

# Introduction: The End of Reading

“Do not interpretations belong to God?”

—Gen. 40:8

The Joseph of the book of Genesis is both a dreamer and dream-reader, and even the briefest page-through of his tale suggests that the latter is more useful—certainly more lucrative—than the former. In his early life, Joseph dreams two big dreams, the grasping subconscious desire of which is obvious—and offensive—to all those around him: one night, he dreams that his brothers’ sheaves of wheat bow down to his sheaf, and another night, he dreams that the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. After the technicolor dreamcoat and its negative aftermath, however, Joseph stops dreaming and starts reading, and his dream reading—dream criticism, if you will—has much higher stakes and a much higher payout than his creative dreaming. It is dream *reading* that paves the way for his release from prison, grants him employment in government, and secures his posterity.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, if any biblical figure opens himself to the charge that his readings might be socially or economically instrumental, it is Joseph.

Joseph parallels the contemporary critic or literary theorist in the sense that he stands to gain a fair amount—in terms of

livelihood—from his reading work, though today’s critics (particularly those at adjunct pay) may feel somewhat less well, or less dramatically, remunerated for their work. Falsely accused, Joseph is in jail when the royal cupbearer and baker dream their dreams. And when he gives the interpretation of impending release to the cupbearer, Joseph is sure to mention the use he hopes to make of his work: “But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon” (Gen. 40:14–15). He makes no such request of the baker, whose dream portends a fast-approaching date with a hangman—no use currying favor there—though that interpretation bears on Joseph’s eventual release as well, since the cupbearer overhears it and mentions it to Pharaoh.

At the outset of what is undeniably instrumental reading, however, Joseph asserts another source, means, and end for his readings than the ones that seem most materially at work: God. He convinces the two men to share their dreams by appealing to a divine foundation for reading: “Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell [your dreams] to me” (Gen. 40:8). And later, when Joseph’s eerily accurate dream-reading skills have landed him an audience with the king, even though Pharaoh is ready to give Joseph the interpretive credit, Joseph asserts, “It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” and “God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do” (Gen. 41:16, 25). This is not, of course, to say that Joseph doesn’t make the most of the opportunity, laying out a response plan and suggesting a job description for himself, because he does and then some: “Now therefore let Pharaoh select a man who is discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land, and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt

during the seven plenteous years” (Gen. 41:33-34). Yet by this time, the conversation has fundamentally changed. When Pharaoh gives reasons for Joseph’s appointment to the top post, he cites not Joseph’s own gifts, as he had when he first consulted Joseph about the dreams, but God’s presence in Joseph as the determining factor: “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you” (Gen. 41:39).

In this story, readers see that God’s purpose for the cosmos is the context in which human interpretations, naturally instrumental, occur. The precocious dreamer’s disturbingly accurate interpretations become the means by which God preserves and protects his chosen people Israel from devastating famine. God’s purposes and promises are preeminent; human readings and their uses are clearly subsidiary and, at times, beside the point (sometimes even downright dangerous or evil).

Present-day readers of Joseph’s story, often enmeshed in our own reading patterns, may miss the larger context of the whole of Genesis, the Old Testament, or the Bible. We can tend to miss the forest of God’s covenant promises of land and descendants for the trees of potentially useful ethical takeaways in Joseph’s narrative: courage no matter what, persistence in integrity, perseverance in suffering, forgiveness of those who wrong you, and so on. Any church worker in children’s ministry will have experienced innumerable instances of text as tool for virtue-ethics indoctrination.<sup>2</sup> Readings of individual Bible stories can be useful and may have some sort of moral value for children, though as a seasoned Sunday school worker, I sometimes doubt it. Such readings may also be incorrect and harmful (as is the reading of Joseph’s dreams by his family). But when interpretation belongs to God and the fact of the larger story is taken seriously, even small acts of reading such as the interpretation of a dream in a prison cell may be part of the transformation of one family’s drama

into a story of God's saving of the cosmos, of his bringing the human family—so broken by the fall—into renewed fellowship with God.

This book is about putting reading—the human activity of textual interpretation—into the larger story of the cosmos, that is, into an eschatological, kingdom-of-God context. In Joseph's story, God's intentions redeem and reshape even the foulest of human behaviors: even the selling of a brother into slavery is transformed by the fact that God meant it for good. The larger context of eschatology likewise transforms our understanding of the practice of reading—our understandings of why we read, of how texts achieve meaningfulness, of how we interpret, and of how we may judge the value, merit, or morality of works.

Ultimately, this book investigates, from a theological perspective, why we read. For those privileged enough to have time, literacy, and access, reading may represent a great investment in an alarmingly finite life. Readers could be doing anything else: ladling sustenance at a soup kitchen, performing life-saving appendectomies, getting enough sleep for once, even praying. Why read?

### **Reading as Means or End?**

When people have thought about what we do as we read or why we do it, their ideas have tended to fit into one of two categories, which, as we will see, collapse into each other almost before we can make the distinction between them. Either we read with some purpose, in which literature is a means (to knowledge, escape, a particular sensation, entertainment, or even attainment of a kind of cultural authority), or we read for reading's sake, in which literature is an end unto itself. The history of literary study and, to a certain extent, that of broader popular reading of texts, reflects considerable

confusion about reading as means or end, especially as readers make value judgments linked to each.

An instrumental use or purpose for reading might be, for instance, my reading of the entire Harry Potter series in the summer of 2007. It is difficult to admit this when Harold Bloom calls people who “devour J. K. Rowling” lemmings who “race down the cliffs to intellectual suicide in the gray ocean of the Internet.”<sup>3</sup> But I couldn’t help it—stress and anxiety left me in major need of an escape: I was working the tenure track, buying our first house, moving, helping my husband put in an entire house worth of floors within a month of purchase so that the bank would give us a mortgage, and chasing an eighteen-month-old around the construction zone. Noting that the seventh Harry Potter book was scheduled to come out on my thirtieth birthday, I consumed—yes, Harold—the entire series during the nights over just a few weeks so that I would be ready to stand in line at midnight on July 21, when the final book was released. Unlike those youths who had grown up with Harry Potter and savored each book, my reading at that time was voracious and unabashedly escapist. I was using the Harry Potter series of books to get a mental break from grown-up work and stress.

