

“Such a world of books”

Spiritual Reading in Augustine Baker

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Abstract

The central role of reading in the spirituality of Augustine Baker has to some extent been disguised by the “methodical digest” of his doctrine published in 1657 as *Sancta Sophia*. His original writings from Cambrai (1627-1633) reveal a pedagogical concern to mediate sophisticated spiritual texts to less experienced readers, a commitment to revitalise the pre-Dissolution heritage of English spiritual writing by re-reading it in the light of 17th century continental mystical theory, the creation of a range of texts occasioned by the reading of spiritual books and intended to promote and support the reading of such books, and an interplay between reading, writing and interior prayer.

Text

Towards the end of Serenus Cressy’s account of the *Life of Father Augustine Baker*, a full-scale biography which he wrote to accompany the 1657 publication of *Sancta Sophia*,² his digest of Baker’s writings, Cressy offers a “Survey of Fr Baker’s spiritual writings”. Cressy is moved to exclaim that “it would almost seem incredible” that any one man should “compile such a world of books” as Baker left behind him at his death in 1641, the full total numbering in excess of one hundred.³ His extensive literary output witnesses to the fact that the reading, translating and writing of spiritual texts played a determinative role in the life of Augustine Baker, and especially in the formation and articulation of his spirituality.

¹ Cressy, Serenus. “The Life of the Venerable Father, Father Augustine Baker.” The Life of Father Augustine Baker, OSB, (1575–1641) by Fr Peter Salvin and Fr Serenus Cressy. Ed. Justin McCann. London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1933. 144.

² Cressy, Serenus. Sancta Sophia. Or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation &c. Extracted Out of More Than XL. Treatises Written by the Late Ven. Father F. Augustin Baker. Douai, France: Iohn Patte & Thomas Fievet, 1657.

³ Cressy, “Life of Baker,” 144–45.

This paper will argue that a distinctive feature of Augustine Baker's spirituality is its very *bookishness*. The shape of the spirituality that his earliest students took to calling "Fr. Baker's Way"⁴ is to be discovered within the world of books that Baker read, recommended, commented upon and began to compose as he worked as unofficial spiritual director to the monastery of Our Lady of Comfort of the English Dames at Cambrai, between the years 1624 and 1633. In many respects, the nature of these texts has been disguised by Serenus Cressy's achievement in *Sancta Sophia, or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation*, a systematic work of ascetical and mystical theology which has its own importance and history in the annals of English Benedictine spirituality and, indeed, beyond; but the recent work of Dr John Clark in bringing many of the original Baker treatises to publication in modern editions,⁵ along with a renewed recognition among students of Christian mysticism of the need to attend to the literary nature of spiritual texts, makes it possible more easily to study Baker's treatises as witnesses to the interplay of reading, writing and the practice of interior prayer.

Perhaps it is only fair to begin by observing that this tribute from Baker's earliest "abridger", as Cressy called himself, to the extent of his original's literary labours was, ironically, destined to share the fate of the hundred or more Baker texts it describes when Cressy's biography of Augustine Baker was omitted from the published text of *Sancta Sophia* in 1657, for reasons of space. Doubtless, many readers of Cressy's substantial volume would agree that there was a certain pragmatic wisdom to this decision. In the event, Cressy's biography of Baker, and the survey of Baker's original and unpublished writings that it

⁴ Latz, Dorothy L. "Glow-Worm Light": Writings of 17th Century English Recusant Women from Original Manuscripts. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik (Universität Salzburg), 1989. 62.

