Milton the entire world is potentially a “text” through which God expresses His intentions and by which His strategies are enacted. And what is true of Milton is true of Protestants more generally. For the Protestant experiencing texts, and especially Scripture, there is no literary theoretical difficulty when they analyze their experience without worrying about whether that experience was intended by the author of scripture, or by the object in nature, because they are only interested in the intention of God, in the strategy of the divine author. The only question for them, and the history of reading Scripture shows that this is still a difficult question to answer, is an empirical one: what is God doing or saying? And while the question for Fish now may not be exactly what is God doing or saying, for him too the only questions that matter are empirical. Thus in the idealism inherent in his community of interpretation model, Fish had at one time embraced a kind of Protestant liberalism, but now in his anti-theoretical intentionalism Fish is back in line with Protestant evangelicalism, with, that is, the very theological
sources with which he began. Now Fish’s theory, like these Protestants’ theology, comes from one unshakeable assumption: meaning is intention. And in coming to this evangelical (and conservative) conclusion, Stanley Fish gave up his old theology and with it the god necessary to sustain the coherence of the interpretive community. Of course, as I have tried to show, giving this up in no way means he has given up theology as such, it means only that he has given up the theology of experience, the theology of Protestant liberals.
NOTES:

1. Fish’s work has been investigated (and at times castigated) by many within Protestant theological, biblical critical and pastoral circles. In addition to Jones and Downing, Stanley Hauerwas is inarguably the most famous theologian influenced by Fish. Indeed much of his work has been formed by Fish’s views of the interpretive community. Hauerwas explores this indebtedness explicitly in Unleashing the Scripture and The State of the University, but Fish’s influence can also be seen in his Gifford Lectures published as With the Grain of the Universe and in Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence. Hauerwas along with Nancey Murphy and Mark Nation have written about Fish in Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth. Stephen Moore in Literary Criticism and the Future of Theological Truth finds Fish’s reader response commitment useful for Biblical exegesis. And finally Scott Saye’s “The Wild and Crooked Tree: Barth, Fish and Interpretive Communities,” James Resseguie’s “Reader Response Criticism and the Synoptic Gospels,” and Andrew McGowan’s “Is there A Liturgical Text in this Gospel?: the institution narratives and their early interpretive communities” all display profound methodological and ideological commitment to Fish’s work. A selected bibliography of projects which are critical of Fish’s work and its influence upon Protestants would include Alan Jacob’s “A Tale of Two Stanleys” on the connection between Stanley Fish’s and Stanley Hauerwas’ thought, Roger Lundin’s The Culture of Interpretation and From Nature to Experience, Daniel J. Treier’s Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture, Anthony C. Thiselton’s New Horizon’s in Hermeneutics, Kevin Vanhoozer’s Is There A Meaning in This Text?, David Dockery’s The Challenge of Postmodernism, and Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm’s Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World. In general, to hazard a sweeping generalization, more conservative Protestants have criticized Fish for being a relativist in interpretation—a criticism I believe is misguided for the simple reason I have shown in this essay: most importantly that two different objects cannot enable relativism. Conversely those who have embraced his work have tended, for reasons I suggest, to be more liberal Protestants and to see in Fish’s work (oddly enough considering Fish’s substantial corpus of anti-liberal writings) support for their liberal projects.

2. Fuller is an historically evangelical seminary which is currently renowned for its antifoundationalist faculty members, including Nancy Murphey and James McClendon, who are proficient in hermeneutics, continental philosophy, and literary theory
Jones is writing his dissertation on “the relational ecclesiology of the emerging church movement” (Jones 1).

Jones et al stating that they are evangelicals: get a quotation from the appendix to The New Christians that says they think of themselves as in some sense as evangelicals. And they name as reason for their inclusion within the evangelical camp a variety of justification in their “Response to Our Critics” which Jones includes in as an appendix to The New Christians.

3. Emergent is both an organization that is a kind of avant-garde of postmodern, evangelical Protestantism, and also an adverbial that describes a certain postmodern Christianity which is not connected to the organization. The organization has an admittedly tenuous and somewhat vexed relationship with the more theologically and politically conservative branches of evangelicism. (though Emergent Village includes Catholic and Orthodox members),

4. Fish discusses the reception of texts explaining that “the history of reception provides much evidence of radically different meanings being posited for the same text” (642)—or, to put it another way, readers have often disagreed about the meanings of texts—but then Fish goes on explaining that these meanings could be said to “go beyond” whatever the author may have intended” (643). The question this generates is like the one I suggested above: “Is going beyond an unfortunate consequence of the difficulty...of figuring out what an author means, or is going beyond what readers do when they are the most creative, going boldly where no interpreter has gone before?” (643) Fish answers that the second option—going beyond as a “goal and a boast,” a creative construction of a text—is not and can never be what motivates those readers who strive to dislodge a previous interpretation and put a new one in its place. A reader who does that believes that he or she has (at long last) discovered the true meaning of the text, the meaning its author intended. If that were not the case, successive interpreters would not bother to argue that a previous reading was wrong, or that the evidence adduced for a rival interpretation was unpersuasive, or that new evidence has finally solved the puzzle. If the point is just to be more ingenious than the last guy, why not get right to it and skip all that disagreement and demonstration stuff? The whole process, along with the notion of ‘same’ text, only makes sense if there is something everyone is after. (643)

Fish suggests that the very practices of interpretation entail certain assumptions about what texts are: we argue about
“previous reading[s]” and produce counterevidence to dislodge current interpretations all because we are committed (even if tacitly) to the “notion of the ‘same’ text.” Fish’s statement demonstrates forcefully my earlier point that the interpretive community cannot give us objects to disagree about because different readers don’t disagree they have just produced different texts and he also points out how such a conclusion really cannot work since all of our practices suggest entirely different conclusions.

But Fish also shows that if interpretive communities cannot give us an object to disagree about, it doesn’t mean that there is no such object. Rather the object is guaranteed by authorial intent, so in embracing intentionalism Fish is—necessarily and simultaneously—abandoning his interpretive community model. He does not spell this out in his legal writings on intentionalism, but in two recent foreign language editions of *Is There A Text In This Class?* Mitchell Berman says that Fish explains that his “earlier work erroneously conflated descriptive and normative accounts of interpretation” (37). Berman’s point suggests that Fish realizes that intentionalism provides solutions to the problems of disagreement and reception produced by reader response and the model of the interpretive community. Fish’s point in these foreign language editions is, as Berman suggests, that the interpretive community model creates a powerful account of the sociology of knowledge—in this case how texts come to be interpreted—but that it is mistake to then take this sociological “description” for an ontology of texts—that is, for a “normative account” of how texts must always be. Fish failed to see that just because communities interpret in the ways that they do it does not follow that they either should interpret in this way or that the products of their interpretation are actually correct.

However if Fish is no longer a believer in the interpretive community has his new intentionalism caused him to reconsider his opposition to Formalism? It hasn’t, on the contrary it has given him additional reasons to oppose formalism. In his intentionalist guise Fish’s continued opposition to Formalism is demonstrated by his proposition that “as words alone” statements have “no determinate meaning,” which is also to say that they can have any meaning at all so long as someone wants to give it to them. Now it is only “once the words are heard within the assumption of an intention [that] they acquire meaning, and the meaning they acquire will vary with the intention posited for them” (632), whereas before it was the community that imbued the words with meanings and construed intentions. To claim as Fish does that meaning is a function of intention and does not inhere in the words, but is “posited for them,” is to reject a central Formalist tenet. Arguing against the common Formalist notion that context can help determine the meaning of texts, Fish continues in this vein of anti-Formalism when he exclaims “text alone, no matter how long or dense, can never yield meaning, whereas intention” (632) always yields meaning.
But if it is the author’s intention which yields and guarantees meaning then it cannot be, as Fish claims in “Interpreting the Variorum,” that “there are no fixed texts, but only interpretive strategies making them” (172) since, as Fish makes clear again and again in “There Is No Textualist Position,” intention fixes a text. Or, as he also says, without intention marks or sounds that appear to be words should be regarded “not as language, but as random marks—akin to the ‘garbage’ one types in when testing to see if the font is one you like—or mere noise, throat clearings” (632). The point of the font example is the same: intention makes meaning. And if intentions and only intentions make meaning, it follows that it cannot be, as Fish once claimed, that interpretive communities “make meaning” by putting “into execution a set of strategies” (173), nor can it be true that “meanings are not extracted but made and made not be encoded forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being” (172-3). In short, intentionalism replaces the interpretive community in Fish’s thought.

It is worth noting here that Fish continues to believe that the interpretive community is an accurate picture of the generation of knowledge, an account that is of the sociology of knowledge, even if he doesn’t believe that by allowing us to see or not see certain things the community guarantees that our beliefs will be true.

