Spiritual Temporalities in Late-Medieval Europe

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Edited by

Michael Foster

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Cur venis nobiscum? Revertere et habita cum rege, quia peregrinus es et egressus de *loco tuo*
—II Samuel 15:19

Dilexi justitiam et odivi iniquitatem propterea morior in exilio
—Pope Gregory VII

INTRODUCTION

SPIRITUAL TEMPORALITIES

MICHAEL FOSTER

With *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Johan Huizinga sparked a debate that continues to the present.[1] The premise of this book is quite simple: by the end of the middle ages, a weary pessimism had become the mood of Europe, and a sense of impending doom dominated medieval life:

> The fifteenth century, profoundly pessimistic, a prey to continual depression, could not forgo the emphatic affirmation of the beauty of life, afforded by these splendid and solemn collective rejoicings. Books were expensive, the country was unsafe, art was rare; the individual lacked the means of distraction. All literary, musical and artistic enjoyment was more or less closely connected with festivals. (230)

Huizinga's argument assumes that moments of medieval beauty are emphatic, perhaps even hysterical, attempts to escape the overwhelming sense of misery of the period. Thus his study begins and ends with a focus on the extremes of medieval emotion and life:

> All things presenting themselves to the mind in violent contrasts and impressive forms, lent a tone of excitement and of passion to everyday life and tended to produce that perpetual oscillation between despair and distracted joy, between cruelty and pious tenderness which characterize life in the Middle Ages. (2)

[1] Trans. Fritz Hopman (London, 1924). Originally published in Dutch in 1919, the English translation has been reprinted many times and remains an often-cited source for understanding the medieval worldview, although it has been largely criticized over the decades for its limited scope and selective evidence.

This hyperemotional culture is presumed not to be the norm of Huizinga's day, when a more moderate temperament makes the middle ages a seemingly foreign and miserable place:

> All this general facility of emotions, of tears and spiritual upheavals, must be borne in mind in order to conceive fully how violent and high-strung was life at that period. (6)

The misery of everyday life in the middle ages has no single source, but the conveniences and security of the modern world desensitize us to the horrors of medieval reality and encourage a nostalgic view of a simpler pastoral Elysium. Huizinga challenged historical nostalgia by reminding us that the end of the middle ages was infested with hysteria.

The Christian anticipation of an apocalyptic event implicitly encourages such a pessimistic worldview, and this attitude is confirmed by the large body of apocalyptic art and literature in the middle ages that encourages personal reform to prepare for God's final judgment. By combining an anticipation for the end of days with an introspective outlook, the medieval Christian was motivated to disregard the social, economic, and political realties around him as vanities of the flesh which would soon be irrelevant at the time of God's ultimate reckoning.

While it would be easy to dismiss all late-medieval perceptions of the flow of history to this apocalyptical anxiety, the reality of the era suggests that people went about their lives with other concerns in mind. The important collection of essays edited by John Burrow and Ian Pei demonstrates that medieval perceptions of the future were complicated and sometimes self-contradictory—indeed, much like our own.[2] A mixture of prophecy, eschatology, apocalyptical anticipation, and moral investment in the future—most tangibly in Burrow's essay on prudence as a means to gain future success in this world and the next—demonstrates a variety of attitudes to the future that often mix and are not easily divided into pragmatic, spiritual, and moralistic categories.[3]

In looking at a world as foreign as late-medieval Europe, it can be tempting to insist on how different their experiences of life and spirituality were from our own; this impulse makes each medieval text and work of art a clue of the minutiae of an exotic and unfamiliar world. The alterity of the

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[2] *Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the Future in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2000).

[3] "The Third Eye of Prudence", *Medieval Futures*, 37-49

middle ages is obvious to any casual reader of Chaucer, yet that same reader cannot go away from the *Canterbury Tales* without some sense that we share much with our medieval ancestors: we are born; we die; we ponder our relationship to society and to the universe (however we understand its topography); we struggle to assert our own presumed correct morality on a world of competing ideologies and interests; and we try to make sense of our brief time on Earth. The variety of answers to these large questions is much greater today than it was for people in the European middle ages, yet it is difficult to find philosophical, moral, or religious ideas that have been completely abandoned as medieval naiveté. The anxiety for the apocalypse is thriving today perhaps more than ever in many parts of the United States, and the religious impulse is familiar to many modern European Union countries, where Christian Democratic political parties are a major contributor to mainstream political discourse.