⁵ See: Clark, John. "Augustine Baker, O.S.B. Towards a Reassessment." Studies in Spirituality 14 (2004): 209–24.

contains, would itself remain in manuscript until 1933, when the indefatigable Justin McCann saw to its publication, only some 276 years later than Cressy had intended.⁶

Hugh Paulinus Cressy (1605-1674), who in religion took the name Serenus, was a 41 year old Anglican priest with an established ecclesiastical career behind him when he became a Roman Catholic in 1646. The former dean of Leighlin and canon of Windsor was never personally acquainted with Augustine Baker, who died while Cressy was still an Anglican; although it is clear from Cressy's *Exomologesis*, an *apologia* he wrote in 1647 defending his conversion, that he had already read some of "the several treatises, as yet manuscripts, of that late very sublime contemplative Fr Augustine Baker" in Rome at the time of his conversion. Cressy writes that "I found myself pressed to hasten my reconcilment to the Church because I thirsted to become capable of practicing those heavenly instructions", and goes on to say that his decision to reverse his previous view of religious life and to enter the noviciate at Douai was prompted by his recognition of the extent to which both that community and the "devout and perfectly religious Benedictine Dames" of Cambrai manifested in their lives the spirit of "the same author's writings".⁷ Doubtless, Cressy's response to this reading of Baker's treatises would have confirmed their author in his view, reported by Baker's *socius* Leander Pritchard, "that more are converted to Catholick religion by the reading of Catholick books then by the disputs of learned men".⁸

Ten years later, and (as a result of the work involved in the composition of *Sancta Sophia*) perhaps more intimately familiar with Augustine Baker's world of books than anyone would ever be again, Cressy reports in his survey of Baker's spiritual writings, that of

⁶ McCann, Justin, ed. The Life of Father Augustine Baker, OSB, (1575–1641) by Fr Peter Salvin and Fr Serenus Cressy. London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1933.

⁷ Cressy, Serenus. Exomologesis or a Faithfull Narrative of the Occasion and Motives of the Conversion Unto Catholique Unity of Hugh-Paulin de Cressy. Paris: Jean Billaine, 1653. 468.

⁸ McCann, Justin, and Hugh Connolly, eds. Memorials of Father Augustine Baker and Other Documents Relating to the English Benedictines. London: Catholic Records Society, 1933. 76.

the manuscript texts he left to posterity a substantial proportion comprise “great volumes of translations and collections” from spiritual writers, of whom Johannes Tauler, Henry Suso and Ludovicus Blosius (Louis de Blois) are mentioned by name, along with the *Vitae Patrum* and “other ancient spiritual fathers and authors, proper to confirm his doctrine”. Aside from these translations, and described by Cressy as deriving “rather from the abundance of his heart than the invention of his brain”, Baker’s original compositions number “near fifty several treatises touching internal prayer and other duties of a contemplative life”. Among these fifty treatises of Baker’s “own framing and invention”, Cressy distinguishes between two groups of texts, written by Baker at different times and in different monasteries, which Cressy finds also to be stylistically distinctive: “for first, some of them are positive instructions, magisterially delivered by way of aphorisms, and such were generally all the treatises written by him at Cambrai. Second, others are more discursive, in which he either solidly proveth or earnestly enforceth some of the former doctrines, and these were afterwards for the most part written at Douai”.⁹

Concluding his survey of Baker’s writings, Cressy is at pains to emphasise that, prolific as Baker’s output was, he “never intended so much as to shadow out the monogram” (that is to say, the first draft or rough sketch) of the “entire body of spirituality” represented by Cressy’s own “methodical abridgement of the doctrine”, *Sancta Sophia*.¹⁰

A part of Cressy’s purpose in making this statement is to draw attention to “how laborious, painful and troublesome an employment” it has been for him to create the methodical digest; that is to say, it is a device that serves discretely to enlarge Cressy’s role as Baker’s abridger. Nevertheless, Cressy’s statement that Baker “never intended” even to sketch out such a methodical and synoptic abridgement of his doctrine points the irony that the book which “historically ... has presented Baker to his readers”¹¹ has at the same time

⁹ Cressy, “Life of Baker,” 145–46.

¹⁰ Cressy, “Life of Baker,” 146.

¹¹ Low, Anthony. *Augustine Baker*. New York, NY: Twayne, 1970. 20.

served substantially to disguise the role played within Baker's spirituality by the diverse range of texts Cressy describes.

It has always been known that Cressy did not create an edition, in our modern sense, of Baker's writings in *Sancta Sophia* but rather "methodically digested" them. In practice, this means that Cressy devised the pattern of a systematic treatise, reordered and combined selected sections from a series of more than forty disparate texts written by Baker for a variety of distinct purposes into that systematic presentation, omitting most of the original material, extensively abridging and completely rewriting Baker's prose and supplying connections of his own composition to hold the whole together.

