

Reflections on “Was Art Really the ‘Book of the Illiterate’?”¹

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In 1981 the old saw about art as “the book of the illiterate” suddenly piqued my interest. Ultimately, my extensive researches resulted in an article published in *Word & Image* in 1989. In it, I sought not only to trace the origins and history of this dictum, but also to ask whether it was in fact true that illiterates could read in images what literates could read in books. I found that the *fons et origo* of this idea was Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) and that it had undergone a long, sometimes curious, even tortuous evolution down to the present. I also argued that no matter how one attempted to interpret, contextualize, or rationalize this notion, in the end we had to “admit that Gregory and his many disciples erred in regarding art as the book of the illiterate”.² This peroration was evidently too much to stomach for the readers consulted by the half-dozen or so distinguished journals to which I had submitted the essay for consideration. These reviewers concurred that the argument was too controversial, brash, or just plain absurd. One scholar with whom I had publicly debated the issue in 1986 was Herbert Kessler. Although then, as presumably now, he disagreed with

¹ In this revised version of the paper I have endeavoured to address the questions and incorporate the suggestions offered at the conference in Utrecht, particularly those of Michael Camille, Michael Curschmann, Herbert Kessler, John Lowden, Henry Mayr-Harting, Rosamond McKitterick, Karl Morrison, Marco Mostert, and Sophie Oosterwijk. To all of them I offer heartfelt thanks.

² L.G. DUGGAN, “Was art really the ‘Book of the Illiterate’?”, *Word & Image* 5 (1989), pp. 227-251, at p. 251, and reprinted in this volume at p. 63. Further references to this article will be made to the reprint only.

me, it was ironically through his good offices that the article finally appeared in *Word & Image*.

Nevertheless, since its appearance eleven years ago, although I have encountered many references to it in notes,³ I have seen almost no discussion of the issues it raises, I have received almost no communications about it, and I was once greeted with studied coolness by a colleague in art history and his wife when I asked them for their response. Two art historians whom I recently informally consulted offered entirely different impressions of its reception. The one thought that the essay was so “fundamental” and its thesis so obvious that it had passed into the conventional wisdom without further discussion, whereas Dale Kinney thought that although the article is frequently cited, no one has really addressed the issues it raises or the implications it suggests, especially their incompatibility with the views of others such as Kessler and Celia Chazelle. One of the few positive comments in print I have discovered is from Robin Cormack, who describes my contribution to the discussions of Gregory’s dictum as “particularly helpful”.⁴ Although Brendan Cassidy does not cite my work explicitly in his “Introduction” to *Iconography at the Crossroads*, he seems implicitly to agree when he quotes approvingly Dr. Johnson’s riposte to Boswell, “Painting, Sir, can illustrate, but cannot inform”.⁵ On the other hand, in his *Violence and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Cîteaux Moralia in Job*, Conrad Rudolph remarks in a footnote to the conclusion that he is “in fundamental disagreement with the recent studies by Chazelle ... and Duggan”, but he does not elaborate.⁶ A revealing early visceral reaction came about six months after the

³ E.g. C. CHAZELLE, “Pictures, books, and the illiterate: Pope Gregory I’s Letters to Serenus of Marseilles”, *Word & Image* 6 (1990), pp. 151-153, nn. 3-5, 32, 34, 37-38, 40, 54; H.L. KESSLER, “‘Facies bibliothecae revelata’: Carolingian art as spiritual seeing”, in: *Testo e Immagine nell’Alto Medioevo*, 2 vols. (Spoleto, 1994: *Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi dell’Alto Medioevo* 41), 2, p. 533, n. 2; L. NEES, “Art and architecture”, in: *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, 2: c. 700-c. 900, ed. R. MCKITTERICK (Cambridge, 1995), p. 818, n. 64; J. LOWDEN, “The beginnings of biblical illustration”, in: *Imaging the Early Medieval Bible*, ed. J. WILLIAMS (University Park, PA, 1999), p. 56, n. 120; D. HOOGLAND VERKERK, “Biblical manuscripts in Rome 400-700 and the Ashburnham Pentateuch”, in: *Imaging the Early Medieval Bible*, p. 98, n. 2; EADEM, “Moral structure in the Ashburnham Pentateuch”, in: *Image and Belief: Studies in Celebration of the Eightieth Anniversary of the Index of Christian Art*, ed. C. HOURIHANE (Princeton, 1999), p. 74, n. 17.