Reading for its own sake might involve activities associated with the aesthetic contemplation of the work itself. Rather than finding the work’s meanings in its particular uses, whether escape, emotional healing, or forwarding of politics, reading noninstrumentally seeks the meaning of the text or narrative in the tracery of its own making and structure. A noninstrumental reading resists assigning value to a text based on its plain content, rhetorical power, or sociopolitical effects alone. Instead, it pursues an often slower and savored interaction with the text’s form and meanings. Nowadays, noninstrumental interaction with texts is often thought to be associated with academic or high literary culture, though Andrew

Delbanco, in *Required Reading*, has termed the interaction with form and meaning a “fundamental *literary* pleasure from which almost all varieties of criticism have become estranged.”<sup>4</sup>

Pleasure, of course, has been attributed to both instrumental and noninstrumental reading—though presumably the pleasures have been diversely valued and saddled with various moral or intellectual judgments. One may read *merely* for pleasure, the book scooted under the bed or slipped into a drawer; or, one may tout the pleasure as reaching the coffee-table heights of humanness, which will, in giving us what Harold Bloom calls “difficult pleasure,” provide us with “the only secular transcendence we can ever attain.”<sup>5</sup>

These two understandings of reading, as means and as end, tend to be tied to definitions of what literature in fact *is*, structure and function. Structural definitions tied to reading reach back to antiquity and persist in various lineages and permutations through the nineteenth century, the main currents being literature as *fictional* language (imitations neither true nor false) and literature as an *autotelic, stylized system* of language that is inwardly focused, intransitive, and nonfunctional, often aimed at beauty.<sup>6</sup> Under these definitions, literature is the thing that can be read through self-referential, systematic, and connotative analysis in a nonfunctional, perhaps academic environment. The only purpose of literature under a noninstrumental understanding would be that of aesthetic pleasure in the rich trove of deep meanings made discernible through careful attention to the text. Instrumental reading relies on a functional understanding of literature as types of discourse with discernible effects. As Tzvetan Todorov points out in “The Notion of Literature,” though, one benefit of considering literature according to the functional definition “types of discourse” is that such types can be linked to discernible—and perhaps far more regular—structural patterns than an amorphous entity such as “literature.”<sup>7</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to deny—and we see it already in Todorov’s 1973 essay “The Notion of Literature”—that these notions of reading and their attendant definitions collapse into each other. What, after all, could be more instrumental than the passionate, carefully analytic reading that a graduate student does for her Ph.D. prelims? My grueling summer of twelve-hour-or-longer days of reading—despite inalienable, irrevocable delight studying Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning,” as I paced around the neighborhood quoting aloud—was pretty much entirely in service of securing the foundational knowledge in my field that would yield me entrance into the dissertation stage of my doctoral work. Rita Felski, in *Uses of Literature*, has called out academics on just this score, writing, “I am always bemused . . . to hear critics assert that literary works serve no evident purpose, even as their engagement with such works patently showcases their critical talents, gratifies their intellectual and aesthetic interests, and, in the crassest sense, furthers their careers.”<sup>8</sup> The sense of credentialization and increased confidence that I experienced through reading for prelims and in their lovely professional payout will attest to the furthering of my own career, anyway.

Perhaps we are in the last stages of the time when literary critics can ground their readings on an unmasking of the ideological underpinnings of reading for its own sake. We have harbored doubts with those suspicious about the hermeneutic of suspicion, and we have seen—and tutted—the myopia of close-reading. The means-oriented use of texts by lay readers has been noted and even championed through a scholarly focus on the cultural and historical activity of reading, fueled by unparalleled digital access to popular literacy materials and periodicals.<sup>9</sup> A heft of theoretical and cultural studies work has offered the discipline an opportunity to acknowledge uses that have been present through even the most high-falutin’ moments that centralized reading for its own sake.

Perhaps as a result of these studies, but more likely for a broader range of reasons, it seems less possible than ever to define literature as a “noninstrumental language whose value resides in itself alone,” except in some rarified subgroups.<sup>10</sup> This seems especially the case when our time’s enabling structure for noninstrumental reading, the liberal arts institution, is fast achieving a snooty rarity sometimes explicitly related to its noninstrumental (that is, nonvocational) status.

I suspect, however, that the pendulum will swing back—or perhaps we will simply acknowledge the agonism that characterizes the division between reading for use and reading for its own sake as a sort of shadow boxing. Into the idea of reading for its own sake always worms the notion that reading accomplishes something—just something that seems larger or more fundamental than whatever use is deemed provisional (the acing of a test, say, or the procuring of a particular sensation or employment). We have innumerable examples of the unreserved soaring into rhetorical flight at the noble, but still undeniably use-oriented, value of reading and literature, some emerging from scholars seeking to resist the consumer-driven, pragmatic, or means-oriented university in which they have found their life’s work and living. In the last decade or more, there has arisen what amounts to a textual industry of defense, where we find innumerable diagnoses of the book under threat or the humanities under threat or the reading mind under threat—or even the life of the (humanities-reading) mind under threat.<sup>11</sup> Seemingly far from crassly material uses, these suggest that reading can do everything from giving us friends to saving our souls.<sup>12</sup> Mark Edmundson has referred repeatedly to literature as our secular Bible. Even Harold Bloom, who claims blatantly, against all ideology, that literature will neither “save any individual” nor “improve any society,” hopes that canonical literature, represented most centrally by Shakespeare, will form the self from a place of loneliness and “teach us how to accept

change, in ourselves as in others, and perhaps even the final form of change.”<sup>13</sup>

Not only do nonutilitarian, aesthetic, and academic readings collapse into instrumental uses, but instrumental use soars into grandiose flights of idealism that mirror the reach of the noninstrumental. For those that passionately defend use can remain remarkably amorphous about what exactly those uses actually accomplish. Todorov, for instance, traced the development of literature as a concept in “The Notion of Literature,” primarily to disabuse the field of the concept of literature, which had been developed so recently and persisted so contradictorily that it seemed at least unhelpful, if not downright deceptive.<sup>14</sup> Todorov suggested that taxonomic value was rather to be had in “types of discourse” than “literature,” since the former have discernibly shared and usefully denoted characteristics, whereas the latter is hopelessly diffuse. This, for Todorov, was undeniably a step toward the use-oriented and perhaps, too, a jointure with a primarily rhetorical understanding of language—at least as employed in literary study. Yet, in 2007, when *New Literary History* reprinted his original “Notion of Literature” with the new essay, “What Is Literature For?,” he seems to put a point on the difficulty of the ends of his original recategorization of literature into “types of discourse.”<sup>15</sup> Contemporary literary education, as he has observed it in French schools, suffers from an overemphasis on the technical skills and tools for reading, rather than on the works and their meanings, which for him, he says, were always paramount: “[N]ever should the study of these *means* for entering the literary work be substituted for the study of meaning, which is the goal.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, of course, this trips back into the difficulty he pointed out and critiqued in the earlier essay—that the definitions we have for literature and the ends to which literature aspires don’t actually help us that much in reading them. Meaning, which is

the goal for Todorov, is a large, swooping, lovely thing but hard to delineate. He writes movingly but abstractly in favor of what literature can do:

[L]iterature helps me live . . . literature does not replace lived experiences but forms a continuum with them and helps me understand them. Denser than daily life but not radically different from it, literature expands our universe, prompts us to see other ways to conceive and organize it. We are all formed from what other people give us: first our parents and then the other people near us. Literature opens to the infinite this possibility of interaction and thus enriches us infinitely. It brings us irreplaceable sensations through which the real world becomes more furnished with meaning and more beautiful. Far from being a simple distraction, an entertainment reserved for educated people, literature lets each one of us fulfill our human potential.<sup>17</sup>

The difference pointed out here—between distraction/entertainment for an educated elite and the fulfillment of human potential more broadly—appears in terms of class and scope. While Todorov’s ends of literature are spirited, they deal in abstraction. Literature’s ends, to Todorov, are human self-understanding, self-fulfillment, self-enrichment, and sensation: not so clear. And what’s all this self-understanding, self-fulfillment, self-enrichment, and sensation for? The means-oriented approaches that Todorov sees in schools, which, I would argue, had been, by implication, supported when he sought a more useful delineation of text or language through “types of discourse,” seem to be insufficiently meaningful—insufficiently specific, perhaps, for addressing the ultimate purpose of a life or self, for addressing “human potential.”