6. To the extent that their interpretation offers a different account of the object under consideration, intentionalism and the logic of belief require Jones and company to give up the idea that those beliefs are “not inferior, but merely different” (Fish 368). To be generous towards someone’s false belief would seem to require one to believe that they are true, but in as much as they disagree with one’s own interpretation, that is precisely what is impossible on Fish’s new model. And here then we see also why Fish has continued to maintain that liberalism is impossible, since he, on the one hand, believes that identity is a function of social constitution (which is made up of language and beliefs) and he, on the other, believes that this constitution does not guarantee that one’s beliefs are true, it inevitably follows that if you are constructed by your beliefs and, by the logic of belief, it is impossible to be tolerant of other people’s false beliefs, it is also impossible to be tolerant of the people who hold those beliefs themselves (since they simply ARE their beliefs in Fish’s conception).
Chapter Four

From Traveling Mercies to Fight Club: Conversions, Dogmas, and Feelings

I hung my head and said “Fuck it: I quit.” I took a long deep breath and said out loud, “All right [Jesus]. You can come in.”

So this was my beautiful conversion moment.

--Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies

You aren’t alive anywhere like you are at fight club...Fight club isn’t about words...There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved.

--Chuck Palahniuk, Fight Club
In her bestselling memoir Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith, Anne Lamott narrates her movement towards Christian faith, following what at first appears a fairly conventional formula of spiritual autobiography. Like St. Paul, Augustine, and Bunyan before her, Lamott describes a moment of crisis, where, in a state of spiritual desperation, she is haunted by an “apparition” who she recognizes is “Jesus,” “following” her like a “lost cat” wanting her “to open the door and let it in” (49). After having rejected this cat-like Jesus’ advance for a week, she is sitting in a largely black, Presbyterian church, profoundly affected by the music that made her feel like “something was rocking me in its bosom” when she suddenly and almost inexplicably “opened up to that feeling” (50). This opening is the beginning of her epiphanic conversion moment, the moment where she, like Paul, is dumb-struck and knocked from her proverbial donkey. Concluding the story in what one jacket blurb describes as her characteristically “irreverent” way, Lamott races home where, standing at her door, she tries to decide if she should let Jesus, imagined as the stray cat, come in. She hesitates, then relents, exclaiming, “Fuck it: I quit,” taking “a long deep breath” and telling the cat, “All right you can come in” (50). This, she says, was “my beautiful moment of conversion” (50).
Lamott’s conversion story, I will argue in what follows, is an important and distinctive one: important because it both exemplifies and contributes to an increasingly widespread sense of the centrality of the conversion narrative, distinctive because it suggests a very particular understanding of what exactly conversion is. And we can begin to see this particularity if we compare it to another recent conversion story—one that is both significantly similar and crucially different—Lauren Winner’s Girl Meets God. In Winner, Jesus appears not as a stray cat but, more conventionally as a kind of suitor—“I was courted,” she says, “by a very determined carpenter from Nazareth” (12). But the relevant difference is not just the one between a pet and a person, it’s that the carpenter’s humanity speaks to an idea, one that had fascinated Winner long before Jesus came calling. Even before she became converted, Winner says, “long before it occurred” to her to “say a creed” or to call herself a Christian (51), one of the things she “liked about Christianity,” was the doctrine of the Incarnation, “the idea that God lowered himself and became a man so that we could relate to Him better” (52). So it’s not just that Jesus is a carpenter instead of a cat, it’s that, as a human being, he embodies a doctrine, that of the Incarnation. Hence, the courtship of the carpenter involves not so much the feelings that characterized Lamott’s conversion—“soft and tender” (48)—but rather the power of a set of beliefs or principles (something no stray cat can articulate).
Indeed, as Winner makes clear, it was precisely this idea that interested her in Christianity, even before she herself came to believe it. She was “impressed” in what she calls “a literary way” with the “idea of the Incarnation” but “wasn’t persuaded by it” because as a Jew she believed in the Messiah and Jesus hadn’t done the “things” the Messiah was supposed to do, “ergo, he wasn’t the Messiah” (52). So even though Christianity “interested” her, she “was sure that it wasn’t, finally, true” (52). But this interest in or question about what was “finally, true” persisted until one night she had a dream from which she woke and “knew...that the dream had come from God and was about the reality of Jesus” (56). It showed “the truth of Him. That He was a person whose pronouns you had to capitalize. That he was God” (56). Thus she becomes what she describes in her “more pompous moments” as “radically incarnational,” incarnational since the belief “that God took flesh is the whole reason” she is no longer “an Orthodox Jew” (73). And because of the Incarnation, Winner “filled” her “bedroom with pictures of Jesus” so that “everywhere you turn, there he is peering at you” and, she explains, “I talk to them...when none of my friends are home and I am bored and alone” (73).

From this perspective, of course, the difference between Winner’s suitor-Jesus and Lamott’s cat may begin to look a little less significant, since it is clear from this parody of a high schooler’s room, covered with posters of pop stars, or the desktop of a lover canvassed with pictures of her beloved, that
something like the strong feeling Lamott has for the cat is as important to Winner as it was to Lamott. Indeed Winner feels as “soft and tender” toward Jesus as Lamott does as the image of Winner’s Jesus-plastered bedroom demonstrates. So the intensity of affection Winner has is not only for the doctrine of the Incarnation, but also for the person to whom it refers: she is attracted not only to the idea of him but also to him, himself. And, of course, some people also have pictures of cats and talk to them too. So it is not only focused and extended attention upon the theological doctrine of the Incarnation in her account of conversion that matters, but a kind of deep attraction to Jesus that Winner represents in her account.

And it is this strong attraction to Jesus that reveals the way these two conversion narratives are deeply similar: both involve passionate feelings focused upon something like a person. But this similarity, as I have already begun to suggest, is accompanied by a fundamental difference. For if in Winner’s conversion narrative doctrines like the Incarnation are central, one of the most striking things about Lamott’s memoir is the sheer absence of doctrine qua doctrine. Indeed this difference is what explains Winner’s very move from Judaism to Christianity as the former is, in her view, really not finally about doctrine at all.

Judaism, Winner thinks, is “a religion of action,” whereas Christianity seems to her “religion of belief” (48). What she means by this is not that Jews don’t often “care passionately
about what they believe” (49), but that the heart of Judaism is not a set of doctrines (like, for example, that of the Incarnation) but a set of practices. Thus, she argues, Judaism as action is constituted by attendance at Shul (synagogue), observance of Shabbat (Sabbath), and even by her practice of “learning,” which she explains “means ‘to study’” and doesn’t need “a direct object” (96)—Winner’s point being that Jewish “learning” is an action which constitutes the Jew’s identity even when the object of that study isn’t something particularly religious (like the Torah or Talmud) and this is why learning doesn’t need to take a direct object. Learning without such an object is an action in which doctrine isn’t all that important since it’s the learning itself rather than what you learn that is important. So where the courtship of the carpenter involved study of a “direct object”—Jesus himself—Jewish practice involves study that isn’t aimed at any particular object, and doesn’t seem to be aimed at acquiring any particular belief.

The way her rabbi explains this to Winner is by saying that Judaism is essentially a practice. Thus, when she finds herself in what she calls a “spiritual dry spell,” he assures her that even

when you doubt, even when it doesn’t feel like anything is happening, even when it seems like God is not around, you keep doing mitzvot [commandments]. You keep saying the prayers, you keep rinsing your hands every morning, you keep decorating the sukkah [booth for the Feast of Booths] with fruit and lighting the Sabbath candles and making latkes [potato cakes] at Hannukkah. (italics original 59)
“The action will get you through the dry spells,” he says, and eventually “the feeling that God is hovering in between your shoulder blades will come back” (59). The point of his advice is that if you keep acting like a Jew, eventually you will feel like one again. But in Winner’s account of Judaism (the Judaism she will reject in converting to Christianity) neither what you do nor how you feel is understood to have anything to do with what you believe. Which is why the courtship of the carpenter offers her not simply a different religion but a different relation to religion, a different account of what religion is.¹

For if Winner’s Judaism is a practice that renders the objects of religious belief secondary to the importance of religious action, and even feeling, her Christianity does just the opposite. It too involves feelings, but not only feelings (and not feelings linked to actions). Instead, at the center of her Christianity is a set of what she calls beliefs. We see this most clearly in the structure of her conversion which involves not, as it does in Lamott, a conversion from nothing to Christianity, but, involves instead—in something more like the classical Pauline conversion—a conversion from one religion to another, from Judaism to Christianity. This is what it means for Winner to come to be not only “impressed” by the Incarnation in a “literary way” but to be “persuaded by it” (52): to be “impressed” is to have a feeling about the Incarnation, in the same way that you might be deeply moved by a story in a novel—that’s the point of her allusion to a “literary way.” But to be
“persuaded by it” is to come to believe that it is true. As a Jew, in Winner’s account, she had above all to perform the actions (going to Shul, etc.) that constituted Judaism and she might hope also to be “impressed” by the “feeling of God between” her “shoulders.” But to be a Christian, she thinks, means something more, or other, than both action and feeling. To be a Christian is to not only be impressed by the Incarnation, or to care about the “atonement” (190), or think about the “authority of Scripture” (104), and the “doctrine” of “biblical inerrancy” (104). It is more crucially to be “persuaded” that the Incarnation is true, that the Atonement is a reality, that Scripture is authoritative and the Bible is inerrant. This then is the distinction between Christianity and Judaism for Winner: Judaism doesn’t require beliefs and Christianity does.