⁴ R. CORMACK, *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks and Shrouds* (London, 1997), p. 227, n. 39.

⁵ *Iconography at the Crossroads: Papers from the Colloquium Sponsored by the Index of Christian Art, Princeton University, 23-24 March 1990*, ed. B. CASSIDY (Princeton, 1993), p. 8. *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, new edn. (London, 1953), p. 1313 (June 1784, act. 75).

⁶ C. RUDOLPH, *Violence and Daily Life: Reading, Art, and Polemics in the Cîteaux Moralia in Job* (Princeton, 1997), p. 125, n. 42 (on p. 126).

publication of the article. At a conference at Princeton in March 1990, Michael Camille called it “a recent diatribe which usefully collects together texts but fails to address the visual aspects of the equation”.⁷ Camille was more measured in his criticism by the time he spoke at Spoleto in 1993, where he said that “A useful corrective to Duggan’s totally textual and therefore limited vision of the issue is given in Kessler, ‘Diction in the ‘Bibles of the Illiterate’ ”.⁸ The latter essay, published originally in 1989 and reprinted in 1994, represented Kessler’s oral refutation of my paper in 1986.⁹ Apart from these few references, for years I have therefore assumed that I had said unpalatable things and was being studiously ignored in reprisal. I am still not sure what to make of it all. Neither is Celia Chazelle, who has been lumped with me by one scholar and contrasted with me by another.

But let us move from the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the article to the reception of texts in the Middle Ages.

First, let me reaffirm my belief that Gregory the Great and his followers were wrong. To be sure, others before Gregory had said somewhat similar things about art as the book of the illiterate. Yet Gregory generally gets the credit because of the crispness of his formulation and his distinctive authority as pope. To recollect his authoritative status, we need only mention labels like ‘Gregorian chant’, ‘Gregorian Sacramentary’, and ‘Gregorian water’, all of which assign to Gregory things for which he was sometimes at best only partly responsible.

Was he wrong on the matter at issue, pictures as the books of the illiterate? Many scholars like Conrad Rudolph in effect insist that he was not. As in 1989, I continue to find it amusing that so many of them “would shudder at the merest mention of papal authority in matters of faith and morals, but have in effect conceded it to Gregory, if not to other popes, in matters aesthetic”.¹⁰ Gregory was simply a human being who could be wrong and make mistakes, and I would suggest that he did so from time to time.

Allow me to probe this point in two different ways. First, it was a staple of late antique and medieval Christian thinking that a passionate husband is an adulterer to his wife. James Brundage has recently shown that what seems to us

⁷ M. CAMILLE, “Mouths and meanings: Toward an anti-iconography of medieval art”, in: *Iconography at the Crossroads*, p. 44, n. 4.

⁸ M. CAMILLE, “Word, text, image and the early Church Fathers in the Egino Codex”, in: *Testo e Immagine*, 1, p. 84, n. 29.

⁹ H. KESSLER, “Diction in the ‘Bibles of the Illiterate’ ”, in: *World Art: Themes of Unity and Diversity: Acts of the XXVth International Congress of the History of Art (Washington, 10-15 August 1986)*, ed. I. LAVIN, 3 vols. (University Park, PA, 1989), 2, pp. 297-308, repr. in: H. KESSLER, *Studies in Pictorial Narrative* (London, 1994), pp. 33-48.

¹⁰ DUGGAN, “Art”, p. 102.

a curious notion is not rooted in the New Testament so much as in Stoic philosophy. When theologians and canon lawyers in the High Middle Ages were casting about for an appropriate Christian authority to adduce in its support, they found it in the so-called *Responsa Gregorii* – probably spurious texts, we now think, but sufficient then in their authority because they were attributed to Gregory the Great.¹¹ Whatever Gregory might have thought of this idea, we would not agree with it.