The pervasion of the means in reading—whether in Todorov’s astute observations of French schools (which will as easily apply to the Common Core in U.S. education), everyday reading, or professional literary study, even of a Bloomian variety in which use is expressly anti-ideological and unapologetically individual (“to strengthen the

self, and to learn its authentic interests”<sup>18</sup>)—has led to a more widespread, if sometimes unacknowledged, abstractness in the ends to which it points. Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature* describes four modes of textual engagement—recognition, knowledge, enchantment, and shock—where each contains “multi-levelled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts” and that “are woven into modern histories of self-formation and transformation, even as the very variability of their uses militates against a calculus that would pare them down to a single political purpose.”<sup>19</sup> This rightfully complicates what might be oversimplified or even denigrated use. Yet she, too, turns the end of such uses into something insubstantial: “While ordinary intuitions are a valuable starting point for reflecting on why literature matters, it is far from self-evident what such intuitions signify. The mundane, on closer inspection, often turns out to be exceptionally mysterious.”<sup>20</sup> Even when the best literary critics highlight the issues surrounding the means and uses of literature, they seem to reach toward the higher mysteries. There seems to be no end to making books, and much study of them brings weariness to the flesh rather than bringing the hope for which the discipline seems to be looking.<sup>21</sup>

### **Help from Ellul; Help from Augustine**

Jacques Ellul’s diagnosis of contemporary society (or what passed for contemporary society in 1969 and 1987, anyhow) in *The Presence of the Kingdom* shares the vocabulary of means and ends; it offers a bracing exhortation to the kingdom citizen, whether reader or no. He writes that we have so altered the arrangement of means and ends in our world that bearing witness to the presence and future of the kingdom of God—glorifying and enjoying him forever, as the Westminster Catechism puts it—is impossible.<sup>22</sup> Ends are completely

abstract and thus absent, he argues, and “the world is wholly given up to means.”<sup>23</sup> Everything is required to be useful to the community and is slotted for production, technology, efficiency, and success. The means of this world, Ellul argues, have become its meaning, and they justify themselves. For Ellul, the triumph of means and the obscuring of ends constitute a totalitarian control over the individual, under which conditions, “it is impossible to live one’s faith.”<sup>24</sup> But Ellul does offer comfort. While “the end, as well as the means, has been taken away from us, and we hesitate as we look at this way which lies open before us, whose end we cannot see; we have only one certainty, and that is the promise which has been made to us of a certain order, which God guarantees: ‘Seek ye first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all things shall be added unto you’ (Matt. 6:33).”<sup>25</sup> Ellul reminds us that “the central point which we can already know, and which is already real, is the lordship of Jesus Christ,”<sup>26</sup> and “in the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit we receive the answer to this work of God, and we are bewildered because we are no longer very sure about the way forward, which no longer depends upon us.”<sup>27</sup> The promise of the kingdom of God, eschatology, is both the end and the means to the end.

I propose that texts are not exempt from this, that the promise, and its presence in the world, is that God works his will in texts and in their reading. But how may our reading—its confused rendering of means and ends—bear witness to the promise and presence?

Augustine’s distinction between use and enjoyment in *On Christian Teaching*, commonly referred to as the *uti/frui* distinction, seems to offer further insight into how we might unpack the swirl of intertwining means and ends—in texts and more. Augustine suggests that all *things* in this world—and texts (or signs or words) to him are things with meaning attached to them—may be either used (*uti*) or enjoyed (*frui*).<sup>28</sup> If we enjoy (*frui*) a thing, Augustine says, we

“hold fast to it in love for its own sake,” without any other purpose.<sup>29</sup> When we enjoy (*frui*) things, we place our hopes in them.<sup>30</sup> If we use (*uti*) a thing, on the other hand, we apply our love for it toward—or refer our love for it to—the one thing we really enjoy. That is, we position what we *uti* in relation to what we *frui*.

According to Augustine, we should enjoy for its own sake (*frui*) only what is eternal, namely God, the Trinity in relationship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “which is a kind of single, supreme thing, shared by all who enjoy it.”<sup>31</sup> This world and the things of it, says Augustine, should be *loved* but must not be enjoyed—at least not enjoyed as he describes enjoyment (*frui*). The things of this world (including ourselves and others we love) should be positioned in relation to God: “So if you ought to love yourself not on your own account but on account of the one who is the most proper object of your love, another person should not be angry if you love him too on account of God.”<sup>32</sup> Things in the world must always be related to the eternal things so that people may love them (*uti*) in God. If we enjoy and love God for his own sake, all other things can be related to God without the love decreasing at all: “So a person who loves his neighbour properly should, in concert with him, aim to love God with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind. In this way, loving him as he would himself, he relates his love of himself and his neighbour entirely to the love of God, which allows not the slightest trickle to flow away from it and thereby diminish it.”<sup>33</sup> People enjoy God together, and love each other in relation to God.

The key here is relatedness. To Augustine, *uti*, proper use, relates things to God. That is, to the love by which we ought to be loved by others, the love that puts all our loves in their place. Even God loves us with *uti*, insofar as he puts his love for us in relation always to his own goodness.<sup>34</sup> God relates us to his own goodness; that is

the measure of his *uti*. His *uti* clarifies what use ought to be for us, emphasizing that proper *uti* is Trinitarian relation-making, a putting of things in relation to the Trinity. All things, whether loved or not, ought to be placed in relation to the supremacy of the eternal Trinity. This is an ordering by which God is preeminent.

If a text is a thing, and we love it for its own sake alone—as an end in itself—doing so would be a misapplication of Augustine’s *frui*, a failure to relate our love to that of the Trinity. For Augustine, if we *frui* things that ought to be *uti*, we are constrained in our ability to love and enjoy the things we ought to, the Trinity, say. But it seems likely that, in the present context (discussed above) of confused means and ends, pure *frui* of literature isn’t reached—it’s more of a vague ideal. In the case of *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* by Mark Roche, the *ultimate* ideal that literature offers could only reach as high as a timeless morality that, though placed in a realm of the absolute, is yet not precisely the interrelation of God. And as Ellul points out, ideal and timeless morality—along with its systemization on earth—is precisely the wrong orientation for all of life: “It is in the light of this Kingdom that the Christian is called to judge present circumstances, and these circumstances cannot be judged according to their moral content or their individual political outlook . . . but simply according to their relation, which always exists, to the *Parousia*,” that is, to the coming of God.<sup>35</sup>

Most often, literature is used, as is perfectly natural. For Augustine, use is fine, so long as the use of it would be *uti*, as he puts it, to love “the thing which must be enjoyed [God] and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing.”<sup>36</sup> It would be a problem, in fact, an abuse, in Augustine’s—and Ellul’s—view, to use literature to do other than manifest the presence and future of the kingdom in some way.