If, however, you take a look at Lamott’s conversion, you find yourself hard-pressed to say what the distinctly Christian beliefs might be. But if Lamott doesn’t have a lot to say about Christian dogmas she certainly makes up for it with what she “could feel God say,” do, and be (51). Indeed, in the stray-cat Jesus scene I began with, it is “the feeling” of “Jesus” that Lamott opens herself up to. And in her own “dry spell” scene, in which she again analogizes Jesus to a house pet, Lamott relates how, in a moment of spiritual crisis, in the blood soaked undergarments of a post-abortion depressive stupor, having just come down from a multi-day drinking and drug binge, she has a “feeling” of “someone with me” (49) and realizes “beyond any
doubt that it was Jesus” beside her. She insists, I “felt him as surely I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this” (49). Lamott’s beliefs “beyond...doubt” are about what she “feels” and her sure feelings of Jesus’ presence are fundamental to both her sense of what Christianity is and then to her conversion to it. Christianity for her is about having those sure feelings: having them is conversion.

In understanding Christianity as a set of feelings of Jesus’ presence—in understanding it as primarily an experience—Lamott’s Christianity is not that different from Rabbi M’s Judaism: it’s a “religion of action” directed at the maintenance of feeling. Her religion, like his, involves the sure feeling of God’s presence, and for both the goal of religion is to maintain that sure feeling of the presence of the divine (though admittedly each believes different actions will maintain that feeling and it’s the difference in these actions that defines the Christianity of the one and the Judaism of the other). Further, for Lamott, as for Winner, when the “dry spell” of Judaism ends, the “feeling of God” is crucial and it is precisely a feeling that can be defined without recourse to doctrine like that of the Incarnation and without recourse to questions like whether one is “persuaded” by the truth of that doctrine. That’s after all the point of the stray cat or the dog at one’s feet in Lamott’s narrative: nobody really expects a stray cat, or the dog at their feet, to persuade them of anything.
Indeed if Christianity is defined for Winner by being “persuaded” of the truth of the Incarnation, the inerrancy of Scripture and the centrality of atonement (it is defined by being about beliefs), it is less clear when reading Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies* that Christianity has anything to do with beliefs at all. Furthermore, it is Lamott’s indifference to doctrine and creeds and interest in feelings that has turned out to be central to the conversion form in what has been called the Third Great Awakening. It thus represents an exemplary instance of the direction of a sizeable body within the American Christian community, a movement away from specific creedal commitments, either towards more universal or increasingly more personal religious commitments. This phenomenon has been variously (and for different reasons) documented by sociologists, pastors, and theologians, but we don’t need to look farther than the influential and theoretically sophisticated work of John D. Caputo.²

In his important and suggestively titled *On Religion*, Caputo describes the irreducible centrality of feelings to religion (and, more specifically, to his conception of Christianity) when he says that “being truly religious” means “truly loving God,” that is, means “loving God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)” (111). For Caputo, Christianity is not accepting correct doctrines, but loving God. Accordingly, Caputo argues that it is a mistake for Christians to think of their beliefs as the core of their religion, to believe that they are
"The Truth" and suggests that they should think of their beliefs as "representing...different ways to love God" (110). Against the "exclusivist claim" (114) of religious "knowledge," claims to "enjoying privileged cognitive, epistemic, propositional information" (111)—think doctrine or true beliefs—Caputo explains what he means by "truly loving God." Rather than this love being in our acts, he says this love exists where we "let something...get done in us" (115). In this Caputo insists that true religion (and, by extension, Christianity) consists of a response ("truly loving God") to an experience (something "done in us"), rather than being a kind of knowledge ("propositional information"). "True religion" is then not something that provides us knowledge, it is instead a "response" to "something that has swept us away" (italics original 117).

Caputo’s language of "response" thus signals the same concern as Lamott’s interest in "feelings." Both are derived from an experience, and both make it clear that it matters little whether that experience is of Caputo’s "something that has swept us away" or Lamott’s "stray cat" or, for that matter, even Rabbi M’s feeling that "God is hovering in between your shoulder blades." But what Caputo’s true religion of response most certainly is not, as he vigorously underscores, is Winner’s Christianity of doctrine. Doctrine, according to Caputo, is, at best, "the historical way we have been gifted to see" God (112) and as such is always "deconstructible" because "religious
truth...does not have to do with propositions" but only with "truly loving God" (112).

The difference between Winner on the one hand and Caputo and Lamott on the other is a significant one. I will argue in what follows that in many recent memoirs and fiction the distinction between being "swept away" by something and being "persuaded" by it is elided. If, as I will suggest, conversion narratives have again become absolutely fundamental and ubiquitous in American culture, it is invariably in the model offered by Lamott, a conversion which is more about the strong "feelings" had by the converted, than it is about what is "finally true." Or, to put the point another way, affective conversion is absolutely central to recent literature even as doctrinal conversion is increasingly peripheral: feelings are increasingly central even as (or precisely because) beliefs are increasingly peripheral.

Furthermore, I will suggest that the increase of conversion narratives is not just the byproduct of increased commitment to Christianity. Indeed, it might as easily be just the opposite, that as the logic of the subject position has become increasingly more powerful in American culture more generally, so has that logic become increasingly more powerful in American Christianity. That is, American Christianity has become increasingly less about beliefs and increasingly more about feelings, just as American culture has come to focus more upon both Christianity and feeling. In what may seem a surprising turn of events, both
American culture and American Christianity are fixated upon experience even as both are indifferent to doctrine. This produces the confluence of two divergent discourses. Where American Christianity may once have seemed at odds with American culture, as was insistently argued by both Christians and non-Christians alike throughout the 1960s and 1970s, in the emphasis upon feelings and experience, Christianity and the putatively “secular” culture are now reunited.

Thus it’s not so surprising that, as we will see, many who are not seeking to tell religious stories would nonetheless borrow the quintessential form of Christian narrative, detached as it has become in its public forms from the very things (Christian beliefs) which have made it unpalatable to the nonreligious in the past. In a context where public Christianity is increasingly affect oriented rather than ideological, it’s not surprising that its narrative forms have become attractive, especially as the conversion narrative comes increasingly to focus on deep affect. Thus, just as Christianity has become less interested in belief, American cultural production has become increasingly interested in the structure of Christian conversion not because of its ideological content but rather in spite of it, for its affective intensity. I will argue that in the Christian conversion narrative, American cultural production finds an ideal model for strong feelings, without needing to locate those feelings within a matrix of beliefs.
And we can begin to see this structure enacted even, and indeed even sometimes more powerfully, in texts that are not explicitly religious, like *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk. *Fight Club* has been understood to be about how “boredom” and “disillusionment” can be “cured” by “mayhem” (Lee 185), or the “new masculinity” and “fascism” (Barker 179), or the problems of post-Fordist economies, the contradictions of late-Capitalism and the struggle for subjectivity in the “anti-Oedipal situation” (Nilges 34), or the drive towards masochism, away from “fear of castration,” “anxiety” and “rebellion” (Ta 270). *Fight Club* has also been read as being about terrorism in the form of “random sabotage and arson” (Appelbaum & Paknadel 416) or in the form of nihilistic violence springing from “cultural frustration and alienation” (Peterson 137). And of course, nearly all of these readings return to the question of psychological disease and the dissociative personality of the narrator. Despite the fact that people tend to read *Fight Club* in these ways, it’s fairly easy to see that Christianity, and as I will suggest Protestantism, is absolutely central to the novel and that it is not a stretch to see it as a kind of spiritual autobiography.

To be sure, *Fight Club* is, on its surface, the story of a narrator suffering from a Dissociative Identity Disorder. Before Tyler Durden, his alter ego, appears, he is a disillusioned, insomniac, trapped in an “unfulfilling life as a corporate drone”
(Ta 267) where everything “appears to...be simulated” (Nilges 34)—what he calls, copying Plato, a “copy of a copy of a copy” (21). This lack of authenticity, this life where everything is a “copy,” precipitates his desire to find “one real thing” (24). Palahniuk’s story is that of a narrator trapped in a life which he “hated” because he “couldn’t see any way to change things” (172), a life in which he says his one “wish” is “to die” (146).