Cressy's chosen description for his method, the expression "methodically digested", is characteristic of a model of knowledge as abstract, systematic and unitary which had begun to take hold in many areas of European intellectual life by the mid-seventeenth century,¹² and a significant part of Cressy's work in creating *Sancta Sophia* was to present Baker's teaching in the decontextualised, methodical and synoptic manner which had begun to be fashionable at the time. It is Cressy's peculiar achievement to have reshaped Baker's "invertebrate" texts, as Justin McCann once called them, into what has sometimes been characterised as "one of the most lucid and orderly of guides to the contemplative life"¹³ ever written in English. This aspect of Cressy's work generated a concern to assert that his book nevertheless remains faithful to what Baker had originally written. From the seventeenth century onwards a strong distinction has been drawn, therefore, between, on the one hand, the doctrine of contemplative prayer found in Baker's writings, and, on the other, the literary vehicle which carried this doctrine, with the emphasis being placed on the doctrine viewed both as detachable from the literary form and as the more significant element. Cressy himself writes that "there is but one objection that can be made" to the process he has used to create *Sancta*

¹² Chambers, Douglas. The Reinvention of the World, English Writing 1650–1750. London: Arnold, 1996.

¹³ Underhill, Evelyn. Mysticism : A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness. London: Methuen, 1911. 559.

Sophia, “viz. that the said doctrine perhaps is not here faithfully delivered” and he is understandably at pains to rebut such an objection.¹⁴ One of the documents he prefaced to the text of his book is a commendatory letter from Dame Catherine Gascoigne, the Abbess of the Cambrai community for whom Baker had written many of his treatises, and herself a Bakerite of unimpeachable credentials.¹⁵ The letter praises “the great diligence you [i.e. Cressy] have used and the very much labour you have bestowed” in the creation of *Sancta Sophia*, and strongly promotes Cressy’s abridgement as “entirely conformable to his [Baker’s] writings”. Significantly, the Abbess writes “not any that hath read your book and is versed in the Author’s works, hath found any objections to make either of anything wanting or differing from him; but all acknowledge that you have most faithfully, clearly, and substantially delivered his doctrine”.¹⁶

Historically, this view of the relationship between Cressy’s work and that of Baker has prevailed, effectively driving a wedge between what Baker was writing *about*, the doctrinal substance, and the books that he actually *wrote*: as Justin McCann puts it, “the substance of *Sancta Sophia* is Fr Baker’s, whereas the literary form is Fr Cressy’s”.¹⁷ John Clark similarly notes that Cressy’s *Sancta Sophia* is “a masterpiece of distillation”, and finds that although “it is of the nature of the book that it should give a more rounded picture than the original treatises do” the abridgement is “faithful to Fr. Baker’s teaching”.¹⁸ Only the iconoclastic David Lunn has significantly challenged the consensus, judging Cressy to have indeed produced a “masterpiece of systematic mystical theology”, but for that very reason to

¹⁴ Cressy, *Sancta Sophia*, 153.

¹⁵ See: Benedictines of Stanbrook. *In a Great Tradition: A Tribute to Dame Laurentia McLachlan*. London: John Murray, 1956.

¹⁶ Cited in: Cressy, *Sancta Sophia*, 5.

¹⁷ McCann, Justin. “Father Baker’s Tercentenary.” *The Downside Review* 59.180 (Oct 1941): 360.