Today, many feel confident that modern perceptions and understandings of time have become more complex, nuanced, sophisticated, and accurate. In the realms of science, this is undeniable; the second law of thermodynamics and post-Einstein concepts of space-time and exotic concepts such as the Planck time, relativity, and the Big Bang are substantially more consistent and independently verifiable theories of time than anything developed in the medieval or Christian traditions, yet they are either too large, too small, or too abstract to form part of our everyday experience. Even physicists count their time in minutes and hours.

Similarly, the development of the second-hand and the mechanical clock have given us tools to divide our moments into increasingly smaller units, but our lifetimes are more often divided into the larger segments of days, months and years, and many make distinctions between them by the senses. Thus sixteenth-century men and women were guided by the seasons in their daily lives and in their organization of their lives, as Amy Orrock's chapter demonstrates. The presence and experience of the seasons and their various festivals was a greater concern for people's personal and social experiences of Christianity, while the philosophical and scientific puzzles of the problem of the calendar—which would only finally be resolved with the Gregorian calendar in 1582—seem to exist in the background for most medieval Christians, just as the developments of theoretical physics are an intellectual pursuit removed from everyday life for us.

Contributors to this book attempt to assess religious understandings and experiences of time in the middle ages from different perspectives and disciplines, but all share an understanding of time as a personal and social experience beyond the quantifiable units of measure made problematic by

moveable feasts. These essays encourage us to see both the similarities and differences between medieval and modern perceptions of time within the frameworks of Christian theology and everyday experience. Our focus is on instances of popular, non-canonical, or local shifts in the perception of time within a Christian world-view.

On the larger level of human history, modern perceptions of time sometimes differ from those found in the late-medieval period, since we are influenced by Kantian and Hegelian perceptions of a progressive metanarrative. Although they differ in ultimate ends, Kant and Hegel agree that human history has a distinct and definable pattern that is leading somewhere. Modern myths of progress have become the mainstays of national identities, and the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany, the USSR, Maoist China, and North Korea implicitly defend their control of political, economic, and social structures through the rhetoric of progress to ultimate ends.

The western world, although more multivocal, has had its own nationalist rhetoric of progression. As the USSR collapsed, confidence in America's liberal economics and representative democracy lead to musings that the end of this narrative had already arrived in the form of the socio-political reality of the United States of America.[4]

Such rhetoric of national, economic, and political progress is absent from medieval records, yet people of the era had a sense of a grand narrative leading towards an ultimate resolution. John Lance Griffith examines the differences between modern and medieval "universal histories" with the suggestion that both provide theoretical tools to understand one's individual significance in relation to one's society and to the world as a whole. The important difference is that modern universal narratives connect the individual to a project of secular improvement, leading to inevitable supermen, whereas the medieval universal narrative of St. Augustine provides meaning for the individual in his relationship to the eternal, which is fixed outside of time and unchanging. Thus every life becomes symbolic and connected to the divine, instead of one part of an evolutionary chain contributing to the good of the nation-state or the social group.

The interaction between experiencing the passing of time and maintaining Christian faith is what we refer to as "temporal spiritualities"; we suggest that the interaction between Christian faith and the passing of

[4] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1993).

time is a hermeneutic circle in which both influence each another. Thus the more time passes, the more Christian faith will change, and the more Christian faith changes, the more its believers will see time differently. The various issues studied in this book demonstrate that Christianity is a socially mediated and highly variable element of European medieval culture. Likewise, changes in Christianity will influence believers' perceptions of their lives and time itself. This can be seen quite clearly in the controversy of medieval pessimism discussed above; the presence of and faith in apocalyptic literature suggests that believers will experience an anxiety about the end of days—in fact, such literature encourages it. One need not look far in the Revelations of John to find urges for the reader to take heed of its text soon:

> et dicit mihi ne signaveris verba prophetiae libri huius tempus enim prope est
> qui nocet noceat adhuc et qui in sordibus est sordescat adhuc et iustus iustitiam faciat adhuc et sanctus sanctificetur adhuc
> ecce venio cito et merces mea mecum est reddere unicuique secundum opera sua
>
> And he saith to me: Seal not the words of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand.
> He that hurteth, let him hurt still: and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is just, let him be justified still: and he that is holy, let him be sanctified still.
> Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to render to every man according to his works. (*Revelations* 22:10-12)[5]

It is still unclear to what extent the apocalypse was anticipated in the late middle ages; judging by the presence of Middle English poetry on the subject, it seems to have been a popular component of Christian faith, yet the abundant attempts in medieval law to control the status of assets well into the future, as Paul Brand has discussed,[6] suggests the presence of a more pragmatic belief that the world would be around for a while, and thus it needed to be controlled through social conventions.