But why? What leads him to such a desire? The short answer is that he doesn’t feel anything: as he says, he “can’t cry” (22)—and in the novel crying is a metonym for deep feeling more generally—and, as he also says, “nothing can touch” him (21). His effort to find something that will “touch him” and allow him to escape his unfulfilling, feeling-deprived life takes the form of faking membership in a series of afflicted groups (he acts the part of testicular cancer survivor, a patient with a brain parasite and one with degenerative bone disease, etc.) and then joining their support groups. And here, in the support groups, the narrator finds his “one real thing,” that thing which touches him, “being held by Big Bob”—a member of the testicular cancer support group “Remaining Men Together”—and “crying...without hope” (18). Among semi-castrated men, in Big Bob’s arms, the narrator is “touched” and says he finally “feels” (18). But he’s not just touched, he is also “saved” (38). And “saved” in very specific terms. Every evening, he says, he “died” and every evening he was then “born” (22): indeed, not just born, reborn, as he says, “resurrected” (22).
Here we see an obvious sense in which the logic of the novel partakes in a kind of Christian structure. Indeed the narrator’s experience of dying and being resurrected at the support groups is analogous—even if only in a parodic form—to Jesus’ representation of the core of Christianity in the Gospel of Matthew. There Jesus says that “whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (16:25), and where Jesus says saving your life means losing it, the narrator says being saved is feeling, and that this kind of being “alive” occurs only when you realize that “the first step to eternal life is...to...die” (12). The narrator’s statement, like Jesus’, displays the structure of creative destruction central to both Christianity and to the rest of the novel: losing your life, being destroyed, dying, makes you feel alive. By this logic the narrator decides that “[m]aybe self-improvement isn’t the answer...Maybe self-destruction is” (49) since in “self-destruction” he can “cry” and be “touched.”

And yet, even though the “self-destruction” the narrator found at the support groups touches him, it does so only for a time. He begins to need something more powerful and he gets it the first time he hits Tyler Durden. Unlike the support groups, fight club doesn’t “happen in words” and the narrator explains that when something “didn’t happen in words” it was more real by being less prone to falsification, ambiguity, and fakery. Fight club doesn’t depend upon men talking to each other for its effects: instead, in fight club language only matters when words
cease to be mere words and become instead what the narrator describes as “hysterical shouting in tongues like at church”, from which “you wake up Sunday afternoon” and “feel saved” (51). Fight club is “like...church” since there you speak in a kind of “tongues,” but fight club is something more than being at a support group even though at both he had felt “saved.” At fight club the narrator suggests two parallel intensifications from the experience of the support groups: from the experience of crying to the experience of fighting, and then, in the fights themselves, from something that happens “without words” to something that is spoken, but is more than words, “tongues.” So then if in being born, dead, and resurrected at the support group the narrator had his first religious experiences, his second experience was when Tyler starts hitting him and he got “somewhere” he’d “never been” (53) before, the spiritual possession of speaking in tongues. This fighting, analogized on the model of Pentecostal speaking in tongues—yet another kind of self-destruction, the loss of self that is implicit in spiritual possession—was an even more intense feeling of being “saved” (51). At the support groups the narrator was saved with words, but in fight club he was saved by something spoken that nonetheless went beyond words.

And here, not only is the logic and structure of Christianity present, but so also are the terms the experience comes to be represented in (“tongues”) unequivocally religious. But it is not just blandly religious or generally spiritual, for when the
narrator starts to feel like he’s spoken in tongues at fight club, we can most clearly see the overlap between fight club and the spiritual autobiography. Fight club is modeled on the Eucharist, the central symbol of Christianity, the solution to the problem of spiritual death, and the most explicit representation of destruction as fulfillment in Christianity—the same structure as the creative destruction in Fight Club. While it is true that this meal denotes different things for different kinds of Christians, for all it is about the salvific logic of Christian doctrine in which the state of being “dead” in “trespasses and sins” is overcome by the Christian being “made alive together with Christ” (as Paul describes it in Ephesians chapter 2) through celebrating his violent death and then resurrection. Like the Eucharist, fight club happens on Sunday mornings. Like the Eucharist, fight club produces something like spiritual possession. Like the Eucharist, fight club involves the breaking of the body and the spilling of blood. And like the Eucharist, the consequences of these destructive actions are the salvation, resurrection, and new life of its participants.

So then, in this commitment to the Eucharist we can see that Fight Club is in some respects a more violent, masculinized version of Lamott’s conversion narrative—or perhaps not more violent since after all, Lamott’s conversion takes place as she is “bleeding heavily” (49) in a post-abortion, drunken stupor. And although Lamott’s savior is a harmless stray cat, the narrator’s savior is the violent and menacing inventor of fight
club, Tyler Durden. The stray cat and Tyler Durden are alike in being the catalysts for the “greatest” moment of the central character’s life.

But as much as *Fight Club* and *Traveling Mercies* are alike, there is, at the same time, however, an important sense in which the cat is more satisfactory than fighting. The way of Tyler Durden does not finally satisfy the narrator’s desire to “cry” in the way that the stray cat Jesus satisfies Lamott’s desire for “strong feelings.” What Tyler needs is something bigger: Project Mayhem, which, as he says, will “blast the world free of history” (124). And what makes Project Mayhem bigger is that it is not just about the experience of personal salvation, but it also involves a creative violence that will work on the whole “world.” It has, in other words, collective ambitions, the ambition to produce an experience that is bigger than anyone alone can have, in contrast to both Lamott’s stray cat and to the narrator’s support groups, and even to fight club. And in moving from the personal to the collective, *Fight Club* thereby makes another move: from the spiritual autobiography to something like the Apocalyptic—a genre in which its not the destruction of the self but the destruction of the world that matters. So just as in the return of Jesus in the *Revelations of John* the world will be destroyed in order to usher in the New Heaven and New Earth (Revelation 21), so in the *Revelations of Tyler* total destruction will bring about salvation and recovery.
Indeed, in its commitment to the salvific potency of destructive force, Project Mayhem emulates not only the creative violence shown in the Revelations of John but in the Apocalyptic more generally from Isaiah and Ezekiel and, in fact, to Enoch and the Apocalypse of Peter. Like the Apocalypse (and indeed the very logic of Christianity itself), the Project has at its center, as Tyler describes it, a creative violence which will “blast the world [and not just any one individual] free of history” (124). Furthermore, the point of this “blasting” is not just to destroy the world, to “break up civilization,” but finally to “save the world” (125).

In a sense then, by going beyond the spiritual autobiography to the Apocalypse, beyond the personal to the collective, Fight Club is more ambitious than Traveling Mercies. It has, in effect, a politics which go beyond the politics of the personal we’ve seen in the spiritual autobiography and memoir. But there is at the same time a more fundamental and final sense in which, despite Fight Club’s heightened social ambition, it really never leaves the logic of Traveling Mercies behind. For in both texts it’s the categories of experience and the irrelevance of the doctrinal that remain central, not only at the personal level, but also, and in a way more strikingly, at the level of the collective.

Thus it is not really any surprise that even when Fight Club appears to bring beliefs and doctrine to the center of the story’s plot, as it does when the narrator discusses what he
calls “Tyler Durden dogma” (140), it does so only by producing doctrines that have no doctrinal content, that function more as jokes than as credos. Compare, as Palahniuk suggests we do, “The first rule about fight club is you don’t talk about fight club” (48), a rule that is in no important sense a dogma, to what we might say is the first rule of Christianity, “I am the Lord your God,” from which follows the requirement to “have no other gods before” Him (Deuteronomy 5:6-7), a rule that begins with a belief, a doctrine from which follows the action. This contrast is enlightening and reveals how Tyler’s dogma functions not as traditional dogma—to state something that is true for all—but solely as a mechanism to keep fight club going—a tool to maintain experience. There is no list of things you have to believe to belong to fight club, whereas there is (at least in theory) a list of things you have to believe to be a Christian (the question of whether there really is such a requirement is part of the point of this dissertation). In this we see the difference between a true dogma and doctrine as a personal instrument: the dogmas of Tyler are not beliefs, like the dogmas of Christianity, they are only instruments. So it follows that even when Fight Club invokes dogma, it does so only to reinterpret the usual core of a “dogma” (the universality of a belief, the way its truth is not dependent upon any one person’s experience) and turn these dogmas into something else entirely, instruments for the maintenance of the personal and the experiential.
But, it might perhaps be argued, that where the novel makes a joke of Tyler’s dogmas about fight club (“you don’t talk about fight club”), it seems to take more seriously the dogmas of Project Mayhem as is made most obvious by the simple fact that the main thread of the narrative is an explanation of how Project Mayhem emerged and how the narrator plans to stop it. The dogmas of Project Mayhem—like the claim that its members are “liberators who destroy...property” (110)—do have instrumental power and the capacity to destroy the personal and experiential by subordinating them to the collective and interpersonal. And this may explain why the narrator feels obligated to contain the violence of the Project before its full destructive force is unveiled. (Indeed then the net effect of the narrator’s defeat of Tyler—if we can call the final chapter in which Tyler has disappeared and the narrator is with “God” in what appears to be a mental hospital cum heaven a defeat—is to give the victory to the personal over the collective, to the spiritual autobiography over the apocalyptic.)