¹⁸ Clark, “Towards a Reassessment,” 210–11.

have followed a route which Baker would have “execrated, as being at least irrelevant, if not misleading and positively harmful”.¹⁹

Lunn is surely correct to sense that “substance” and “literary form”, to borrow McCann’s terminology, the contemplative doctrine and the textual vehicle, are harder to tease apart than many readers of *Sancta Sophia* have supposed; but, while Baker himself might well have enjoyed the rhetorical vigour of Lunn’s challenge to Cressy, I doubt he would have agreed in any straightforward way with his criticism of *Sancta Sophia*. True, Baker is ambivalent at times about the value of his own writings, and he certainly was not writing with a view to publication to a general audience. Indeed, if one puts to one side issues of congregational politics and doctrinal paranoia, which were endemic throughout this period and surely played their part in the decision to rewrite Baker’s texts, it was essentially because Baker never prepared any account of his spirituality for a wider audience that Cressy was commissioned to do so, as he himself states. But Baker demonstrably values and makes extensive use of systematic treatments of mystical theology by earlier authors. What Baker “execrates”, to use Lunn’s term, is not the *writing* of spiritual textbooks, but rather the misunderstanding and misuse of them, the *mis-reading* of spiritual texts.

But Lunn’s challenge is useful in so far as it draws the attention of the contemporary student of spirituality back to that problematic distinction between literary form and doctrinal substance which historically has hovered like a hermeneutical cloud of unknowing between Baker’s own writings and *Sancta Sophia* as their public record. For most types of writing coming to us from the past, contemporary literary and hermeneutical theory has made it clear that such a distinction is wholly unsustainable. Nevertheless, as the leading contemporary historian of Christian mysticism, Bernard McGinn, has shown, in the specific case of mystical texts a willingness to ignore the significance of literary form has tended to be re-

¹⁹ Lunn, David. *The English Benedictines, 1540–1688, from Reformation to Revolution*. London: Burns and Oates, 1980. 213.

enforced rather than undermined by the theoretical perspectives operating through most of the twentieth century.²⁰

Writing in the first volume of his magisterial history of Western Christian mysticism, “The Presence of God”, McGinn draws attention to “an important misconception that has plagued the modern study of mysticism”. Mystical texts, he argues, have “often been understood in terms of misleading models of a simple distinction between experience and understanding that do justice neither to the texts of the mystics nor to the complexities of the relations between experience and understanding that modern epistemological and cognitional theories have presented to us”. At its crudest, the distinction McGinn is describing would hold that there is, in some sense, a primordial, raw experience enjoyed by the mystic, which may at a later stage come to be understood within a system of confessional religious symbols, and then written down as conceptualised within that belief system. To paraphrase McGinn’s words, when this distinction is applied, mystical texts are viewed as some kind of epiphenomenon, they are a shell or covering that can be peeled off to reveal the “real” thing.

McGinn finds that the widespread belief that a raw mystical experience is in some sense primordial, while its written expression is secondary, can neither be sustained from an examination of mystical texts themselves nor be shown to be philosophically reputable. “The interactions between conscious acts and their symbolic and theoretical thematizations are much more complex than this,” he writes, going on to argue that it is the careful examination of written texts that should occupy pride of place, rather than the misleading quest for a species of raw experience.

One significant consequence for the study of spirituality of an inappropriate focus on “the highly ambiguous notion of mystical experience”, McGinn suggests, has been a failure to attend to the literary nature of spiritual texts, their styles of discourse, modes of organisation, uses of language, or patterns of imagery for example. The belief that

²⁰ McGinn, Bernard. The Foundations of Mysticism. New York: Crossroad publishing company, 1991. Vol. 1 of The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism. xiii-xv.

“autobiographical mystical experience” is the subject to be studied “has blocked careful analysis of the special hermeneutics of mystical texts, which have usually been treated without attention to genre, audience, structure, and even the simplest procedures for elucidating the study of the text. Mystical masterpieces ... have all too often been treated like phone books or airline schedules: handy sources for confirming what we already expect”.

McGinn argues that a second result of the widespread fascination with the *chimera* “mystical experience” has been “an emphasis on first-person, autobiographical accounts of special visionary or unitive experiences of God”, an emphasis which has led to sterile debates about whether such-and-such a person is truly a mystic when their writings either lack such accounts (in the case, for example, of Pseudo-Dionysius) or include accounts clearly modelled upon prior literary sources (in the case, for instance, of Augustine of Hippo). By contrast, McGinn stresses the “textually and theologically mediated nature of all Christian mysticism” and the fact that the Christian mystic is involved in “a life-long spiritual journey – all the preparations for, and reflections upon which, comprise mysticism in its fullest sense”.²¹ In McGinn’s view, then, “rather than being something added on to mystical experience, mystical theory in most cases precedes and guides the mystic’s whole way of life”.