Legal and philosophical debates share a practical concern for people's relationships to posterity, and assume that a human civilization will

[5] The translation is from the Douay-Rheims Bible.
[6] Paul Brand, *In perpetuum: The Rhetoric and Reality of Attempts to Control the future in the English Medieval Common Law*, in *Medieval Futures* 101-113.

continue to mediate reputation and social standing. Laura Cleaver's chapter in the present volume examines this phenomenon in relation to Peter Lombard's contested status throughout the twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries; her essay suggests that artists and writers wanted to contribute to an academic debate on the thinker's status that was expected to continue on Earth amongst living human beings.

This lengthy debate was an attempt to construct meaning and significance in relation to Peter Lombard, and many medieval authors and artists were more invested in the long-term project of constructing and mediating meaning than they were in self-expression or self-promotion. Similarly, my essay on scribal variants in *Tundale* argues that scribes in the middle ages were often motivated by an urge to correct readers' understandings of texts, and they consciously edited their texts as they responded to them. Such rhetorical emendation suggests that medieval doctrine was not fixed dogma, but a malleable collection of ideas and theories that were subject to variation and change as individual Christians modified and emended the tradition they inherited. Importantly, this individual "improvement" does not come from centers of authority, and it is not explicitly sanctioned by the Church.

A popular understanding of the relationship between real, contemporary time and Biblical time can be found in the Middle English York cycle plays, which dramatically realize Biblical events not as symbolic or allegorical concepts, but as events occurring on a real timeline. At the same time, these plays incorporate contemporary concerns and interests with the ancient, Biblical content. Karen Ward analyzes the rhetorical effect of the balance between elements of contemporary reality and representations of Biblical history within the York plays; her reading of *The Crucifixion* illuminates a popular, communal understanding of the similarities and differences between Biblical and contemporary time in late fourteenth-century England while it emphasizes the central importance of Christian salvation to their own lives.

The impulse of bookmakers to modify texts to new ideological ends is also the focus of Nancy Ross's chapter on images accompanying the commentary on the apocalypse myth by Berengaudus of Ferrières in two English manuscripts of the late thirteenth century. Ross demonstrates how the manuscripts present an anti-Semitic argument that focuses on the presumed contemporary sins of the Jews in medieval Europe while ignoring those "ancient crimes" that led to the crucifixion of Christ. Here we see a combination of image and text organized to form a political argument that culminated in the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290. The presentation of this commentary in these books transforms

ancient beliefs in an attempt to modify medieval attitudes while maintaining and even intensifying old prejudices and hatred.

Luciana Meinking Guimarães finds much larger shifts in motifs and themes amongst the Welsh saints' lives, which form a cohesive corpus of texts that are often seen as propaganda-responses to the Norman invasion and occupation of Wales. Guimarães finds instead a collection of motifs that suggest the perpetuation of a Welsh hagiographical tradition that precedes the extant manuscripts. At the same time, these themes are adapted to a new historical context where they take on new significance. Here, as in *Tundale* and the Berengaudus commentary, we see a popular Christian tradition being perpetuated and adapted to a new moment in time.

The adaption of old works of religious art to a new secular situation is also the concern of Tom Nickson's chapter, which suggests that the changing collection of images in Toledo Cathedral reflects a philosophical response to Gregory's defense of the use of images in articulating belief. Thus the ornamentation of the building itself becomes a battleground for a burgeoning theological debate, and artists are invited to take part in the debate with their contributions to the building's artworks. Here we see archbishop Tenorio, a central and powerful figure of the Church, asserting the papal defense of religious imagery by reshaping a part of Christendom's topography.

We hope that these essays will contribute to an understanding of medieval perceptions and experiences of time not as a completely alien historical phenomenon, nor as entirely consistent with modern perceptions of the world. Rather, we would like to introduce these instances of spiritual temporalities with the hope that further comparative analysis will uncover how the myths and realities of modern life mirror the religious perceptions of and responses to the passing of time in late-medieval Europe.