And yet, even if it seems at first that they may be different than fight club’s, Project Mayhem’s dogmas turn out to be more about the personal than they are about anything collective. They turn out, in other words, to be nearly identical to fight club’s dogmas. That’s why almost as soon as Tyler starts talking about Project Mayhem being the collective “liberator” which works by “destroying” “physical power and possessions” (110), he returns to the personal saying that this
destruction is for personal ends. Tyler claims that “destroying myself” releases “the greater power of my spirit” and destructively liberates me “to save my spirit” and “set me free” (11). Which all suggests that although Project Mayhem differs from fight club by having a collective rhetoric, ultimately its effects are experiential, which is just to say they are no more ideological than were fight club’s, irrespective of their collective ambition. And in this, the apocalyptic edifice in the novel teeters and collapses back into the spiritual autobiography from which it emerged.

And so, if I am right, and Fight Club is a spiritual autobiography, then one obvious criticism of the contemporary spiritual autobiography may appear in the way it focuses on the individual at the expense of the social. But as we have seen Fight Club functions to imagine the possibilities for the collective of what had before been the realm of the personal in the way that it tries to guarantee “strong feelings” through Apocalyptic violence and, in this, it turns out that Palahniuk remains committed to retaining all of the categories—the unimportance of doctrine and the primacy of experience—central to the individual spiritual autobiography, making these categories now available, not only to individual, but also to the whole of society. Thus, what Fight Club contributes is the fantasy of not only an individual subjectivity full of experiences and devoid of beliefs, but an entire society so constructed. If Fight Club then first appears to go beyond Traveling Mercies, and the
spiritual autobiography more generally, by invoking the apocalyptic (and through the apocalyptic, the collective and possibly the ideological), it does so only to re-inscribe them both in the terms of the experiential and personal. It is as if *Fight Club* reimagines the apocalypse not as a fantasy about the radical transformation of the whole ontology of the world (as in the New Heaven and New Earth of John’s *Revelations*), but as primarily an experience for the individual watching it all unfold. And in such an individualizing of the apocalypse *Fight Club* manages to pull it back into the spiritual autobiography where what matters most is what happens to me. Of course, Palahniuk has to give something up in order to maintain this fantasy—the possibility of collective life in which beliefs matter at all—and yet, as we have already begun to see in this chapter (and in this dissertation more broadly) this is precisely what has been imagined by Protestant liberals of the last five decades.

**Zizek and Twilight**

And yet *Fight Club* and these Protestants are not alone in imagining a world where catastrophic violence coexists easily with, and in certain respects makes possible an ideologically neutral individual, looking for some strong experiences while waiting for something to happen. Indeed, this is just the situation Slavoj Zizek has been describing in any number of his
recent works, including emphatically his most recent, and most
apocalyptically themed, *Living In the End Times*.

Here Zizek’s “premise” is that the tropes of Apocalyptic
narrative are currently best exemplified by a “capitalist system”
which is fast “approaching an apocalyptic zero-point” (x). For
Zizek, as for Tyler Durden, the “forthcoming apocalypse,” when
perceived properly, is not a “threat” but the “chance of a new
beginning” (xii) and, just as it is for Tyler, the “starting
point” of this new beginning is “to become terrified” (xii). But
it’s not just fear as such that is critical, but fear “of
oneself” which is necessary for the “emancipatory enthusiasm” to
be “fully lived” (xii). And this is also what he is getting at
in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* when Zizek uses Saint Paul to
demonstrate who is “really alive” (94). And if for the narrator
of *Fight Club*, the fear of oneself is located in one’s inability
to feel or be “touched” and the solution to this problem is a
“self-destruction” which made you “feel saved,” for Zizek, the
fear of oneself is located in our desire to “deny” the “state of
our daily lives” which he says, sounding uncannily like both the
narrator and Tyler, “is that of a lived lie” (xii) and the
solution to this problem is to “believe” in the “truth”
(understood as “a Badiouian Event”) so you are “able to see”
(xiv). Yet, like Project Mayhem (and unlike the Christian
apocalyptic), Zizek is not clear about just what we are to
“believe” this “new beginning” is.⁴
There are few contemporary theorists who seem more committed to the primacy of belief and to the critique of the therapeutic bad faith of the West than Zizek (he wrote an entire book *On Belief* after all), and so he may seem like an implausible figure to introduce at the end of an argument which has been principally about the ways that beliefs and doctrine are being relegated to the periphery in order that experience and emotion might take center stage. But it’s actually a kind of testimony to the power and virtual omnipresence of this relegation that, even in Zizek’s work, ultimately experience comes to the fore while belief recedes. Preceding in a way that looks very similar to the logic of the “blasting” that will “save the world” of *Fight Club*, Zizek’s “apocalyptic zero point” (x) brings “a new beginning” (xii) that like Tyler’s turns out to be principally justified by, and valued for, its experiential effects. Thus Zizek’s first explanation of why anyone should engage in the “struggle” to know the “truth” is rooted in its therapeutic value: it helps you to escape the plight of “vegetat[ing] in the eventless utilitarian-hedonist survival of what Nietzsche called the ‘last men’” (xv). What motivates him is not exactly the justice of the cause but the fear of living a boring life. Like *Fight Club*’s narrator, Zizek appeals to people tired of living in an IKEA catalog, and to the experiences you will miss out on if you don’t join the struggle.

To this end, in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Zizek contrasts a jogger running along the Hudson River (one of his favorite images
of the banality of capitalism; it also appears in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* and a Palestinian suicide bomber. In a strikingly similar moment to both the logic of *Fight Club* and to the logic of “struggle” in *Living in the End Times*, Zizek suggests that this “New York yuppie jogging” is to be pitied because his life is less exciting (it’s what he calls “eventless”) than the “Palestinian suicide bomber’s” (94). The bomber is, Zizek says, comparatively “‘more alive’” because he has “engaged” himself with “an excessive intensity” which puts him beyond “‘mere life’”(94). The point here is precisely not doctrinal; Zizek is not endorsing terrorism and he’s not even arguing for the justice of the Palestinians’ cause, or for the rightness of his beliefs. What he is arguing for is the virtue of feeling “more alive,” of experiencing “an excessive intensity” (94). We could say that this “excessive intensity” is precisely what Lamott found at the black Presbyterian church and *Fight Club’s* narrator sought and found in fight club (“hysterical shouting in tongues like at church”), and it is what Tyler wishes to give to all of society through Project Mayhem. Zizek suggests by the example an unmistakably similar lesson to his justification for joining the “struggle” in *Living In the End Times*, the problem of capitalism and the reason to overcome it are the same: it doesn’t yield the kinds of experiences we want.

But if this is what it means to believe in beliefs and to try to overcome “today’s ideological malaise” (xiii) then we haven’t gotten far beyond the logic of *Fight Club* or Anne Lamott.
Indeed, for Zizek, as for Palahniuk and Lamott, the power of beliefs seems to lie not in the question of whether they are true or false, but in their ability to produce transformative experiences (Zizek calls it their “truth-effect” (xiii)), particularly experiences that transform the tedium and boredom of ordinary life in late-capitalism into excitement, pleasure, and sense of meaning. In short, for Zizek and Badiou, as for Palahniuk and Lamott, what is desired are experiences that convert you, events that make you new.

But if we look, somewhat in the spirit of Zizek’s own method of finding “revelations,” in not only the works of theorists like Badiou and Lacan, but also in movies like “The Dark Knight” and “The Matrix,” we can see that this desire for radical transformation is one of the staples of contemporary popular culture. Indeed, the possibility of being made new animates not only the world of Palahniuk and Lamott, but also the superficial (and grotesquely physical) television makeover program “The Swan” (in which the show’s subjects undergo invasive plastic surgeries and exercise regimes in order to be made into “New Beings”) and is one of the staples of the therapeutic discourse permeating our entire culture. It is no stretch to say that the story of transformation, often imagined through the psycho-therapeutic, is our culture’s one remaining metanarrative.

And so it is no surprise then that the possibility of being radically transformed also informs the massively popular book and film series *Twilight*, and, indeed, it informs the whole popular
discourse of the vampire more generally. For in Twilight the primary fantasy is not just the possibility that you will find love and overcome the boredom of living in Forks, Washington by being chosen, courted, and lusted over by both a vampire and a werewolf. The crucial thing is also the expectation that you will somehow be radically transformed. We see this in the way that both the thrill and threat of Edward “making” Bella “immortal” and in the debate over whether she should “stay human forever” (519) moves the series forward. Twilight is primarily driven by both the question of whether or not Bella will be “changed” and by debate over whether or not she should be changed. This is seen in both Edward’s and Jacob’s desire to keep her human and Bella’s own pursuit of a “new being.” Indeed, in the latest of the films in the series, “Eclipse,” Bella suggests, in a moment of almost perfect identitarian naiveté, that becoming a vampire will enable her to become the person she “should” be rather than just the person she is. She tells Edward that she has always felt out of step and out of place as a human and has known that she should be something else: becoming a vampire, she reasons, is that other being she was made to be. Thus, as the scene demonstrates, for Meyers’ stories the motivation to become a vampire is not just the motivation to remain with Edward forever, but for Bella to convert into the kind of person she should be, the kind of person—the scene suggests—she has always sensed she could be.
In fact, we see this radical transformation figured most powerfully in Meyers’ series by the very logic of the vampire’s bite. Like the “new beginning” imagined by both Palahniuk and Zizek and the “New Being” of Saint Paul, Edward’s bite is the literalization of the paradox we have seen throughout this essay, the paradox of dying in order to gain a new and better life. Part of the attraction of Edward’s bite is that it might cost Bella her “soul” (518). Yet, like the apocalyptic event or spiritual conversion, his bite—if properly controlled—also possesses the ability to transform Bella completely, making her a vampire, the being she was always “meant” to be.