This sentiment seems, at minimum, a bit extreme, and more likely offensively outrageous: texts should have no other use than to manifest the presence and future of the kingdom? I suspect the offense of the idea emerges because literature and language seem to us such human, provisional things and so open to all manner of uses and ends. But what if we took it seriously? What would it look like to put all things—texts, even—in relation to the kingdom of God? The next chapter will seek to put text upon a Trinitarian foundation centered in Jesus the incarnate word that proceeds from the Father and is brought into fulfillment in the Spirit. For the moment, however, Augustine’s *uti/frui* and Ellul’s diagnosis of confused means and ends offer several critiques of both functional and structural definitions of literature—of both reading for use and reading for reading’s sake—that give a sense of the problems of reading on those foundations.

### **Idolatry of the Ends: Eschatologically Insufficient**

I have been suggesting that arguments for noninstrumental reading often rest on the idea that a larger or more personally formative end can keep reading from being too immersed in the round of consumer-driven means to ends. Bringing Augustine and Ellul to bear upon these arguments suggests that reading literature for literature’s sake, the autotelic structure for literature that is implied by the methodology, is an insufficient eschatology.<sup>37</sup>

Arguments for reading for its own sake, however mistaken they might be about the possibility of avoiding use, value literature *contra mundum*, against the world of ideology, of technology, of fleeting fame, of educational pragmatism. In so doing, they are asserting that the literature itself either offers transcendent value of its own or assists

readers in being able to choose their own transcendent values. They are trying to beat back the self-proclaimed despair of the discipline by making literature and the experience of literature a value that will stand against moral and intellectual decline; reading, then, is a stay against confusion, a ballast. Reading is functional hope. As Andrew Delbanco describes reading American literature in particular, despite the inevitable political connection of literature, it is “[t]hrough this *literary* experience . . . we can partake of the democratic faith in the capacity of all human beings to perform the miracle of creation.”<sup>38</sup> And, if literary texts are indeed structurally autotelic too, then they both functionally and structurally presuppose their own, nondivinely originating eschatologies. In short, in reading for reading’s sake, literary form generates an eschatology unto itself.

This process, of course, may not be direct. Roche, for example, suggests that the hope that is offered for literature and literary criticism, that is, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, is that the forwarding or unpacking of literary form in noninstrumental reading may offer moral guidance. In the final assessment, he substitutes the moral for the religious—setting up the permanence of particular values above the purpose of God. He writes, “Morality is not one subsystem among the others, such that there is art, science, religion, business, politics, and so forth, *alongside* morality. Instead, morality is the guiding principle for all human endeavors.”<sup>39</sup> And, to the extent that literature or literary criticism fails to “fulfill [or attend to, in the case of critics] certain universal conditions of beauty or to address the specific needs of the technological age,” it will be morally unable to “garner a window onto an ideal sphere.”<sup>40</sup> In Roche’s view, the final purpose for literature is to be a moral force for beauty.

Contrastingly, Glenn Arbery’s *Why Literature Matters* obliquely hints toward a Christian eschatology in his suggestion that literature is “waiting for completion from elsewhere,”<sup>41</sup> a “pure receptivity”<sup>42</sup>

that is part of the literature's "promissory joy,"<sup>43</sup> rather than building its own road to the eternal elsewhere. His work falls back into the same sort of auto-eschatology as Roche's, however, with the assertion that, if a work does not achieve the status of literature through permanent honor-worthiness, it can do none of the aesthetically revelatory work that will come to it from the outside as revelation. The honor-worthiness comes from meeting particular formal standards: "A novel that does not succeed at being literature cannot fruitfully address the actual condition of the world. Why? Because it has not addressed, with sufficient awareness and care, its own actual condition as a made thing."<sup>44</sup> Arbery has required the sacredness of the work to come from within its structure and form. Without the standards of rule-following, in which genre and tradition are the foremost standards, "There is no reason to trust [the work] as wisdom, and its inflated contemporaneity will eventually hit a low pressure trough and drop into the waters where not even the *Rachel* will be looking for orphans."<sup>45</sup> So, though he gives some space for a work to become what it will be finally through an outside source and—as does Roche—has room in his ideas for the community of literature, he yet requires a work to *be literature* before it may have access to what Roche would call the ideal or what Arbery might call "divine form."<sup>46</sup> It must be all in all to itself before it may be an agent of revelation and made what it is by some transcendent force.

Often, those who advertise noninstrumental approaches to texts are driven, perhaps by crisis thinking, toward the very instrumentality they repudiate.<sup>47</sup> This instrumental thinking is elevated, however, and differentiated from vulgar use by moral illumination or even divine form—but this amounts to autotelic eschatological rhetoric. In fulfilling the form of the eschatological and the desire for it, however, they remain insufficient, for a few reasons.

First, instead of the expanding love of the Trinity visible in the community of the new creation, these authors' works seem to offer literary form. Only excellent literature (for Arbery, that which achieves honor through formal excellence; for Roche, that which possesses substantive content, sensuousness of style, organic coherence of substance and form, and supertemporality<sup>48</sup>) accomplishes the salutary effects that they promise, the ends to which literature itself is, in their view, noninstrumentally wedded. Putting aside the common relativist objection to arguments like this, namely that standards of literary or formal excellence are by no means universal or supertemporal, it seems that these eschatologies of literature, these divine uses to which literature is put, require that works of art generate their own worthiness. It is by no means self-evident, however, that particular standards of worthiness are required for texts to accomplish particular goods—even eternal ones. For the effects of literature are by no means easily controlled, as teachers are often chagrined to find. And if, indeed, as in Arbery's case, works are waiting for something outside themselves, something divine, to complete them, then it seems plausible that texts might not be completed from an already aesthetically perfect state to their most full being. There seems to be no space in Roche or Arbery under which literature—like people—may be redeemed, or, if you will, under which criticism may exist in a culture of grace. By understanding literature as centripetally arranged and autotelic according to a particular and universal standard, positions like Roche's and Arbery's might seem to handicap God from choosing and using whichever text God pleases to do kingdom work.<sup>49</sup>

Second, noninstrumental approaches, as they seem known to us through available arguments, tend to offer insufficient space for literary becoming. Roche does insist that literature is inexhaustible in meaning and to that extent not static; Arbery, too, finds some way for

literature to become in its ultimate receipt of divine transformation after waiting for heavenly consummation. But such positions prematurely fix literary texts in eternal states. Such canonization seems at odds with a robust theology of the kingdom of God, particularly the present site of the already/not-yet kingdom and its advancement in time.