With this perspective from Bernard McGinn in mind, I have taken Cressy’s survey of Augustine Baker’s world of books as a gateway into his spirituality, and specifically as a pointer towards the reading, translating and writing of mystical texts as central to it. The newly published editions of many of Baker’s original treatises, edited by John Clark, invite a new exploration of Baker’s spirituality as a resource for monastics and others which involves us in moving away from discussion of Baker’s spiritual teaching independently of his sometimes frustrating literary forms. Instead of the serene system of *Sancta Sophia* we encounter a more rough hewn spirituality which arises from, is guided by and gives rise to written texts. Baker’s original writings make it abundantly clear that his exploration of what

²¹ McIntosh, Mark A. Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 31.

McGinn calls “mystical theory” stands at the centre of Baker’s contribution to 17th century English Benedictine spirituality, and so it is not with Baker as the author of a completed mystical system that I shall be concerned here, nor indeed with the issue (which is not absent from contemporary discussion of Baker) as to whether or not he enjoyed unitive mystical experiences; my concern here will be with the image of Baker as the reader of mystical texts, which, as McGinn has suggested, usually “precede and guide the mystic’s whole way of life”.

An emblematic moment is narrated by Baker in his biographical treatise *The Life and Death of Dame Gertrude More* (c. 1635/6), which, although written after Baker’s departure from Cambrai nevertheless offers valuable insights into the context of Baker’s writing during that period.²² In the passage that interests me, Baker pictures himself (under the pseudonym Fr Anonimus) at a point in 1625 reading to the young Dame Gertrude More and another Cambrai sister from Constantine de Barbanson’s book, *The Secret Paths of Divine Love*, a work of mystical theology of which Baker made extensive use and strongly promoted at Cambrai.²³ The passage illustrates several dimensions of Baker’s self-presentation as a reader of spiritual texts.

“In the beginning of this course of hers, that was much subject to those desolations, Anonimus one daie was reading to her and another some things out of a booke called, *De Semitis occultis Divini Amoris*; in French, *Secre Sentiers*, etc.; the which he having in Latein, he readde to them in English; and therein he hapned to reade a certain place concerning Desolations; which was as followeth; *videlicet*: ‘There are some, who are leadde by great ariditie, indevotion, and without the sensible perceaving of the divin correspondence; in so much that they knowe not on which side to turne themselves for to finde meanes to help or elevate them towards God. Thes indeed can do no better in such a case, then in such their

²² Baker, Augustine. The Life and Death of Dame Gertrude More, Edited from All the Known Manuscripts. Ed. Ben Wekking. *Analecta Cartusiana*. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 2002.

²³ Barbanson, Constantin de. Les Secrets Sentiers de l’Amour Divin, Esquels Est Cachee la Vraye Sapiencie Celeste & le Royaume de Dieu en Nos Ames. Paris: Desclée & Co, 1932. 1623.

povertie of spirit and ariditie to be contented, yet doeng the best they are able. And then lette them confort themselves with the divin will, and accommodate all their exercises for to arrive to the true love of God.’ And here ende the words of the said Author in this point, the which Anonimus having readde to those two in order, after some other things out of the same Author, our Virgin was somewhat strucken with it, and suddenly said: ‘O, O, that must be my waie, I prairie you (said she to him) lette me have that place translated into English’. And so Anonimus did, and gave it to her, and she made great use of the doctin, and continued her prairie with great profit, notwithstanding all desolations, which were frequent to her.’²⁴

In this passage, Baker pictures himself in a pedagogical relationship with the two nuns, fundamental to which is his role as reader of the Barbanson book. There are several points to be made about Baker’s self-presentation in this text which illuminate the role of reading in his spirituality.