And so while much has been made of her Mormon beliefs in the criticisms of Meyers’ series, it is critical to see that, just as for Lamott, there is an important sense in which these beliefs have almost nothing to do with this conversionist logic. What the reader of Twilight finds attractive in other words, is not the hidden Mormon doctrines, but the thematizing of our culture’s primary fantasy: the radical transformation of ourselves, and of our whole social order, that has nothing to do with what we believe.

In this commitment, Twilight, like Zizek’s apocalypticism, Fight Club’s violence, and Lamott’s spiritual autobiography, turns out to be much more concerned with the fact of, and affects about, your conversion than with any substantive commitments that might have occasioned it (Mormon or otherwise). Above all, in Twilight, as in the other examples I have here dealt with, the
conversion narrative has finally come in our culture’s trajectory to something like its logical culmination. And so *Twilight* brings to perfection a conception of conversion which is not quite in line with the conversion narrative from Paul to Augustine and then to Bunyan: for in the vampire’s bite we have a conversion mechanism that finally has nothing to do with what you believe and everything to do with what you will become.
Notes

1. It’s worth nothing that here Winner articulates a completely common view of Judaism summed up in the idea of Jews as people who keep the Law, recalling that keeping the Law has nothing to do with how one feels about the Law, nor even what one believes about it. Following the Law is simply a question of right practice and involves neither feeling, nor believing.

2. The loss of creedoal commitment and the subsequent movement toward the personal expression of private spiritualities within Christianity are documented in Christian Smith’s Souls In Transition and in Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teens, in Leslie Newbigin’s The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, and can be seen in nearly all of Robert Wuthnow’s work on the subject including After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since 1945.

3. So then Fight Club’s logic of creative destruction parallels Christianity’s perfectly as in both being destroyed constitutes being made whole. The Christian saying that “He who would find his life must lose it” is transmuted in Fight Club into “self improvement isn’t the answer maybe self-destruction is” (49) and the narrator’s belief that “if I don’t fall all the way [what he calls “hitting the bottom”], I can’t be saved” and in his saying that “only after disaster can we be resurrected”(70). In the same way the narrator explains that at “the time my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves” (52). And as one further example of the logic, in the novel the lye burn which “hurt worse than you’ve ever been burned” is also something to which you must “pay attention because this is the greatest moment of…[your] life” (73-4). It is only when intensity is the measure of magnitude and value that the “worse” burn can be imagined as “greatest” moment of your life.

4. Zizek’s failure to articulate either an account of what the revolutionary is to do to bring about the new order he awaits is precisely what Nicolas Brown is critiquing in his “[0, $} E {$} Or Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek, Waiting for Something to Happen.” Indeed, Zizek seems to be more accurately apocalyptic in his inability to come up with any account of what would really bring about the end than he even intends, since one of the crucial features of this genre is, as Mitchell Reddish contends in his Apocalyptic Literature, an emphasis upon the idea “human effort could do little change” history, since “human efforts to change God’s design are futile” (26). Thus followed the correlating necessity to wait for “God’s new creation, brought into reality through divine means” (27). What Brown suggests is that for Badiou and Zizek, no less than for the classical
Apocalypticists that Reddish is writing about, “human effort” is “futile” and something like “God’s will” seems to be necessary to bring the end of the world about. What certainly isn’t effective, Brown argues Badiou and Zizek imply, is anything that humans might do.
Chapter Five

The Varieties of Apocalypse: revelatory experience and the end of belief

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

--Robert Frost
In the final section of the last chapter, we saw how “Eclipse” ends with Bella deciding that she needs to convert from what she is to what she “should be”. And if a vampire is what she “should” be in the end of the movie, it is intriguing to note where the film begins: in an identical setting to the scene we’ve just analyzed at the film’s conclusion. In this parallel scene we again find Bella and Edward lying in a meadow, but this time, we don’t hear Bella talking about her conversion. Instead she recites the opening line’s to Robert Frost’s apocalyptic poem “Fire and Ice”: “Some say the world will end in fire,/Some say in ice./ From what I've tasted of desire/I hold with those who favor fire.” Just what this scene and its apocalyptic invocation might mean in “Eclipse” is not important for my purposes here. What is important is that beginning “Eclipse” with “Fire and Ice” suggests how attracted we are to apocalyptic scenarios and vocabularies. Indeed even a quick survey of our immediate past shows that the apocalyptic has been one of the more fecund areas of cultural production in the last fifteen years. In what follows I suggest that there’s a good reason for this.

Among recent apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictions there are few novels that have been better received than Cormac McCarthy’s The Road. It was not only nearly universally adored, but its reviewers continually noted that there was something “profound” (Charles) going on in the book and many thought that profundity was something of “an avowed religious intent”
(Chabon). Reading the reviews it’s hard to miss the religious undertones ascribed to McCarthy’s novel: it’s “a messianic parable” (Kennedy) delivered with an “almost biblical fury” that seems to be “an embrace of faith in the face of no hope whatsoever” (Maslin) ending with “a tender answer to [a] desperate prayer” (Charles). No doubt McCarthy’s critics were right to see that The Road had some sort of religious quality to it, the question is what?

We can begin to see the answer in what Amy Hungerford says about McCarthy in her recent book Postmodern Belief. Hungerford acknowledges that he “made his reputation with the Biblical style of Blood Meridian” (133), but it’s The Road that shows “where the strain of literary and religious thought...will go in twenty-first century American writing” (134). And where The Road goes according to Hungerford is in the direction of producing a “feeling of biblical force” (134). The key word in Hungerford’s phrase isn’t “biblical” or “force,” but rather “feeling,” what I have been most concerned with throughout this study. This feeling is McCarthy’s version of Tillich’s revelatory experience with the Botticelli, Lamott’s sensation of Jesus nearby, Rabbi M’s God “hovering” between his shoulder blades, and the narrator of Fight Club’s experience of being “saved” by “destroy[ing] something beautiful” (122). It is as we have seen in each of these instances an experience unlike any other, conceived of as not only unique, but uniquely religious. At least in part this
religious effect is produced in The Road by what reviewers unanimously note as the plain style of the novel.

Ashley Kunsa suggests that this plain style is consistent with the novel’s world, a world “reduced to the basics,” where we should expect to find that the language is stripped to its “rudiments” (58). What Kunsa implies, and I think that she’s right, is that the prose style is a function of the post-apocalyptic genre of the novel. This suggests in turn that its effects are in some sense the function of the genre: a plain prose style necessary for a world as barren and stripped as the one McCarthy describes as “Barren, silent, godless”. But more than that, when this “Barren, silent, godless” world is described in a similar prose style the reader is moved.

We can see the force of this experience just by looking at what Kunsa describes as the debate over “the issue of meaning versus meaninglessness” (58) in the novel. She explains that some critics, like Vereen Bell, see McCarthy as a “nihilist” with “no first principles, no foundational truth” (58), while others, like Edwin Arnold, challenge this McCarthy-as-nihilist thesis and argue that there is “always the possibility of grace and redemption” in McCarthy’s “darkest” tales (58). This debate reveals how the style works for while it looks like they are disagreeing, I would argue that Arnold and Bell can both be right. McCarthy could be committed simultaneously to meaninglessness and to “the possibility of grace and redemption.” Bell and Arnold have just misunderstood what McCarthy might mean
by “redemption” and have missed how even potentially meaningless language—like “Barren. Silent. Godless.”—might achieve such an end. In seeing salvation as a kind of intense experience we can bring their positions together. For if it’s the experience of works and texts that matters most to postmodern authors, and, furthermore, if experience is something one can have from language even at its most nihilistic and spare (at its most meaningless in other words), then there is no reason that McCarthy could not be producing nearly meaningless prose that itself produces a powerful experience for his readers. On the contrary, as has been forcefully argued in Jennifer Ashton’s From Modernism to Postmodernism, it’s precisely the fantasy of many postmodern authors that the meaninglessness of their texts give them their greatest affective intensity by making them blunt objects of experiences, things that causally manipulate their readers.