Now there is a very different matter in which we do know Gregory's position, and on this most of us would again not concur with him. Several years ago I published an essay on Charlemagne and the forcible conversion of the Saxons to Christianity.¹² Much of it was devoted to exploring the long period of religious and cultural preparation culminating in Charlemagne's drastic decision that the Saxons must convert to Christianity or die. Among those people most crucial in shaping this climate of thinking was a long line of bishops. They took seriously their obedience to the Great Mandate imposed by Christ to spread the gospel to all nations, and put great pressure on rulers like Clovis not only to convert, but to exert pressure on their subjects to convert. Gregory took this one step further by exhorting the recently converted King Ethelbert of Kent (560-616) to

increase your righteous zeal for their conversion; suppress the worship of idols; overthrow their buildings and shrines; strengthen the morals of your subjects by outstanding purity of life, by exhorting them, terrifying, enticing, and correcting them ...¹³

Gregory was urging the king to calculated violence against specific pagan objects. In dispensing advice to Augustine, the first archbishop of Canterbury (597-604/609), Gregory pulled back somewhat from this position:

tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the

¹¹ J.A. BRUNDAGE, "The married man's dilemma: Sexual morals, canon law, and marital restraint", *Studia Gratiana* 28 (1998), pp. 149-69, especially p. 167; on the authenticity of the *Responsa Gregorii*, see IDEM, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago and London, 1987), pp. 140-141 and the references given there.

¹² L.G. DUGGAN, "For force is not of God?" Compulsion and conversion from Yahweh to Charlemagne", in: *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. MULDOON (Gainesville, Fla., 1997), pp. 49-62.

¹³ Beda, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, I, c. 32, ed. as: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and tr. B. COLGRAVE and R.A.B. MYNORS (Oxford, 1969), p. 113.

idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God.¹⁴

But even to a fellow bishop Gregory was urging a policy of selective destruction of things – of idols, but not of their repositories. It is of great interest, then, that a century and a half later Boniface († 754), the 'Apostle to the Germans', followed Gregory's advice to Ethelbert, not Augustine, in cutting down sacred trees and shrines among the Frisians and the Hessians, including the mighty Oak of Jupiter (i.e. Thor) at Geismar.¹⁵ Several decades later, Charlemagne, ever a man of bold action, went one step further from the destruction of things to the destruction of people in his promotion of Christianity. What Gregory the Great would have thought of his own contribution to the incremental espousal of violence in the onward march of Christianity one can only wonder.

It will doubtless be objected that in this instance Gregory was addressing a question of policy and not epistemology, as in the two famous letters to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles. Let us then suppose that if Gregory did not actually make a mistake, perhaps he did not express himself as well as he might have. After all, this has happened time and again in the history of human thought and expression. Consider Epicurus (341-270 BC), for example, and the peculiar disparity between his actual teachings and the popular understanding of the term 'epicurean'. Epicurus can hardly be blamed for the survival of some of his writings and not of others. In those that are extant, however, he does not state the core of his philosophy as well as he might – to avoid pain rather than to pursue pleasure – and thus contributed inadvertently to widespread misconstrual of his position. Perhaps Gregory the Great similarly did not articulate as precisely as he might his position on images as the books of the illiterate.

The objection will also be voiced that Gregory did not mean his words to be interpreted in these ways, and that what he wrote should not be construed literally or wrenched from its context. Perhaps not, but the indisputable facts are that both did occur with respect to his written words on images as well as on conversion policies. Although Gregory cannot be blamed for what Charlemagne chose to do, Gregory did contribute significantly to the creation of that climate of opinion on which Charlemagne acted. As for our insistence on the distinction

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, c. 30, ed. pp. 106-107.

¹⁵ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, cc. 5-6, 8, ed. in: *Briefe des Bonifatius – Willibalds Leben des Bonifatius nebst einigen zeitgenössischen Dokumenten*, ed. and tr. R. RAU (Darmstadt, 1968: *Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters* 4b), pp. 488, 494-495, 508-512; English tr. in: *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany*, tr. C.H. TALBOT (New York, 1954), pp. 41, 45-46, 55.

between the literal and the metaphorical interpretations of Gregory's words, this typically modern binary opposition was probably inapplicable in the Middle Ages because of the well-developed method of fourfold interpretation of Scripture. In that approach to interpretive thinking not only were the literal and the metaphorical compatible; it easily encouraged movement from one to the other. And in reply to the possible further objection that here we are not dealing with the interpretation of Scripture as such, we must remind ourselves that Gregory the bishop was living and working in a highly sacralized culture suffused with allusions to and evocations of the Bible at almost every turn. This was certainly the case with the images with which we are dealing.