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CHAPTER ONE

AUGUSTINE AT THE END OF HISTORY: UNIVERSAL HISTORIES AND THE INDIVIDUAL'S PLACE IN TIME

JOHN LANCE GRIFFITH

In his *Life of King Alfred*, Asser recounts the story of Alfred's attempt to overcome a problem of time. The king had promised to devote "one half of his mental and bodily effort both by day and by night" to the service of God,[1] yet he found that he "could not in any way accurately estimate the duration of the night hours because of darkness, nor the day-time because of the frequent density of rain and cloud".[2] And so he invents a time-keeping device, a series of wax candles that burn at regular intervals continuously throughout the day.

We are reminded that, at a very basic level, the medieval experience of time was quite different from our own. We have constructed social and cultural systems which simply cannot function without precise dividing, measuring, and tracking of time. But even after the invention of accurate time pieces, how differently time must have been filled by the medieval person—how differently time must have been perceived by the medieval mind. As Augustine observed, long before Einstein, we "must not allow [our] mind to insist that time is something objective... I measure time in my mind. For everything which happens leaves an impression on it, and this impression remains after the thing itself has ceased to be. It is the

[1] Alfred the Great, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (New York, 1983), 107.
[2] Ibid.,108.

impression that I measure."[3] And those medieval impressions must be in many ways strange, if not unknowable, to us who move at speeds and process relentless streams of data from omnipresent television and internet media unthinkable in the medieval world.

Yet, however differently the medieval and the modern mind may perceive the speed of passing time when observing the other—however "fast" this world might seem to the time traveler from the middle ages, however "slow" the daily grind of the medieval worker to us—surely the reflecting on one's own time in the world leads one (medieval or modern) to the conclusion that it is all too brief; that our allotted interval (as Walter Pater would say) is marked by an awful brevity. Chaucer's Host observes:

> Lordynges…I warne yow, al this route,
> The fourthe party of this day is gon.
> Now for the love of God and of Seint John,
> Leseth no tyme, as ferforth as ye may.
> Lordynges, the tyme wasteth nyght and day,
> And steleth from us, what pryvely slepynge,
> And what thurgh necligence in oure wakynge,
> As dooth the streem, that turneth nevere agayn,
> Descendynge fro the montaigne into playn.
> Wel kan Senec and many a philosophre
> Biwaillen tyme, moore than gold in cofre;
> For "Los of catel may recovered be,
> But los of tyme shendeth us," quod he.
> It wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,
> Namoore than wole Malkynes maydenhede,
> Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse.
> Lat us nat mowlen thus in ydelnesse.[4]

Time is a thief, a ravager, a wasting force, as in the Reeve's metaphor of life as a draining barrel of ale:

> As many a yeer as it is passed henne
> Syn that my tappe of lif bigan to renne.
> For sikerly, whan I was bore, anon
> Deeth drough the tappe of lyf, and leet it gon,
> And ever sithe hath so the tappe yronne

[3] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York, 1961), 276.
[4] *Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale*, ll.16-32. All references to Chaucer are from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987).

> Til that almoost al empty is the tonne.
> The streem of lyf now droppeth on the chymbe.
> The sely tonge may wel rynge and chymbe
> Of wrecchednesse that passed is ful yore;
> With olde folk, save dotage, is namoore![5]

For the Host, the way to battle time is to try and keep ahead, finding the pleasure in a good tale while one can. For the Reeve, the battle for the body is lost, though there remains a spark of spirit, and emotions (even negative ones) keep one struggling on, finding, as he says, a ripeness in the rottenness.[6] For both, the implication is that life is short and death (the end of time) is always a nearby possibility. It is partly this sense of brevity and of the unpredictable arrival of death that makes the Host and the other pilgrims both likeable and intelligible to the modern reader. Our shared perception of the wasting and our fear of death transcends the historical and cultural time that separates us.

It is then not so much our respective conceptions of time that marks a significant division between the medieval and the modern, as much as our respective ideas of history—that is, understandings of the purpose of time and of our place (be it as individuals or communities and generations) in time. This essay examines the concept of universal history, the way in which that concept joins and divides the medieval and the modern imagination. I refer to histories of the world from beginning to end, theories of time which posit an unfolding of time towards an intelligible end—the world-historical views of thinkers like Augustine, Kant, Hegel, and Marx.