Third, noninstrumental reading eschatologies also seem to rely overmuch on certainty as to the greatness of some literature. That is to say, they delineate worthiness in artistry and communication—prejudging works with all confidence and almost falling into presumption by usurping the judgment of God.<sup>50</sup> Both Arbery and Roche assert that some literature has achieved, and definitively so, the lofty ends—the illumination of the ideal or the lasting honor of fame. They assert that the good critic knows and preaches that literature. Yet, if, as in both these cases, the ideal to which the text aims is eternal or divine, it seems that God would be the judge of that.

In various versions of the argument for noninstrumental reading of texts, there is an aspirational quality, a winsome call for “further up and further in” that can easily be seen as an opening to transcendence, to something eschatological in shape. In that sense, it can be seen as a glint of very recognizable and human hunger after the shape of the kingdom. Yet, this seeking of transcendence in reading can turn, like the tower of Babel, to self-ordained, self-justifying grasping. George Steiner, author of *Real Presences* and *After Babel* and practical priest for what is classic and transcendent in literature (and human achievement more broadly), has suggested that the great ones, “a Socrates, a Mozart, a Gauss or a Galileo . . . in some degree, compensate for man.”<sup>51</sup> It is a turn of phrase no doubt somewhat hyperbolic—James Wood calls this tendency in Steiner a “melodrama of transcenden[t]” greatness.<sup>52</sup> Hyperbole itself is an eschatological

turn—a too-strong statement that needs its verification and correction from elsewhere; hyperbole casts its net as wide as the sea for the Christ to fill. However, Steiner's statement nonetheless demonstrates a sense (however doomed) of human self-justification through the treasures of canonized achievement. For Christians, though, the canon can never be solely human; and the human can never solely save itself—through the canon or any other thing. Noninstrumental theories of reading tend to try.

### **Idolatry of the Means: Insufficiently Eschatological**

Instrumental uses of reading have been considered, if not gauche, certainly a bit shabby, lumped into a sort of dirty rhetoricality outclassed by higher textual encounters.<sup>53</sup> The residuum of this line of thinking still grates uncomfortably along the sometimes-unacknowledged divide between the literature and composition-rhetoric halves of many English departments. Then again, instrumental use has never been as strongly championed as in a set of more recent historical and cultural literary studies clarifying and redeeming the role of various kinds of reading heretofore ignored as vulgar use. Reading for escape, absorption, enchantment, or self-recognition—only a few among many possible uses of literature—has been earnestly and variously defended, perhaps as earnestly defended in the present as denigrated in the past. And consequently, the ideal of critical distance, with its traditional disapproval of absorption and escape, immersion and self-recognition, with their supposed attendant loss of discernment, has had its assumptions called into question. Studies of popular reading and its history have found evidence that immersed, absorptive reading and even escape have offered strategic and intellectual benefits to the reader and have even

impacted—or, in some views, made possible—the public sphere from which they were supposed to have retreated.<sup>54</sup> Other uses are being recognized for their, well, usefulness, too: studies of self-recognition and identification to a certain extent made possible through immersive reading have begun to yield scientific evidence of particular social, intellectual, and moral benefits that seem broader than the individual.<sup>55</sup>

As should by now be abundantly clear, this book does not intend to critique instrumental uses from a morally superior position of non-use or commitment to particular canons of greatness—no latter-day Professor Teufelsdröckh here proclaims “Close thy [Dan] Brown and open thy [Robert] Browning!” Nor, however, does this argument intend to reclaim or celebrate the instrumental use as its own end, as is the sometime-fashion of the scholarly world—however compelling. Instead, this section argues that a look at instrumental reading opens up as clearly to the kingdom of God and eschatology as noninstrumental reading. Reading for any purpose—for escape, self-identification, or knowledge, as means (and all reading is a relating that may be called means-like)—opens up a vast space of desire that highlights the not-yet and, as I shall argue in the next chapter, is metonymically connected to the eschaton through the future of the word of God in Christ.

As I mention above, Felski’s uses for literature—recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock—end in mystery much higher than their presumed strategic purposes would indicate, and her very words betray the point. Her language offers symptomatic glints of the eschatological consequences of reading for use. Reading for recognition, she writes, “comes without guarantees; it takes place in the messy and mundane world of human action, not divine revelation,”<sup>56</sup> that it is “ultimately driven by division and self-loss . . . far from synonymous with reconciliation.”<sup>57</sup> When we read to

recognize ourselves in literature, Felski shows, we find out what we don't have yet, but we do so only partially and limitedly. Our unified self is not yet, and what we truly need—connection with others—is certainly not guaranteed through reading, even as we seek to make connections through it. This sense of partiality and unfulfillment that reaches toward fulfillment is what I am pointing to as eschatological. Regarding enchantment, Felski's language is even more suggestive of the religious: she writes of the magic of understandings of reading as enchantment skirting “dangerously close to the edges of secular thought.”<sup>58</sup> These snippets of language are perhaps metaphorical, or illustrative, but the religious speech genres and spheres on which they touch lend an eschatological quality to Felski's discussion: even when discussing mundane reading, we see reading as reaching into the transcendent, being willed there, perhaps, but pushing beyond somehow.

The theory and practice of reading for escape or absorption will show its eschatological reach. Scholarly positions on absorption appropriately understand it variously:<sup>59</sup> some figure escape or absorption as a dramatic drive through a text that explodes the details of language with the unconcern of a movie audience for the other cars smashed in pursuit of the bandits—so much collateral damage. Others suggest, contrarily, that absorption causes stronger attachments to language itself. The cold, distant clinician may be drawn, perhaps unwillingly, into tenderness for the subject, meeting full passion through slow exploration of a text's intricacies in almost a timeless dreamscape. As Charles Bernstein has understood absorption as a sort of artifice, absorption may be an effect of poetic language too, a way for a poem to extend beyond its devices.<sup>60</sup> It may even be visible, say, in the effect of poetic stuplidity (Sianne Ngai's term) produced by the seemingly endlessly iterable snippets of Gertrude Stein that produce a sublime stupefaction combining shock and

boredom, which is in itself a sort of absorption that lends an alternative to mundane consciousness.<sup>61</sup>

My own experiences of absorptive reading and escape began very early; I began to figure out my need to escape and be absorbed in a text just at the moment when literacy made it possible: at five years old when I was diagnosed with stage three muscle cancer. After hours of chemotherapy but before the aftermath—just in the body’s break between receiving the medicine and repulsing it with long periods of violent vomiting, my mother, sisters, and I would visit Flower Memorial Library, submerging our sorrows and the seats of our car in books. Two years of chemotherapy established something of a habit with us of a kind of excessive escape—we measured out my life in inches rather than pages of Andrew Lang’s *Coloured Fairy Book* spines—buttressed by grocery bags full *Trixie Belden* and *Nancy Drew* on loan from friends.