There is yet another possibility we need to consider as well, i.e. the unspoken assumptions behind Gregory's ideas about reading as not being a solitary and silent activity, but rather a communal and aural one. In my article I suggested this possibility when I asked what did Gregory "mean by the verb 'to read' – private silent reading, reading aloud, or some kind of group activity perhaps engaging both illiterates and literates?"¹⁶ I did not explore then what I had posed as a rhetorical question, so allow me to do so now by looking at four different texts illustrating the reception of both images and words by 'interpretive communities' in worlds quite different from our own. We shall work our way backwards in time.

In his *Autobiography*, Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) tells us that upon near-completion of his *Perseus and Medusa* in 1554, his patron, Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany, responded in this way:

For all that the work strikes us as being very beautiful it still has to please the people. So, my dear Benvenuto, before you give it the finishing touches I wonder if you would do me the favour of opening the screen, a little, for half a day, so that it can be seen from my piazza. Then we shall be able to hear what the people think of it.

Cellini complied, and his record of the popular reaction comes as no surprise:

And then, as God would have it, as soon as it was shown, the people praised it with such unrestrained enthusiasm that I was given some consolation. They never left off attaching verses to the posts of the doors ... On that day, when it was on show for a few hours, more than twenty sonnets, all praising my statue to the skies, were attached to the posts. After I had covered it up again, every day a host of sonnets were attached there, and with them Latin and Greek verses as well, since it was vacation

¹⁶ DUGGAN, "Art", p. 64.

for the University of Pisa and all the celebrated professors and scholars rivalled each other in what they wrote.¹⁷

According to Cellini, this kind of reaction was hardly unusual. Earlier he tells us that the dedication of Michelangelo's New Sacristy at San Lorenzo in Florence occasioned the composition of more than a hundred sonnets, but that Bandinello's botched *Hercules and Cacus* elicited more than a thousand sonnets, "all abusing that clumsy abortion".¹⁸ Vilification evidently comes forth far more readily than praise.

In 1311, Duccio di Buoninsegna (ca. 1255-1319) completed his enormous altarpiece, the *Maestà*, for the cathedral in Siena. Its placement there was recorded by one of the city's chroniclers:

And on the day that it was carried to the Duomo the shops were shut, and the bishop conducted a great and devout company of priests and friars in solemn procession, accompanied by the nine signiors, and all the officers of the commune, and all the people, and one after another the worthiest with lighted candles in their hands took places near the picture, and behind came the women and children with great devotion. And they accompanied the said picture up to the Duomo, making the procession around the Campo, as is the custom, all the bells ringing joyously, out of reverence for so noble a picture as this. And this picture Duccio di Niccolò the painter made in the house of the Muciatti outside the gate *a Stalloreggi*. And all that day they stood in prayer with great almsgiving for poor persons, praying God and His Mother, who is our advocate, to defend us by their infinite mercy from every adversity and all evil, and keep us from the hands of traitors and of the enemies of Siena.¹⁹

This was an event bringing together the entire community, lay and clerical, male and female, rich and poor, accompanied by much music and presumably many words, for both a holiday and a holy day to pray that this sacred image might protect Siena against its many enemies.

Just two years earlier, in 1309 Jean de Joinville (1225-1317) completed what Queen Jeanne of Navarre had asked him to write, a life of King St. Louis IX. He begins his account in this revealing way:

¹⁷ Benvenuto Cellini, *Autobiography*, tr. G. BULL (Harmondsworth, 1956), pp. 364-65.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 336, 379.

¹⁹ G. MILANESI, *Documenti per la storia dell'arte senese*, 3 vols. (Siena, 1854), 1, p. 169; tr. in: C.E. NORTON, *Historical Studies of Church-Building in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1880), pp. 144-145.

In the name of God Almighty, I, Jean, Lord of Joinville, Seneschal of Champagne, dictate the life of our good King, Saint Louis, ... so that it may be set down in due order for the edification of those to whom this book is read.²⁰

This one sentence tells us that this book, the first biography by a layman in French, in both its composition and its reception involved more than one person and both the mouth and the ear as well as the eye and the hand.

This passage quite possibly also reminds one of the famous section in Book VI of Augustine's *Confessions* (VI, c. 3) in which he describes coming upon Ambrose reading silently.²¹ Instead of dwelling on this much analysed text, let us turn instead to the book that Ambrose may have been reading and which in any event was the central text for Ambrose, Gregory the Great, and all those other early Christians, some of whom were inspired to create that new product of late antique Christian civilization, the illuminated Bible.