Initially a response to pagan critics who blamed the spread of Christian values among Roman citizens for the sack of the city, Augustine's *City of God* eventually became an analysis not just of current Roman events or even of the history of the Empire, but an explanation for all of human history—that is, a universal history. Though he does not invoke the phrase, Augustine is a seminal figure in the history of the idea of "universal history." His opus is one of the most influential outlines of universal history ever written, shaping the medieval world's understanding of history and time, and of the individual's place in both. More modern universal histories such as those of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, vary widely from one another and of course deviate substantially from Augustine's medieval understanding. But all such histories have the same basic

[5] *The Reeve's Prologue*, ll.3889-3998.
[6] Ibid., l.3875 ("Til we be rotten, kan we nat be rype").

purpose: to establish the meaning of human existence through an investigation of the teleology of its history, to understand the relevance of one's own time through its relation to the beginning and ending of a course of events unfolding in time. So while one way to mark historical periods is by changes in theories of universal history (marking Kant's Enlightenment philosophy from Augustine's Medievalism), the break between the periods with and without such a concept of history is also significant. For those in the modern world without a sense of teleological history (or who believe that they are living at what Hegel would term "the end of history"), Augustine's history highlights a radical difference between the medieval and the modern mind.

Moreover, exploring Augustine's place in the history of the idea of universal history helps us to consider how such a conception of time and history impacted literary narratives such as those of Chaucer in the Middle Ages; that is, how this view of history—which may seem puzzling to those of us who have arrived at the end of history—affected their understanding of the place of the individual, the universal human pilgrim, as it were, in time.

A Modern View of Universal History

What does it mean for the modern individual to be part of a universal history or to be living at the end of history? Where Augustine imagines a literal beginning and end of the world (where time and existence as we know it began and will cease to be), the post-Enlightenment universal histories from Kant through Marx tend to concentrate on the end point which is not apocalyptic but liminal in the sense that significant cultural/political change is no longer possible or desirable. Comprehending the vast scope of time needed for such progress requires political and economic philosophy, not theology. "History," the unfolding of events and the record of change wrought by political and economic forces, ends—for Kant in the establishment of a global union of states, for Marx in a socialist utopia.

How one evaluates this moment in history at the end of history depends in part on what one takes to be evidence of "significant" change; and also on whether one emphasizes the "us" or the "me" implicit in this evaluation, whether one emphasizes the consequences for the collective culture or for the individual.

The history of the individual is like and unlike the history of the world. For Alexandre Kojève (whose lectures on Hegel early in the twentieth century crystallized the Hegelian concept of universal history for subsequent

generations of thinkers), the two are directly linked, since the individual, like history, is defined by movement through time, not space. "Man becomes conscious of himself at the moment when—for the 'first time'—he says 'I.'"[7] That "I" is revealed through its desire (not an animal desire for a natural object easily satisfied, but desire for desire itself) and is revealed in its pursuit of what it is not; that is, revealed in its "becoming" in time:

> This I, which "feeds" on Desires, will itself be Desire in its very being, created in and by the satisfaction of its Desire. And since Desire is realized as action negating the given, the very being of this I will be action. This I will not, like the animal "I," be "identity" or equality to itself, but "negating-negativity." In other words, the very being of this I will be becoming, and the universal form of this being will not be space, but time.[8]

To talk meaningfully about the individual is to talk not about what he is, but what he is becoming. In this case, the end toward which his own dissatisfaction is driving him to evolve. Self-consciousness is a process, a production subject to constant change and, like history, unfolded continuously in time rather than defined fixedly in space:

> Therefore, its continuation in existence will signify this I: "not to be what it is (as static and given being, as natural being, as 'innate character') and to be (that is, to become) what it is not." Thus, this I will be its own product: will be (in the future) what it has become by negation (in the present) of what it was (in the past), this negation being accomplished with a view to what it will become. In its very being this I is intentional becoming, deliberate evolution, conscious and voluntary progress; it is the act of transcending the given that is given to it and that it itself is. This I is...historical (in relation to itself).[9]

But how does this "historical" individual relate to history itself? In Kojève's reading of Hegel, the evolution of individuals and the progress of their individual desires plays out as a struggle between masters and slaves. This struggle *is* history, a process of becoming, of cultural identity established in time rather than space, similar to that of the individual. This is in part because, for Kojève, desire here is specifically the human desire for desire (as opposed, we said, to a simpler animal desire for mere

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[7] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ithaca, 1969), 3.
[8] Ibid., 5.
[9] Ibid., 5.