It seems perfectly honest to admit that reading for escape—no matter what sort of absorption is described—is probably only metaphoric. Reading books never made me less cancerous, a fact I consider often when I reflect on my career choice. All sorts of use demonstrate, above all, the needs that set the use into motion—needs that point always to the eschatological end, which is, of course, found at the beginning. Escapist, absorptive reading, however, sets as paramount the desire or need for escape, while self-identification in a text—the recognition and self-critique that one finds in some useful reading—highlights a need for connection and community. Purely mundane use of text is illusory, some flimsy utility hole cover; if we are nose-y, we may lift the cover of our own use and gaze into echoing spaces of longing. When we escape into a book, become absorbed into it, are magically transported, nothing becomes more visible, upon our return, than the edges that confine, the inescapable problems, the unabsorbable fact, the intransigent present. They

become only so much more visible as under the x-ray—the indomitable ribcage, the recalcitrant tumor. Reading is thus primarily an acknowledgment that escape is fundamentally impossible. To read for escape, or stress relief, or relief of some other kind is, at bottom, rife with longing.

In the winter of 2013, I heard the poet Jon Woodward give a reading from his book *Uncanny Valley*, a longer poem called “Huge Dragonflies” that stands out for its use of what might be considered extreme repetition—134 instantiations of or variations on the line “Hope dwells eternally there.”<sup>62</sup> Listening, I found myself in an absorptive, escaping space that concurrently registered in self-identification and attention to the texture of the litanied language. It was an in-between place: between the slide through a text that would be part of reading for plot and a very attentive absorption into textual effects. On the one hand, I surely wanted to know what was going to happen, and in the tension of the language, I was waiting as the repetition stacked up for the payoff. On the other, the repetition, as it extended, made me work to be sure that I wouldn’t miss even the tiniest of variations. Within the poem, the “Hope dwells eternally there” line accrues errors—as if the language itself mutates at a cellular level and stutters itself forward. In attending to a kind of eternity through and beyond the creation of tension within variation amounting to plot, I found myself wondering about how to find eternity in language through degeneration and mutations. While listening, I wrote in a journal, “I don’t seem to stop needing him to keep saying it.” In the line itself was the tension between time—or hope, which seems to require time—and eternity. In this absorptive experience of reading through hearing, and, later, in rereading the text in the volume I scooped up from the book table, I found myself hyper-aware at the same time I was absorbed in the poem. Even my absorption was never escape.

In listening to Jon Woodward's poetry, the experience of absorption paralleled, too, what I have experienced as more often recognizably instrumental escape. The dual inattention and attention effected by the poem oddly freed me for my own riffs on and applications of the words. I was more aware of my own life—which I normally would have sought to escape—while listening to the poem create its own space. This is partially because of the iterability of the language of the poem—the space that it holds for the habitation of the listener or reader, whose mind is freed to make whatever use seems meet. Yet, I also felt, at the same time, an obligation to surrender to the text itself, rather than using it as a tool for processing my feelings about having just submitted the book proposal for this work to a publisher. In the end, I had to let go of both my concerns and the concerns presented by the text because of the length and burden of the unexplained repetition. In a way, the burden of the experimental language in poems like Woodward's is so great that it in fact parallels the burdens we bring to Christ. We have to let them go such that, like the yoke of Christ, the word carries the burden itself, easy and light.

And yet, as so many impassioned defenses of absorption or immersion or enchantment have noted, there is a much more action-oriented hopefulness imbedded in the process of escape or absorption. Such an idea, that reading for escape is hopeful, may be defensible: Ricoeur, for instance, argues that fiction provides possible worlds as an imaginatively functional hope of the remaking of one's own world through the envisioning of alternatives to it. Mark Edmundson's more recent *Why Read?* offers to a broader audience the idea that encounters with texts can yield testable versions of life transformation to readers, and scholar teachers in the university can purvey them to students. Edmundson argues passionately that “[l]iterature is . . . our best goad toward new beginnings, our best

chance for what we might call secular rebirth,” and that “in literature there abide major hopes for human renovation.”<sup>63</sup> For Edmundson, literature gives us options that our families and upbringings never could, a wider array of possibilities for our lives—hope for our future—if we will use them thus. Of course, Edmundson points out what Ricoeur does not, that for him, literature is a “*secular Bible*”<sup>64</sup>—it may remake the world of the reader without recourse to a theocentric eschatology. It is, for Ricoeur, a useful metaphor, the functional provision of possibilities.

Most often, I have found that when I have sought escape in books, my mind zeroes in on connections between it and the outside world. This exacerbates the distance between the two, highlighting the need for rescue. In my experience, literature thus does not, as in Kierkegaard’s formulation, which Ricoeur takes up, grant me a passion for the possible but rather a passionate response to the impossible. The experience of magic and wonder at the world prompts various degrees of longing, as when the desire to really fly, after reading the missives of fairy land, cannot in real life be satisfactorily pretended, no matter what one’s mother constructs out of pantyhose, hangers, elastic, glitter paint, and the like. What seems truest about escape and self-recognition—at least in my experience—is their longing shape. Something seems present to our touch, yet also recedes from it, pointing to the insufficiency of our experience and the need for the rescue of the word. Escape, absorption, and enchantment are a sort of paradox: on the one hand a removal from something—whether it be body or mind or circumstances—and on the other hand, an enthrallment to a text that highlights our need for rescue rather than escape. As does the plaintive singing of “I’ll Fly Away,” the practices of absorption and enchantment in reading reinforce, at times, the jarring return, the need for redemption.

Both instrumental and noninstrumental ways of reading—which, after all, are but uses—crack open an eschatological gap. They highlight a desire for the future of the world in the future of the word. Ellul unflinchingly insists that “we have only one certainty, and that is the promise” found in Matt. 6:33 to seek first the kingdom of God.<sup>65</sup> And our necessarily ultimate relationship with God reveals both kinds of reading as potentially idolatrous. Reading for its own sake risks raising the book as a brick in Babel, the library as a luciferian reach toward its own ultimacy. Instrumental, everyday reading, for the most part, plows east of Eden, this side of Paradise, without seeing the larger story, yet each furrow bears witness to the need out of which it beseeches the cursed ground. In making human readers the primary users of literature and their uses into the ends of literature, we limit use to an accomplishment of the human person or psyche when it ought to be understood that it is ultimately divine use that matters. This book, somewhat perversely for the demands of the discipline, places debates about use within the wider framework of God’s purpose for the world and its cultures. In other words, if instrumentality is a problem in our understanding of reading, then the problem is not how the instrument is played or whether the use is worthwhile. The real problem is whether the instrument is being played by the right person. The end or future that matters is the future of the word of God—that is, Christ. It is in this future where the end and future of all our words—and our reading—will be found. To this ultimate end, text is neither means nor end. For our words participate in the word of God; they are metonyms of the end who is also the means, the spirit of Christ, the word of God.