While The Road is inevitably connected with Christian eschatology by being set in a post-apocalyptic world, its truest religious significance lies in the root meaning of “apocalypse” in Greek: to reveal. McCarthy is seeking to produce a revelatory experience for his reader by emulating the Bible’s style, not its doctrine, and thereby replacing it, or, as Hungerford describes, by transforming “Biblical authority into literary authority reconceived as supernatural authorship or rhetorical power” (137). The effect of this “reconceiving” is to substitute the Bible with a secular scripture, revealing to the reader of that
scripture the religious power of language. This religious power, as I’d suggest we have seen throughout this study, is the fantasized religious power of postmodern art more generally and its consequence is the production of an experience rather than the conversion to any belief.

In her most recent book Religious Experience Reconsidered, the religious historian and theologian Ann Taves explains the theological origins of this emphasis upon religious experience. As I have been suggesting from the beginning of this study, and as Taves also argues, the theology of experience, the theology that most values the “force” of “feeling,” is liberal Protestantism. Indeed she asserts that the key component of “twentieth century liberal Christian” theology is the placement of “experience” at “the center of Christianity” (4). But more than this she argues that the “sui generis” conception of religious experience, “seemed like a promising source of religious renewal” for many theologians “who followed in the footsteps” of that most Liberal of “the liberal Protestant” theologians Friedrich Schleiermacher (4). Liberal Protestants she continues believed that “a certain kind of experience,” distinct from all others, “constituted the essence” of Christianity (5).

Of course, one point of this study has been to suggest not that this art indeed has such a religious power, but rather that, in a somewhat ironic turn of history, it has been precisely religious people (Protestant Liberals) who encouraged this sacralization of first modern and then by extension postmodern
art. To be sure, it wasn’t their intention to replace religion with art, but in the distinction between the two that slowly began to disappear, it was, as Hungerford is at pains to show, precisely what they achieved. So in the end McCarthy’s account of the religious power of language—its capacity to produce intense experiences for its readers—turns out to be an implicitly Protestant liberal account of the power of literary art, one defended long before McCarthy by critics like Nathan Scott who saw in literature a nascent religiosity even (and especially) when that literature represented an almost complete despair about religious meaning. Thus for McCarthy’s nearly mystical minimalism, as for Tillich and Smith, Fish and Jones, Palahniuk and Lamott, what is worth borrowing from Christianity is not any doctrine, but the structure understood to produce experiences and strong emotions.

There may not be anything all that strange about an author like McCarthy, one with no expressed religious intentions or goals, trying to write a novel that produces a kind of Protestant liberal theology by instrumentalizing the power of religious experience and affection for aesthetic purposes. It might even be unproblematic to try to produce something in art that is akin to the power of religious conversion or theophanic experience in religion, since, these are both experiences of often documented intensity. In this attempt, McCarthy seems to be simply recognizing, like Zizek, that the Christian religious
legacy, including a genre like the apocalypse, could be something worth emptying so you can borrow it.

But if McCarthy’s actions aren’t strange, what certainly is strange is that Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, authors of the *Left Behind* novels, seem to be just as concerned with experience and emotion as McCarthy is. While they are not seemingly all that concerned about their prose style, I will argue they are very concerned with producing another experience for their readers: the experience of abject terror.

It might be objected that the *Left Behind* books are an odd example for a study like this, concerned as they clearly seem to be with dispensationalist, Christian doctrine. To be sure, reading them one is struck by their indoctrinating quality. And what is more, in their own accounts of why they wrote these novels, the authors mention nothing about producing any experiences for their readers. On the contrary, they seem to be concerned principally with doing just the opposite of McCarthy: where he wanted to instrumentalize religion for artistic purposes, they want to instrumentalize art for religious purposes. And finally LaHaye and Jenkins insist that writing the novels gave them ample evangelistic opportunity, “the opportunity” as Jenkins describes it “to tell [people] what the gospel is (salvation by grace through faith) and what it isn't (based on our own efforts)” (FamilyChristianBooks.com).

But even more than this opportunity to “tell people” about “salvation,” the novels seem to have given LaHaye and Jenkins
“the opportunity” to use fiction to show people that “violence is okay if it's not too graphic” so long as it produces an experience of fear that keeps people from being “left behind” (LeftBehind.com). They are trying, in other words, to produce a religious experience through the power of art. But when it’s put like this the question that is begged is just what kind of religion they are committed to if they think that the best way to embrace it is through strong feelings and experiences.

As Hungerford describes it, LaHaye and Jenkins “stake their success” as writers on “whether or not the books actually produce conversions” (123). Their Christianity—what New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing calls “Rapture and Armageddon politics” (553)—when aestheticized in a novel becomes something of a violent spectacle. Rossing describes the core of this aestheticized politics as a “countdown of events of ever-escalating violence, all prophesied in advance...leading to the mother of all battles” so that Jesus can “return to earth...as an avenging warrior on a white horse to do battle with his enemies” (554). Where the literary art becomes important then is in conveying the sheer scope and intensity of the violence that Jesus and those who are with him will bring upon the unregenerate.

Just a few representative passage will suffice to demonstrate how Jenkins and LaHaye use violence. For example, to take only one of the novels, in the Glorious Appearing, they describe the last battle when Jesus returns to the earth to
destroy the antichrist and establish his millennial reign. In a battle scene this is what they depict: “Men and women, soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood. It was as if the very words of the Lord had superheated their blood, causing it to burst their veins and skin” (225). If that wasn’t violent enough, they describe how Jesus “merely” raised “one hand a few inches” and then a multitude “tumbled” into hell “howling and screaming” (280). And the death of another group of the unregenerate is described by “even as they struggled, their own flesh dissolved, they melted and their tongues disintegrated” (380). Reading the books it’s hard to remember much about their doctrine, what with all the superheating and bursting of blood and skin, howling on the way to hell, and dissolving flesh: it’s hard to get past the horror of the violence, much less think about anything but avoiding this terrible and hellish destruction.

And of course, McCarthy’s “imaginings are hellish” (Maslin) too, but he doesn’t seem to be trying to do any converting by them. But the reader reading Glorious Appearing is supposed to convert by experiencing the terror produced by witnessing the violence that might soon be done to him or her. Quotes like the ones we just saw above act as a forceful inducement for the unregenerate to repent and come to Christianity. In this, Jenkins and LaHaye might look like they stand in a tradition that includes figures as diverse as Dante, Hieronymus Bosch, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the tradition of using art as a cautionary
tale to encourage moral behavior, repentance or even conversion from apostasy.

Although it’s not subtle, the transformation of the cautionary tale genre in *Left Behind*, is important. For in something like Dante’s *Inferno*, Bosch’s “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” or Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” the purpose of the art was to encourage right behavior (orthopraxy) and belief (orthodoxy) though the vehicle of right feeling (orthopathos), but in *Left Behind*, amid the violence, intrigue, dissolving flesh, disintegrating tongues, and exploding men, women and horses, its difficult to notice anything but the pathos. It’s hard, in other words, to notice the beliefs that are being communicated at all because of the effects produced by what Rossing calls the “almost pornographic description” (554) of violence. To be sure there is a set of right beliefs and behaviors being prescribed, but these also seem secondary, simply guarantors of your being on the right team in the coming battle, so that you are in the position of watching (or reading) about the destruction, rather than being one of those “superheated,” “dissolve[ed]” or “howling and screeching” (380). Experiencing simultaneously the pleasure and terror of the destruction of the unregenerate then produces an emotional intensity that Jenkins and LaHaye bet will encourage repentance, and repentance will produce salvation. Thus pornographic violence, the tropes of pulp fiction, action-adventure novels, and camp cinema, become the vehicles by which the apocalypse is both represented, and
more fundamentally for Jenkins, LaHaye and the rest of their dispensationalist supporters, ushered in. Since, after all, dispensationalists believe that conversions create the conditions for Christ’s return, it might seem reasonable to borrow from art to produce experiences that convert.

And yet, even though in *Left Behind* the experience of violence overwhelms any doctrinal and catechetical function the texts might have, it’s still important to note a distinction between it and some of the other religious postmodernisms in this study. An important part of my argument here has been about the replacement of doctrine with feeling, but unlike what we’ve seen of Tony Jones’ work in chapter three or Anne Lamott’s memoir in chapter four, in *Left Behind* doctrine still matters. Unlike Lamott who replaces doctrine with feelings, Jenkins and LaHaye still communicate doctrine even when that intent flounders because of their means. And Jones wanted to be committed to doctrine too, but he was logically unable to do so once he adopted Fish’s epistemology, the epistemology of disagreeing but equal beliefs—as Fish put it disagreeing beliefs are “not inferior but merely different” (368). But even if Jones had to give up the truth of his beliefs, there is nothing that epistemologically prevents Jenkins and LaHaye from having true beliefs, nothing that logically prevents *Left Behind* from doctrinal commitment.

Indeed, it’s clear from even a quick glance through the *Left Behind* books that Jenkins and LaHaye have a lot of beliefs
they wish to communicate through the novels. This is clearly on

display in the *Glorious Appearing* where, in an opening chapter

before the battle scenes we looked at above, Jenkins and LaHaye

have included the entirety of a famous sermon which is nothing

but doctrinal truth claims about Jesus. Unlike in Jones, my

criticism does not imply that there is a logical reason why

document can’t matter in their books. On the contrary, my point

is merely that in the midst of all the novels’ violence, the

experience produced seems to *displace* doctrine without wholly

replacing it with experience. In this sense then Jenkins and

LaHaye want *both* experience and doctrine, and whether or not we

think the importance of doctrine survives the foregrounding of

experience in *Left Behind*, it survives here in ways it has not

and can not in either Lamott and Jones.