material objects which please us); substituting the self for the traditional object of desire, human desire becomes a desire for recognition of the individual's own self-worth. This inevitably leads to a conflict between individuals, as they struggle not for desired resources, but for recognition. Each tries "to impose itself on the other as the supreme value; accordingly their meeting can only be a fight to the death."[10] The desire for recognition becomes a desire for power to ensure such recognition of self worth. History is the record of this struggle, between the masters who use their power to impose values and the slaves who resist or, if unwilling to risk their lives in the struggle, acquiesce:

> If the human being is begotten only in and by the fight that ends in the relation between Master and Slave, the progressive realization and revelation of this being can themselves be effected only in terms of this fundamental social relation. If man is nothing but his becoming, if his human existence in space is his existence in time or as time, if the revealed human reality is nothing but universal history, that history must be the history of the interaction between Mastery and Slavery: the historical "dialectic" is the "dialectic" of Master and Slave.[11]

If the urge for self-recognition, and the desire for the power to ensure such recognition, is so basic to the human condition, how is it possible for such a process to come to an end? How can an existence defined by its change and struggle in time come to an end except through an apocalyptic destruction of time itself? Hegelian logic drives Kojève to the inevitable answer:

> But if the opposition of "thesis" and "antithesis" is meaningful only in the context of their reconciliation by "synthesis," if history (in the full sense of the word) necessarily has a final term, if man who becomes must culminate in man who has become, if Desire must end in satisfaction, if the science of man must possess the quality of a definitively and universally valid truth—the interaction of Master and Slave must finally end in the "dialectical overcoming" of both of them.[12]

History, as a dialectical process, contains within itself the solution, the processes by which its own nature will be overcome, by which it will be transformed into its final state.

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[10] Ibid., 7.
[11] Ibid., 9.
[12] Ibid., 9.

Masters and servants are not just byproducts of human history, but essential elements which will bring about the end of history: individuals struggle for recognition and power; some become masters and some (unwilling to risk death) become slaves; but the slaves then struggle against the masters, using their own work as a means of establishing their self-worth and so eliminating their dependence on masters; the overcoming of the masters through work puts an end to the history of struggle, and an end to history itself.[13] But the essential point is that slaves require masters to force them to work, to develop the concept of work which will ultimately free them. History, then, may or may not have been "designed" or "planned" by a rational being, but it is governed by a logic that compels the development of the individual (the development of modern self-consciousness) and of human society to a particular end. Because this process is a temporal one, time (more so than space) is essential to the modern individual's understanding of himself and of the modern world.

Recalling the Host's image of time as a stream descending from a mountain to a plain and the Reeve's image of time as a slowly emptying barrel, we note that in both cases there is no indication of progress. There is structure, order, even logic, but not the sense that conceives of movement to a better place (in fact, the Host's image is one of descent), or of the radical change for the better implicit in most modern conceptions of universal history (the Reeve's cask, in going nowhere, returns only to its original state of emptiness).

Both are images of an individual's relation to time, of time allotted specifically to the individual, though they could as well be figures of time and of human history itself, if both the Host and the Reeve did not lack a sensitivity to the theology that makes possible the Augustinian concept of history and were not seemingly unaware of the individual's relation to divine history. From an Augustinian point of view, one could say that the Host and the Reeve have missed the point (or misread the signs): the stream having descended the mountain is purified, calmed after its rough descent, and its origin (which the Host laments cannot be returned to) is insignificant given that now it placidly flows on without end; similarly, the Reeve's empty cask can be seen as a purification of the soul, emptied of desire and turbulent passion, the individual returned to the nothingness, the blank surpassing human imagination and understanding, which is God

[13] Ibid., 24-27.

(the "unknown Nothingness"/ *nihil incognitum* as Bataille says, quoting Saint Angèle de Foligno).[14]