## Notes

1. “He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, ‘Bow the knee!’ Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.’ Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt” (Gen. 41:43-45).
2. See John Walton and Kim Walton, *The Bible Story Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).
3. Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 10.
4. Andrew Delbanco, *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 209.
5. Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 29.
6. See René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Mariner, 1984), chapter 2.
7. Tzvetan Todorov, Lynn Moss, and Bruno Braunrot, “The Notion of Literature,” *New Literary History* 38, no. 1 (2007): 1–12.
8. Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 8.
9. A few of very many recent examples of this might include Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature*, Joan Shelley Rubin’s *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), Leah Price’s *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), *Fever Reading: Affect and Reading Badly in the Early American Public Sphere* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012), Lynn S. Neal’s *Romancing God* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), Margaret Willes’s *Reading Matters: Five Centuries of Discovering Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), along with Mark Edmundson’s *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).
10. Phrase describing this view in Todorov, Moss, and Braunrot, “The Notion of Literature,” 5.

11. See the following: Anna Kamenetz, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2010); Naomi Schaefer Riley, *The Faculty Lounges: And Other Reasons You Won't Get the College Education You Paid For* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011); Victor E. Ferrall Jr., *Liberal Arts at the Brink* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Mark William Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010); Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Richard P. Keeling and Richard H. Hersh, *We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Other, broader looks at the state of reading in the United States, such as Mark William Roche's *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), point to technological explanations alongside literary critical ones for the decline. Nicholas Carr has suggested in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010) that the Internet age in which we live has rewired our brains—and that the online reader, whose brain's plasticity has responded to the medium, though able to process a lot of information quickly, can't think as deeply or thoroughly as before. Alan Jacobs's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) suggests that reading still has a lively following in a technological age but that distracted readers have lost their confidence.
12. Works that defend noninstrumental reading have tended to function as responses to conditions where the value of literature is threatened. Most famous among these, perhaps, are any number of works by Harold Bloom, who says blatantly in *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), "The flight from or repression of the aesthetic is endemic in our institutions of what still purport to be higher education"; he is unequivocal: "To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all" (23, 29). In *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, Mark William Roche asserts that, in a technological age, we must "preserve, against all attempts to reduce art to the sociopolitical and ideological, that aspect of art which is purely without purpose" (206). Roche cites the challenge of technology and offers literary criticism as a means by which literature may be seen as an agent of timeless and timely wholeness that will grant an inexhaustible well of meaning to the dedicated reader. Another, *Why Literature Matters: Permanence*

*and the Politics of Reputation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001) by Glenn C. Arbery, opens by repulsing what the author terms the “literature industry” and cultural studies, the materialist values of which are tantamount to the “loss of literature itself”—a point made more stringently by George Steiner, whose blatant disgust with the rabbit-like increase of critical works is well known, especially in works such as *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) (xi). Roche asserts that while the reading he espouses is an end in and of itself, it nonetheless retains an endless sort of quality, a journey rather than a destination—in which the reader has access to truths that are timeless, though in no way, to his view, separate from the world of the now. For Roche, art is useful but not shabbily usable because it “is removed from the merely temporal and is potentially of supertemporal significance” (39). These approaches undeniably support noninstrumental, aesthetically focused reading by making noninstrumentality and aesthetics in some way valuable or useful. For Arbery, good reading is always “anagogical”—a spiritual knowledge, which must relinquish “the habit of trying to extract, by the quickest means, the usable gist of people and experiences; it requires a recovery of the inner nature of time” (149). Language, for Arbery, is a tool for thinking, a sort of weighty and important knowledge that is made knowable by form. Roche emphasizes that, “the sensuous dimension of literature [form] reinforces the value of the literary experience as an end in itself” rather than “for practical purposes” (29). Yet, he also gives literature a value from its use, that it gives “us great insight into the logic of human behavior and the consequences of given positions” and that it can critique reality, counter it with an alternative vision, or even “directly evoke a normative ideal” (20, 21). It may even in its “moral dimension” “perform an edifying function based on its integrity as an artwork . . . meaningfully affecting its recipients” (39). For Roche, this edification avoids abusive instrumentality because of literature’s autonomy, where literature’s distinctiveness is an autotelic structure. In reading, Roche suggests, a “mechanical means-end thinking disappears, and various vital impulses that are their own intrinsic end remain” (39). Because the impulses that Roche sees literature engendering are ones he sees as timelessly vital for humans, the use of literature for these purposes seems defensible to him. For Bloom, “The reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves” (29–30). In more than one book, Bloom, pooh-poohing larger claims for literature’s salvific power, instead suggests that literature prepares us for change—most centrally for the change of death, which is inescapable. Along with a number of somewhat traditionalist defenses of noninstrumental reading from a literary

studies standpoint, there have also been interdisciplinary research studies that link the methodologies usually associated with noninstrumental reading and beneficial popular or educational ends. Christina Vischer Bruns's recent book, situated on the borders of education, psychology, and literary study, *Why Literature Matters: The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 2011), advances the claim that literature is instrumental in personal identity formation and that teachers may assist students in identity formation through helping them to attach to books as transitional objects through which they may work out questions and issues of their own development. The psychological research of Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley in the last five to ten years on "deep reading" and the development of empathy in readers is one example of this (e.g., "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 [2008]: 173–92). Further, the pressure of the scope of information and available material stretch the plausibility of use's plethora of possible claims regarding cultural and textual history. Maurice S. Lee's 2012 article "Searching the Archives with Dickens and Hawthorne" (*ELH* 79 [2012]: 747–71) helpfully points out how problematic New Historicist methodologies can be when enacted within and upon such vast electronic archives: we can find documentary evidence supporting just about any conceivable argument. Lee's fascinating case study of library and information science and literary study—of electronic archive research under the current conditions of documentary proliferation—have led him at least to swing back toward more formal and aesthetic standards: "A crucial unintended consequence of the New Historicism in an age of total information is that it highlights the need for aesthetic judgment when searching through documentary chaos" (750). Aesthetic judgment, though a traditionally nonutilitarian approach to addressing the form or structure of a text, ends up being a kind of means to discern the most helpful approaches to texts.

13. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt, 1994), 31.
14. Tzvetan Todorov has helpfully traced this definitional history in "The Notion of Literature."
15. Tzvetan Todorov and John Lyons, "What Is Literature For?" *New Literary History* 38, no. 1 (2007): 13–32. This essay took part in a special issue of the journal *New Literary History* on the topic, "What Is Literature Now?"
16. *Ibid.*, 22.