First, we notice that Baker is not simply reciting the text, which is in Latin, but is reading it and translating it into English for his scholars; thus Baker personally mediates the Barbanson text to Dame Gertrude and her companion, becoming the conduit between the mystical theology of *The Secret Paths of Divine Love* and the Cambrai community. The first point we might note from this passage, then, is Baker’s self-presentation as reader and mediator of the works of other spiritual writers, which is foregrounded here and is Baker’s characteristic self-presentation throughout the Cambrai treatises. If one attempts a chronological reading of Baker’s works, *A Spiritual Treatise ... Called A.B.C.* which was written at Cambrai c.1627 has a good claim to contain some of Baker’s earliest spiritual writings.²⁵ This three-part work, which is described on its title page as “composed and collected” by Baker, is dominated by lengthy sections of “collections” (as Baker terms them) of passages from favoured spiritual authors, selected and transcribed by Baker, perhaps for use in just such periods of public spiritual reading as the one described in this passage.

²⁴ Baker, *The Life and Death of Dame Gertrude More*, 37–38.

²⁵ Baker, Augustine. *A Spiritual Treatise.. Called A.B.C.* Ed. John Clark. *Analecta Carthusiana*. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 2001.

Throughout the Cambrai treatises, Baker maintains this practice to a greater or lesser extent. In several cases, whole treatises arise from Baker's fascination with earlier texts. For example, the *Secretum Sive Mysticum*, written c.1629/30, (the work from which Justin McCann extracted and rearranged a selection of passages which he published in 1922 as *The Confessions of Venerable Father Augustine Baker*, thereby tending to create the view that the *Secretum* is in some sense Baker's "spiritual autobiography") in its original form presents itself as a commentary on *The Cloud of Unknowing*.²⁶ Indeed, it is a commentary on the *Cloud* (which, although Baker dates wrongly, he knows to be an "old English book") as seen through the prism of two of Baker's other favourite authors, contemporary early modern Catholic writers. One of Baker's last works at Cambrai, the *Vox Clamantis in Deserto Animae* of c.1632 sets out to offer a commentary on Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, and although Baker, characteristically, abandons this project within a few pages of the text it remains significant that this was his original plan.²⁷ If there is one dominant self-image of Augustine Baker in the books he wrote in Cambrai, that image is of Baker the reader of spiritual texts, a reader whose pedagogic purpose in writing is the mediation of these texts to less experienced readers.

Next, it is helpful to attend to the text Baker is reading to Dame Gertrude. Constantine de Barbanson (1581-1632), a Belgian Capuchin friar who lived and worked in Cologne and later in Hamburg, is a slightly younger contemporary of Baker, and wrote *The Secret Paths of Divine Love* in French in about 1617, although Baker here pictures himself making use of the Latin edition of 1623. Significantly, what Baker is described as reading to the two sisters is a work of spirituality which, in 1625, is absolutely of the moment. The very latest in continental Catholic spirituality is foregrounded in this encounter between these three exiled recusants, the two English nuns and their Welsh teacher. Not until 1657, and then quite

²⁶ Baker, Augustine. *Secretum*. Ed. John Clark. *Analecta Cartusiana*. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1997.

²⁷ Baker, Augustine. *Vox Clamantis in Deserto Animae*. Ed. John Clark. *Analecta Cartusiana*. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 2004.

possibly in part because of Baker's promotion of this text at Cambrai, would an English edition of *The Secret Paths* appear in print. More than thirty years earlier, Baker is accessing Latin, the international language of scholarship, which in this period usually means male scholarship, to bring his two female disciples into contact with a pattern of spirituality which would otherwise not be available to them.

It has become something of a commonplace to describe Baker as the "final flowering of the pre-Reformation English mystical tradition".²⁸ It is certainly true, as J.T. Rhodes has noted, that Baker's "interest in and knowledge of mediaeval English spiritual authors was probably more extensive than any of his contemporaries",²⁹ and it is to Baker and the "Cambrai school" that we owe the survival into modern times of many pre-Reformation English spiritual texts.³⁰ But, as John Clark points out, while Baker is "deeply appreciative of the pre-Dissolution English contemplative tradition, the key writers for his spiritual formation belong rather to mainland Europe".³¹ It is unhelpful, therefore to consider Baker's spirituality as, in any simple sense, a continuation into the early modern period of the outlook of the English 14th century. His outlook is of a piece with the preoccupations of his own times, thus Clark can write of Baker's view of *The Cloud of Unknowing* "The *Cloud* is precious to Fr Baker, but its importance and authority lie in the fact that it anticipates teaching that is found in two authoritative and widely read authors of Fr Baker's own day",³² one of whom is the same Barbanson from whom he is reading to Dame Gertrude in this passage. Of the *Cloud*