Still, even in the Augustinian view, the radical change (the progress) of the individual or of the society does not happen in time or in history, but rather at the end of time (at the moment of the individual's death or at the apocalypse, the end of all society). Or rather, the degree to which the change is perceptible seems much less in the medieval than in the modern view. Of course, as discussed below, Augustine does imagine the individual participating in divine history, contributing to the end of history, since the City of Man and the City of God exist simultaneously and are interconnected. And we should not overstate the static nature of medieval culture; it could be dynamic and there was more social mobility than clichéd images of the period suggest. Yet in contrast to the modern era, medieval culture and the individual's movement within that culture are relatively static. Even in the fourteenth century, a period of greater social mobility, Chaucer's pilgrims are defined for the most part not by names but by occupation or type. Times change, but not by very much; individuals come and go, but their social roles are basically the same. Though there is free will and room for the individual to learn and the soul to develop and to make better choices, medieval discourse allows no space for attaining "self-consciousness," which Kojève defines as the continuous and conscious development of self through "becoming." The classical world could be easily fused (or confused) with the medieval world by Chaucer's Knight because the historical moment beyond which the ancients reside is the Incarnation; what antiquity lacked was knowledge of Christianity, and so the "progress" of the fourteenth century was somewhat narrow in scope, at least in comparison to what the Enlightenment would later conceive of as historical progress. Medieval history is moving toward an end, a better world, and the individual has a role to play (perhaps, as we will see, more so than in modern conceptions of universal history), but this is not the linear progressive history of the Enlightenment.

From a Hegelian point of view, the individual and the world both pass from history into the end of history; for Hegel and Kojève, from a political and cultural perspective, this end has already arrived (or very nearly arrived) and is for the best: slaves have freed themselves from their masters and, upon the principles of liberty and equality, a union of people

[14] Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany, NY, 1988), 104.

and of states has emerged to provide relative peace and stability. In Francis Fukuyama's terms, liberal democracies like the American federal system and the European Union have emerged.[15] Although such systems are always in need of some small correction, they are the final form of political organization in that their values (of liberty and equality) are the most universal and most likely to become globalized. Human society, the world, has achieved its end and will persist in this state. History, as the record of significant change, has ended.

The concept of universal history has produced, of course, its share of critics; aside from inviting debates about what the end of history will actually be like (Kojève's and Fukuyama's vision as opposed to Marx's), the idea of history being an irresistible social force leading us to an inevitable outcome is simply unacceptable to many modern thinkers. Karl Popper's main objection to Hegel was that the positing of a historical dialectic diminishes the human capacity for free will; if the end of history is certain, then we are in no position to resist or change that end, even if we do not like it:

> If we think that history progresses, or that we are bound to progress, then we commit the same mistake as those who believe that history has a meaning that can be discovered in it and need not be given to it. For to progress is to move towards some kind of end, towards an end which exists for us as human beings. 'History' cannot do that; only we, the human individuals, can do it; we can do it by defending and strengthening those democratic institutions upon which freedom, and with it progress, depends...Instead of posing as prophets we must become the makers of our fate.[16]

Notable here is that even Popper has a concept of "progress," even if he deplores the concept of history and historical forces (the determinism of which he may be somewhat overstating). But my goal here is not to choose between such views; instead, I would like to focus on not so much the political or economic implications of these ideas, but rather on what these interests reveal about modern attitudes toward time and history. Although the discourse is quite modern ("self-consciousness," "progress," "dialectic"), the fundamental philosophical problem behind these debates

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[15] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1993, reprinted 2006).

[16] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies Vol. 2: Hegel and Marx* (Princeton, 1966), 279-280.

would not be unintelligible to the medieval thinker (though, as we will see below in the discussion of Augustine, the medieval framing and solution of the problem is quite different): what is the ultimate purpose of a temporally constructed world, of a universe existing in time? And what is the purpose of the individual in the history of that universe?

Let us assume for the moment that the Hegelian end of history is good for the world society and, in the view of Kojève, good for the individuals living at the end of history, since they experience freedom and equality. Yet the individual is not the world. World history may come to a neat conclusion after the relentless unfolding of events in time; the individual, however, both experiences and reflects upon that history—he asks, what is my role in that unfolding plan, what am I to do at the end of that history? If one is not Napoleon, a Hegelian superman as it were, then what is one's purpose other than to watch these grand events unfold? And at the end, what is anyone, superman or commoner, to do, to think, to make theories about? If as a culture, a civilization, and a species we have exhausted our collective imaginations, does any possibility of significant progress present itself to the individual?

For Georges Bataille, our position at the Hegelian end of history is at once tragic and darkly comic. We face the possibility that, historically speaking, if we take history to be the record of significant change through time, there is nothing ahead of us, only a stale analysis of how we have come to be here; only distracting, if pointless, speculation about whether it was all worth it. Nothing left, Bataille says, but an "unemployed negativity," the proving of one's own "irrevocable insignificance." Bataille embraces this hypothesis "seriously though cheerfully":[17]

> But the horror he [the man at the end of history] feels looking at negativity within himself is no less likely to end in satisfaction than in the case of a work of art (not to mention religion). For it is precisely in needing to act that he has recognized negativity; and this recognition is bound up with a conception that has it be the condition of all human existence. Far from stopping in this investigation, he finds a total satisfaction in the fact of becoming the man of "recognized negativity." He will no longer rest as he begins the effort to pursue this recognition to its very end...Thus [bringing] into play representations extremely charged with emotive value (such as physical destruction or erotic obscenity, an object of laughter, of physical excitation, of fear and of tears). But at the same time these representations

[17] Georges Bataille, *The College of Sociology 1937-1939*, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis, 1988), 90.