17. Ibid., 17.
18. Bloom, *How to Read and Why*, 22.
19. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 14–15.
20. Ibid., 15.
21. As Mark Edmundson has worded it in *Why Read?*, “What’s missing from the current dispensation is a sense of hope when we confront major works, the hope that they will tell us something we do not know about the world or give us an entirely fresh way to apprehend experience” (46).
22. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 64.
23. Ibid., 52.
24. Ibid., 63.
25. Ibid., 78.
26. Ibid., 42.
27. Ibid., 78.
28. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 25.
31. Ibid., 10.
32. Ibid., 17.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 24–25.
35. Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 42.
36. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 27.
37. Another counter to aesthetically driven, noninstrumental reading has emerged in Richard Viladesau’s *Theological Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): noninstrumental uses of literature, which pride themselves on a supposedly non means-end thinking that facilitates a rich, unhurried engagement with literary form, risk an idolatry of the word that is tantamount to the worship of images. Such a critique, of course, is as old as Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, as Viladesau has pointed out. Viladesau has further suggested that, as noninstrumental as self-consciously aesthetic

pursuits seem, they may fold into the vices of other, more pragmatic concerns as well, concerns that deny others while fulfilling the self: “the pursuit of beauty (like any form of human self-fulfillment) may serve as a vehicle of escapism, fostering an egotistical occupation with pleasure and providing a distraction from the love of neighbor” (199). The tacitly self-fulfilling nature of supposedly noninstrumental uses of literature makes them as idolatrous as more blatantly grasping uses, such as those outlined and defended so sensibly in Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature*. And not only for the sake of its threat to practical kingdom-work in the world would such noninstrumental uses of art be potentially sinful. The critique here is not only of any presumed inactiveness in the work of creating art but also of the refusal of self-sacrifice that the pursuit of one’s own conception of beauty presupposes. The issue here, of failing to love others and loving the self more, which would be a problem attendant on uses of texts, is one of failure in love, a failure in the act of self-sacrifice that is central to the Christian faith—the taking up of one’s cross in imitation and discipleship of Christ. Viladesau’s own work has sought to link the arts with theology, particularly of the cross, under which banner the primary uses of self-love may, in fact, be concomitant on escapism or recognition. Viladesau points to this as a particularly Protestant problem, an iconoclast’s ironic attempt to avoid idolatry by simply switching the target of idolatrous affection and ending up in the same boat as more instrumental uses of literature, which amount to a sort of magic transport via the Reading Rainbow or Super Why’s leap into a book.

38. Delbanco, *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now*, xi.
39. Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, 8.
40. *Ibid.*, 259.
41. Arbery, *Why Literature Matters: Permanence and the Politics of Reputation*, 228.
42. *Ibid.*, 229.
43. *Ibid.*, 230.
44. *Ibid.*, 19.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 229.
47. I have so far in this chapter argued that arguments in favor of noninstrumental reading of literature lean toward eschatology—problematically to the extent that they rely on autotelic texts, and insufficiently insofar as they give presumptive judgmental authority to

critics. Other critiques of earlier versions of noninstrumental criticism have arisen—more attached to the particular ideologies at work in, say, New Criticism. The sources I particularly deal with aren't meant to be more than representative of a kind—instantiations at a particular moment. Larger, more famous critiques of particular noninstrumentality exist. For example, Susan Sontag's famous "Against Interpretation" (in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966]) suggests that "interpretation" itself, in its systematization "presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of (later) readers" (6): the transformation of form and content into intellectually consumable bits, "makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (10)—which again, though part of a schema explicitly aiming at noninstrumentality in its very schematization, functions as use. She suggests an erotics of art instead, which might be found in the desire for literature or the love of it—perhaps something along the lines of what Alan Jacobs is after when he seeks charitable reading and whimsy as guiding principles of interpretation in books such as *Theology of Reading: A Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001) and *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

48. Arbery, *Why Literature Matters*, 19. Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*, 251.
49. Thus also does Roche require morally exemplary critics, a requirement only slightly less daunting than Arbery's, which requires that critics must know the playlist of God's favorites in a world in which the making of books will have no end. Critics, for Roche, must "exhibit the virtues that they discuss in their interpretations with students and others, critics embody the existential worth of literature—not only the value of the existential relationship to literature but also appreciation of literature as an end in itself and recognition of those virtues elicited in aesthetic experience but neglected in modernity" (257). Criticism will, in so doing—if its critics attend to aesthetics and those questions inspired in a technological age—"earn its place among the disciplines that deserve support" (259). This is a meritocracy of books and of criticism—it is the secular academy and though easily associated with the eschatological in its idealistic cast, is not in the same key as the grace—the costly grace—central to the kingdom of God.
50. Arbery, for instance, unironically writes, "Of all the poems in the history of the West, actual Scripture aside, but including the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, and all the devotional lyrics ever written, God loves the *Iliad* most" (151).

51. George Steiner, "The Archives of Eden," in *No Passion Spent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 275.
52. James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Picador, 2010), 160. Wood's mellifluously written assessment of Steiner in "George Steiner's Unreal Presence" proceeds along the same lines as the argument here, pointing out the eschatological hunger of noninstrumental reading: Wood suspects that what Steiner offers in works such as *Real Presences* is a making universal of the greatness of some works, in fact, the making universal of some tastes: "[W]hat Steiner is asking us to believe in is not the presence of the divine but the easier presence of undefined greatness. The test is easy to apply. Were Steiner proposing a doctrine of *meaning* it would have to be a universal doctrine. That is, if great work incarnates a Real Presence then minor or even bad work must do so also, for the divine cannot choose merely to be present in masterpieces. This is what a theory of meaning is: it is universal" (167). It might not be too much to say that proposing a universal doctrine of meaning in which the divine is present in minor, and even bad, works is more or less what this book is trying to do.
53. For an overview of such, see the introduction to Felski, *Uses of Literature*.
54. For a very few examples of what is really a much wider, and theoretically rich, phenomenon, see works such as Caroline Levine's *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003); Robert Darnton's *The Case for Books* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010); Michael Millner's *Fever Reading: Affect and Reading Badly in the Early American Public Sphere* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012). See also note 10 above.
55. For example, see David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Costano, "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342, no. 6156 (2013): 377–80.
56. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 50.
57. *Ibid.*, 31.
58. *Ibid.*, 57.
59. The variations described here ought not be understood only agonistically, however; it makes complete sense that absorptive reading might have varieties, as available ways of reading have varied over community practices. As Robert Darnton has pointed out in *The Case for Books*, some sorts of reading from the early modern period onward were never very absorptive

or even linear but distinctly piecemeal. Texts were cobbled together into commonplace books as one's own self and life were composed in the lines or even partial lines of another, not even always selected by oneself, but also by friends participating in the making of a self and a life (149–50). This, of course, is a different sort of making use of reading than specifically escape or absorption, in which one connects one's life events to the passages, but it too participates in the eschatological.

60. Charles Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption," in *Artifice and Indeterminacy: An Anthology of New Poetics*, ed. Christopher Beach (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 3–23.
61. Sianne Ngai, "Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics," *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2 (January 2000): accessed November 24, 2013.
62. Jon Woodward, "Huge Dragonflies," in *Uncanny Valley* (Cleveland: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2012), 1–7.
63. Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?*, 3.
64. *Ibid.*, 124.
65. Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*, 78.