²⁸ Woodward, Michael, ed. *That Mysterious Man. Essays on Augustine Baker OSB.* Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2001 Cover material.

²⁹ Rhodes, J. T. "Some Writings of a Seventeenth-Century English Benedictine Dom Augustine Baker OSB." *Yale University Library Gazette* 67.3-4 (Apr 1993): 111.

³⁰ Spearritt, P. "The Survival of Medieval Spirituality Among the Exiled English Black Monks." *American Benedictine Review* 25 (1974): 287-316.

³¹ Clark, "Towards a Reassessment," 220.

³² Clark, John. *Secretum, Introduction and Notes.* Analecta Cartusiana. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 2003. 23.

and Barbanson, Baker writes in the *Secretum* that they “are of one effect” and “I will endeavour to show as much”.³³

Thus, the second point we might note from this passage is Baker’s self-presentation as one who mediates between the re-founded English Benedictine monastic movement, which represents a re-invention of the now fractured medieval English contemplative tradition, and the continuing stream of continental Catholic spirituality; which by the early 17th century has renewed itself and moved in new directions, particularly towards a preoccupation with the psychology of the individual which is largely absent from the earlier tradition.³⁴

Baker records for us Dame Gertrude’s exclamation at the Barbanson passage, which, we are told, has affected her deeply. Notice that Baker goes on: “ ‘I praie you (said she to him) lette me have that place translated into English’. And so Anonimus did, and gave it to her”. Once again, the story is emblematic of Baker’s time in Cambrai, and of the process which led to the written texts he produced there. We might note as the third point to emerge from a reading of this passage that Baker repeatedly expresses the motive behind his writing as having to do with the situation of the nuns among whom he is working: personal requests or individual needs, as is the case here, or more frequently, his own recognition of a deficiency in the resources available to them for their spiritual formation; that is to say, he is either asked to write books or recognises that a book on a specific topic is required. His writing of spiritual texts exists in relationship with his reading and teaching from such texts.

“The present author hath bin driven to this,” he writes in the treatise, *A secure stay in all temptations* (c.1629/30),³⁵ a powerful choice of language on Baker’s part to describe, in

³³ Baker, *Secretum*, 9.

³⁴ Higgins, Sister M St Teresa, C.S.J. “Augustine Baker.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation. *Augustine Baker*. University of Wisconsin: Wisconsin, 1963. 32.

³⁵ Baker, Augustine. *A Secure Stay in All Temptations*. Ed. John Clark. *Analecta Cartusiana*. Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1998. 2.

this case, his writing a treatise to meet a perceived lack of appropriate books.³⁶ But whether driven or by his own choice, Baker always writes in response to issues which arise from spiritual reading: to offset the over-severe books he argues are too plentiful in his own day, to address issues appropriate to the contemplative life which he believes are not adequately covered in the books he has acquired for the nuns, to translate texts that are not available in English, to determine the authorship of texts where this matter is in dispute, or to compare books to discover whether or not they are in agreement, to explain how to read certain texts, or how to understand specific expressions, to show that mystic authors sometimes use differing terminology to describe the same matters, and even to say why it does not always matter if one fails to understand what is read.

We might almost say that something like Dame Gertrude's request stands writ large behind all of Baker's Cambrai texts, which are the fruits of the relationship between the author, the nuns for whom he is writing, and the spiritual texts he is reading with them. Baker's treatises are wholly contextualised works, unlike public writing produced for a general audience, and this must be at least a part of the reason for that infamously shapeless quality which has so often been remarked upon. Baker does very often write by what Justin McCann accurately termed the "method of accumulation", by which McCann meant that Baker just added things when they occurred to him; but it is significant to note at the same time that what tends to accumulate in Baker's treatises is a series of approaches to the reading of spiritual books.