> intoxicate him, he strips off the straitjacket that has kept them from contemplation and he sets them objectively within the eruption of time that nothing changes. He understands then that it is his good, not his bad, luck that brought him into a world where there was nothing left to do. For he cannot be the man of "recognized negativity" except to the extent that he makes himself be recognized as such. Thus, once again, he discovers something "to do" in a world where, from the point of view of actions, nothing is done any more. And what he has "to do" is to satisfy the portion of existence that is freed from doing: It is all about using free time.[18]

For Bataille's weary individual employed only in establishing his own "negativity," the event horizon which marks that passing into the end of history is not unlike that moment when one realizes that one has already read Shakespeare for the first time. Whatever lies beyond that—re-readings, new readings, comparative readings, writings—the radically transformative, the radically developmental part of one's history is largely past, gone with one's youth.

Of course, with the Wordsworthian voice of the "Intimations of Immortality" ode, one could say that this is a good thing, that not all is lost "in years that bring a philosophic mind"; one can get on with the business of being an adult, a scholar, cataloguing one's memories and systematizing our knowledge of the world, even if we are no longer experiencing it in a vital way. For Walter Pater it is good as well, since the social stability derived from freedom and equality give one the opportunity to focus on the awful brevity of one's interval, to pursue the aesthetic experiences which alone bestow solace if not significance on that interval—"on this short day of frost and sun...we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch."[19]

For Bataille, it is an ambiguous good at best; in some senses liberating, but the indulging of desire and the thrill of excess and of pushing limits ultimately proves only a negative proposition, establishing the truth of the individual's own negativity:

> I enter into a dead end. There all possibilities are exhausted; the "possible" slips away and the impossible prevails. To face the impossible—exorbitant, indubitable—when nothing is possible any longer is in my eyes to have an experience of the divine; it is analogous to a torment.[20]

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18 Ibid., 91-92.
19 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, 1986), 152.
20 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 33.

> Supposing that I were to be God, that I were to have in the world the assurance of Hegel (suppressing shadow and doubt)—knowing everything and even why fulfilled knowledge required that man, the innumerable particularities of *selves*, and history produce themselves—at precisely that moment, the question is formulated which allows human, divine existence to enter...the deepest foray into darkness without return; why must there be *what I know*? Why is it a necessity? In this question is hidden—it doesn't appear at first—an extreme rupture, so deep that only the silence of ecstasy answers it.[21]

One can understand Bataille's fascination with medieval mystics such as Saint Angèle de Foligno, who located God at the extremes of human perception and understanding, in the Nothingness beyond human experience and knowledge.[22] In accepting the reality of the end of history, there is always for Bataille a desire to resist because it is terrifying to face the possibility that life (collective human life and that of every individual) is what Chaucer's Reeve thought it was: in the end, just an empty cask that has been slowly depleted to reveal its essential (and rather unimaginative and relatively uninteresting) shape, its fundamental hollowness, its natural function to frame an empty space.

For the Reeve, as for Bataille, there is no transformation—at the beginning and at the end the Reeve is a reeve, and his work brings him no freedom, no illumination; the cask of life, the shape and the content of time, is known and found wanting. There is only the pursuit of desire, the experience of the passions (anger, jealousy, lust, etc.), and then at the end of life the chasing down of the last sparks of those passions:

> But ik am oold; me list no pley for age;
> Gras tyme is doon; my fodder is now forage;
> This white top writeth myne olde yeris;
> Myn herte is also mowled as myne heris,
> But if I fare as dooth an open-ers -
> That ilke fruyt is ever lenger the wers,
> Til it be roten in mullok or in stree.
> We olde men, I drede, so fare we:
> Til we be rotten, kan we nat be rype;
> We hoppen alwey whil that the world wol pype.
> For in oure wyl ther stiketh evere a nayl,

21 Ibid., 109.
22 Ibid., 103-104.