And so we turn to the Bible itself. A reading from the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, chapter the 5th, beginning at the 43rd verse: "Jesus said, 'You have heard that it was said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and shalt hate thy enemy" ' ". We literates accustomed to thinking of the Bible as a book to be read might be struck by Jesus' words "heard" and "said". "Said" may be ambiguous, as in "the book says", but "heard" is not. Perhaps Jesus meant to call attention to the disparity between what the text actually says and what people think it says. For Leviticus 19, 18 clearly enjoins us only to "Love thy neighbour as thyself" and speaks neither of hate nor of enemies (and, incidentally, it also reminds us that the law of love first appears in the Old Testament, not the New, no matter what many Christians prefer to believe). It is the sixth time in the opening chapter of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus speaks in this way – "You have heard that it was said" – but this is the first and only instance in which he was perhaps pointing to a misunderstanding or even perversion of the original text. On killing, adultery, divorce, oaths, and revenge, Jesus quotes the original Old Testament passage accurately. Underscoring received distortions of the law was therefore not the reason for his choice of this repeated mode of allocution. Instead, Jesus is reminding us of how his presumably Hebrew audience came to learn and understand the scriptures either principally or secondarily – through hearing and probably usually as a communal experience. This was doubtless true for women and children, who were presumably present at the

²⁰ Jean de Joinville, *Life of Saint Louis*, I, c. 1, tr. in: *Joinville and Villehardouin, Chronicles of the Crusades*, tr. M.R.B. SHAW (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 167.

²¹ Cf. B. STOCK, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1996), p. 7 and *passim*.

Sermon on the Mount as they certainly were at the miracle of the loaves and fishes. But this common aural experience was true also for Jewish males schooled in the scriptures. Men heard these words recited and chanted by others repeatedly, and they heard the words of God as they reverentially recited them by themselves. Hearing the sacred text was an integral part of the experience. What was true for Jews was no less true for Christians.²²

The Bible. In thinking about this paper and mining medieval and Renaissance sources illuminating the subject of interpretive communities, I had not thought about looking to the Bible itself until I heard a sermon given by the rector of my church, in which he referred to this passage from Matthew. Suddenly it clicked. It was so obvious, particularly since it was the Scriptures and the whole realm of religion that formed the backdrop of Gregory the Great's famous formulation and of so much modern scholarship on 'art' in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

If we reorient ourselves to the Bible, to the world of Gregory and of the Middle Ages, we can again find in medieval texts confirmation of these intimations about how God's Word was received. Consider *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiography in English. In one place Margery (ca. 1373-ca. 1440) speaks of "conversing about scripture, which she learned in sermons and by talking with clerks".²³ Later she begs Almighty God to slake her hunger for His Word by sending her a priest to read Scripture to her. God, having been properly approached, was evidently happy to oblige. A priest came to her in Lynn and "for the most part of seven or eight years" read to her not only the Bible, but also "many a good book of high contemplation", including "doctors' commentaries on it, St. Bride's book, Hilton's book, Bonaventura's *Stimulus amoris*, *Incendium amoris*, and others similar".²⁴ Although no one would argue that Margery Kempe was in any respect typical, her testimony reminds us yet again that in her world sight and sound, reading and hearing, were intermingled in ways we need always to bear in mind, especially when we are trying to figure out whether art was really the "book of the illiterate".

This brings us back to Gregory the Great, this time in his approach to the Bible itself. Michael Camille has pointed out a particularly pertinent passage in Gregory's own writings.²⁵ In the epistolary preface to his *Homilies on the Gos-*

²² Cf. W.A. GRAHAM, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge, 1987).

²³ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, c. 14, tr. B.A. WINDEATT (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 65.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, c. 58, pp. 181-182. For another parallel passage, see *ibid.*, c. 17, p. 75.