Doctrinally LaHaye and Jenkins are conservative Christians,
dispensationalists who believe in a literal interpretation of the

*Book of Revelations*, but in this commitment to the power of

experience to effect conversion they look like something else

entirely: they look like Protestant liberals. To be more

precise, they appear to be just like so many others in this

study, using a Protestant liberal emphasis upon “certain kind of

experience” in order to advance their mission. To be sure in

their case that mission is fiercely (even dogmatically)
doctrinal, but, in the end, the experiential force of the

violence in their books ends up overwhelming any doctrinal

possibilities that they might have had. Because of the intensity
of the experience produced by the violence of their battles, they, like Edward’s bite, Tyler Durden’s fist, and Tony Smith’s night drive, fail to produce any doctrinal conversion. They certainly might terrorize some, and in this they might produce Anne Lamott’s “strong feelings” (fear) about Jesus, but Left Behind, like Traveling Mercies before it, fails to not only occasion, but also to encourage a change in belief.

What we see here in this conclusion is the way that The Road and Left Behind, two seemingly dissimilar works, turn out to be more similar than at first imagined, for in both experience displaces doctrine. More generally, we see in these texts a microcosm of what I have been arguing throughout this study: that Christianity has been moving increasingly toward experience and away from doctrine, even as the putatively secular cultural has been moving towards an increasingly religious conception of experience. Where it was once Protestant liberals who imagined religious experience could “renew” Christianity, it is now postmodern artists, theorists, and writers who imagine that art (conceived as sui generis religious experience) can renew culture. The place this Christianity and this secular culture meet is the theology of experience, the theology of liberal Protestantism. This meeting is what I have been calling Protestant Postmodernism.
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Caleb D. Spencer  
Curriculum Vitae

Education:

University of Illinois, Chicago, Chicago, Illinois  
PhD in English and American Studies, May 2011  
Director: Walter Benn Michaels  
Exam Fields:  
British Fiction 1850-1950  
American Fiction 1850-1950  
British and American Modernist Poetry  
Literary and Social Theory and Theology

University of Illinois, Chicago, Chicago, Illinois  
Master of Arts in English (literature), May 2002  
Thesis: “The Right Road Lost: Redemption and Blessing in Wordsworth’s Prelude.”  
Director: Donald Marshall

Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois  
Bachelor of Arts in English, August 1999

Awards:

Harvey Fellowship 2008-2011

University of Illinois Dean’s Scholar Fellowship, 2008-2009

University of Illinois Board of Trustees Fellowship, 2008-2011

Conference on Christianity and Literature MLA Conference Graduate Student Award, December 2008

Publications:

“What Counts as Christian Criticism” Christianity and Literature, Winter 2009

Where There’s Smoke, There’s Smoke, art catalog essay for David Hooker’s Wheaton College Faith and Learning Project, published Spring 2009


Conference Papers and Presentations:

“Auden’s ‘Urban’ Images: Perambulating, the Polis, and Dialogue,” Conference on Christianity and Literature, Midwest Regional Conference: Wheaton College, September 2009

“Stanley Fish’s God: Theology and the Interpretive Community,” *Opus* Speakers Series, Hope College, October 2008

“Aesthetic Reprisal: Late Modernism and the Return of the Aesthetic,” MLA Conference: Conference on Christianity and Literature, December 2007

“Integrate/Separate: A Colloquium on Religion and Art,” invited participant for a colloquium on the relationships between religion, fiction, poetry, visual art and scholarship at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, October 2007

Invited colloquium fellow, Nagoya Japanese American Studies Conference, July 2007, Nanzun University, Nagoya, Japan


“Topicality, Timelessness and Representation: Social Inequality and the Negro” April 2005, Lies and Literature Conference, University of Wisconsin, Madison

“Bourdieu’s Aesthetic: Class Distinction and the Impossibility of Beauty” Illinois Institute for the Humanities Graduate Student Conference, Chicago, IL Spring 2004

“The Right Road Lost: Redemption and Blessing in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*.” September 2001, South West Conference on Christianity
and Literature at Baylor University (paper accepted but not delivered because 9/11 events prevented travel).

Teaching Experience:

**Wheaton College (Illinois)**
Spring 2011 Department of English, Wheaton College, IL

**Visiting Assistant Professor**
Faculty member teaching expository writing, cultural theory, social class analysis, and theories of postmodernism

English 103 Writing Effective Prose: What has Williamsburg to do with Jerusalem? Coolhunting in Postchristianity

Fall 2005–Spring 2006 Department of English, Wheaton College, IL

**Visiting Instructor**
Faculty member teaching American Literature, critical theory, expository writing, and theology of culture

Spring 2006: English 103 Writing Effective Prose: Cultural Hermeneutics, Cultural Theology
English 104 Writing Effective Prose: Cultural Hermeneutics, Cultural Theology

Fall 2005: English 341: American Literature: Colonial to Romantic (1620–1850)
English 103 Writing Effective Prose: Cultural Hermeneutics, Cultural Theology

**School of the Art Institute of Chicago**
Fall 2004–present Department of Liberal Arts, School of the Art Institute of Chicago,

**Adjunct Faculty**
Faculty member teaching American, British, and Classical Literature, literary and critical theory, writing, and aesthetics in the SAIC first year program.

Fall 2010: First Year Seminar I Normality and Subversion: New Historicism and Interrogations of the Cool
First Year Seminar I: Tuning Taste: Social Class and Aesthetics

Spring 2010: Literature in Historical Contexts: Modern European Literature: Flaubert to the 1950s
First Year Seminar II: Apocalyptic Literature and Film

Fall 2009: First Year Seminar I Beauties and Beasts: Ideality, Hybridity and Monstrosity
Literature in Historical Contexts: History of Literary Theory: Ancient to Postmodern
First Year Seminar I: Normality and Subversion: New Historicism and Interrogations of the Cool

Summer 2008: First Year Seminar I: The Proud, the Prejudiced, the Clueless, the Awakened and the Diaries they Keep: 19th century British and American Women’s Fiction and 20th century Adaptations.

Spring 2008: Literature in Historical Contexts: Literary Theory: Surveying Theories of Reading
First Year Seminar I Cultural Semiotics and Class

Fall 2007-- Literature in Historical Contexts: The Modern Novel: Transatlantic Modernism in Fiction
First Year Seminar I Both/And: Hybrid and Ideal Creatures.

Spring 2007--Literature in Historical Contexts: Reading the Modern: Aesthetics, Theology and Modern Art

Fall 2006--First Year Seminar II Social Class and Aesthetics
First Year Seminar I Both/And: Hybrid and Ideal Creatures.

Spring 2006--Liberal Arts 1001 Tuning Taste: Social Class and Aesthetics

Fall 2005-- Liberal Arts 1001 Social Class and Aesthetics
First Year Seminar I Both/And: Hybrid and Ideal Creatures.

Fall 2004 -- Liberal Arts 1001 Hybrid Creatures and Ideality

University of Illinois at Chicago
Fall 2001-Spring 2007 Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago

Teaching Assistant

Instructor in the undergraduate English faculty: classes include introduction to classical literature, American literature and composition courses on the themes of poverty and social class in America, heroism, photography and identity, and ideology and identity).

Summer 2007--English 241: British Literature 1: beginnings to 1660 (TA)
Fall 2006—English 240: Introduction to Literary Study and Methods
   English 101: Introduction to Literature

Summer 2006—English 240: Introduction to Literary Study and Methods

Fall 2005—English 115: The Bible as Literature (co-taught)

Spring 2005 — English 105: Introduction to British and American Fiction

Fall 2004 — English 105: Introduction to British and American Fiction

Summer 2004 — English 101: Introduction to Literature

Spring 2004 — English 101: Introduction to Literature

Fall 2003 — English 101: Introduction to Literature
   English 105: Introduction to British and American Fiction

Summer 2003 — English 105: Introduction to British and American Fiction

Spring 2003 — English 161 (composition II): Poverty and Social Class


Related Experience:
Spring 2003-Summer 2004 — Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago
   Research Assistant

Research Assistant to Walter Benn Michaels responsible for copy editing of and research for forthcoming Cambridge University Press volume on the History of American Fiction. Responsible for updating manuscript and researching current advances in the field of 19th and 20th century American Poetry and Fiction.
Service:
Composition course review committee (2002-2005)
2nd Year PhD Colloquium committee (2003)
Chicago-land American Studies Society Graduate Assistant
(2004)

Professional Organization Memberships:
Modern Languages Association
American Academy of Religion
Conference on Christianity and Literature
C.L.A.S.S. Chicago-land American Studies Society