²⁵ CAMILLE, "Word, text, image", p. 85.

pels, addressed to Bishop Secundinus of Taormina, Gregory wrote the following:

As part of the sacred ceremonies of the Mass, from those which are customarily read on certain days in this church, I made an exposition of forty readings from the Gospels. And the already dictated exegesis of certain of them was read aloud to the attendant congregation by the scribe, but the explanation of certain others I delivered before the people myself, which was collected in writing (*excepta*) as I spoke. But certain brothers, burning with passion for the sacred Word, recopied them before I could follow my plans for correcting what I had said.²⁶

Camille characterizes the import of this brief passage for our purposes as illustrating “complex and problematic relations between the oral production of [Gregory’s] writings, their aural reception and their eventual visual transcription as writing”. Initially I was not so sure. I assumed that these *lectiones* on the Gospels, collected as *homilia*, were sermons of an exegetical type well known, for example, in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers and John Chrysostom (second half of the fourth century). Things were not that complicated – so I thought. But questions arose upon further reflection. Why would Gregory have his scribe read these prepared *lectiones* to the congregation instead of doing so himself, particularly if the scribe was not a priest? If Gregory did so because of his notoriously poor health, why would he then deliver his as yet unwritten homilies himself? Why should he evidently have so little control over the production of the definitive text of words which he had delivered *ex tempore*? Is this really plausible, or is Gregory employing a classical literary trope – perhaps to apologize proleptically for imperfections in his style? Or is it possible, as I suggested earlier, that Gregory has simply expressed himself poorly here? There may be logical answers to all these questions, but they do not readily come to mind. Therefore we should beware of our assumptions about how Gregory dealt with Scripture.

And so, too, with Gregory and images. It has recently been pointed out that Kurt Weitzmann, that *doyen* of late antique and early Christian art, and his disci-

²⁶ Gregorius Magnus, *Homilia in Evangelia*, ed. R. ÉTAIT (Turnhout, 1999: *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 141), p. 1: “*Inter sacra missarum sollempnia, ex his quae diebus certis in hac ecclesia legi ex more solent, sancti euangelii quadraginta lectiones exposui. Et quarundam quidem dictata expositio assistenti plebi est per notarium recitata, quarundam uero explanationem coram populo ipse locutus sum atque ita ut loquebar excepta est. Sed quidam fratres, sacri uerbi feruentes, antequam ad propositum modum ea quae dixeram subtili emendatione perducerem transtulerunt*”. I have amended Camille’s slightly confusing translation in his “Word, text, image”, p. 85.

ples made fundamental assumptions about early Christian painting. One of them was that “narrative art began in texts”²⁷ and that words were “in or near almost all medieval pictures”. The latter quotation is from one of Weitzmann’s students, Herbert Kessler, who significantly goes on to ruminate on “precisely what Gregory and his followers thought could be learned from *these pictured texts*”.²⁸ But were “pictured texts” that common at the time of Gregory himself? A watchword of historians is that “chronology and geography are the eyes of history”. John Williams and John Lowden have recently argued that Weitzmann got the order wrong: large-scale pictures inspired illustrated Bibles, not vice versa. Words were not *ab initio* in a close physical nexus with, and increasingly in juxtaposition to, images, but became so only gradually.²⁹ The implication is that the kind of association between word and images to which Kessler alludes, which was indeed characteristic of later medieval art, was still infrequent in Gregory’s own age and took root firmly only from the Carolingian period onwards, having passed in some sense through the unusually complex filter of Insular art.³⁰ In short, it is anachronistic to think of a late antique Gregory in this medieval way, and therefore misleading to contextualize and rationalize his words about pictures as the “books of the illiterate” in this manner. Kessler’s governing premise in his refutation of my original argument seems wrong.

Yet if I am right, it is exactly this point which helps to explain why Gregory’s dictum caught on so readily in the Middle Ages and has enjoyed such tenacious vitality down to the present. Later established medieval patterns with the nearly ubiquitous juxtaposition of images and texts came to inform, but also distort, the understanding and interpretation of Gregory’s dictum, and to perpetuate that distortion.

If Gregory’s commentators and advocates were thus in yet another respect wrong – even if understandably so – do I still maintain that Gregory himself was wrong? Rather than repeat the final sentence of my original essay which so thoroughly vexed the reviewers and later readers, allow me to cite again an incomparably higher authority than myself, Dr Samuel Johnson: “Painting, Sir, can illustrate, but not inform”.

²⁷ This apt phrasing is from J. WILLIAMS, “Introduction”, in: *Imaging the Early Medieval Bible*, p. 4.

²⁸ KESSLER, “Diction in the ‘Bibles of the Illiterate’”, p. 33. Emphasis added.

²⁹ WILLIAMS, “Introduction”, pp. 1-8, and LOWDEN, “The beginnings”, especially pp. 52-58.

³⁰ I am particularly grateful to John Lowden for his help in phrasing this distillation of his ideas as precisely as possible.