A fourth and final point to be drawn from this emblematic encounter between Baker and his young disciple lies in the role that reading plays in setting Dame Gertrude in her "way", the dynamic between reading and interior prayer. After Baker has read the Barbanson passage, Gertrude is, he tells us "somewhat stricken with it, and suddenly said: 'O, O, that must be my waie'", going on to ask for a written copy of Baker's translation of the passage,

³⁶ On this see: Truran, Margaret. "'The Present Author Hath Been Driven to This': What Needs Was Fr Baker Trying to Meet?" That Mysterious Man, Essays on Augustine Baker 1575–1641. Ed. Michael Woodward. Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2001. 70–81.

which he tells us that he supplied. Gertrude, he writes, “made great use of the doctin, and continued her praier with great profit”. Dame Gertrude’s progress in her spiritual course is portrayed as the fruit of the reading and re-reading of a spiritual text which Baker translates and writes down for her. In some sense, Dame Gertrude “finds herself” in the book which Baker is reading to her. This interplay between the individual’s “spiritual course” and the reading of spiritual texts is a recurrent preoccupation in Baker’s work.

At several points in the Cambrai treatises, Baker is effectively writing down what amounts to a curriculum of the spiritual life as he understands it, and in a text such as *A Spiritual Alphabet for the Use of Beginners* this intention is absolutely explicit.³⁷ Early in this text we find Baker making reference to the newcomer to the religious life as a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet of paper, an image which is highly suggestive in this context. Baker makes the conventional point that such a soul must now learn a new mode of being, different from that of the world. But it is surely no accident that having raised this issue, which might have led in any one of a number of directions, Baker’s mind turns immediately to “the books that the soul is to use at the first for her spiritual instruction”. He next refers the reader to his own book lists³⁸ in *Directions for Contemplation, Book H*,³⁹ and “for further instructions in particulars, I do refer the soul to other books”.⁴⁰ The *Spiritual Alphabet* certainly recognises the importance of what Baker terms an “instructor”, who is to “guid a scholar in the way”, but it is to the books that the “scholar” is to use that Baker returns repeatedly, and with detailed instructions: “For ye right use of sensible devotion, I wish her to peruse the *Book H*, in ye later end of the treatise *De Custodia Cordis*, what I have there brought in out of

³⁷ Baker, Augustine. *Alphabet and Order*. Ed. John Clark. Analecta Cartusiana. Salzburg, Austria: Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universitat Salzburg, 2001.

³⁸ Rhodes, J. T. “Dom Augustine Baker’s Reading Lists.” *Downside Review* July 1993 1993: 157–73.

³⁹ Baker, Augustine. *Directions for Contemplation, Book H*. Ed. John Clark. Analecta Cartusiana. Salzburg, Austria: Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universitat Salzburg, 2000.

⁴⁰ Baker, *Alphabet and Order*, 5.

Harpius, which maketh six leaves of my writing”.⁴¹ It is as if even in the context of an enclosed, contemplative community, Baker, the spiritual autodidact, cannot conceive of the pursuit of a spiritual course other than as a dialogue with a set of spiritual books.

As John Clark has shown, a key text for understanding the nature of Baker’s project is the *Secretum sive Mysticum*. The *Secretum* is presented by Baker as “an exposition of the book called *The Cloud*”, but Baker weaves into this exposition a series of passages which are almost certainly an autobiographical account of his own “spiritual course”. Baker draws attention to the origins of the particular copy of *The Cloud* owned by the Cambrai community in the “private library of Fr Benet Fitch, our countryman, the Capuchin, author of the book called *The Will of God*”, whose spirituality Baker is at pains to promote throughout the *Secretum*, alongside that of Constantine de Barbanson, author of *Secrets Sentiers*. The *Secretum* also contains extended translations from the *Institutio Spiritualis* of Louis de Blois and passages from Tauler, Herp, and several of Baker’s other favourite authors. Thus, in a single work Baker brings together a variety of spiritual texts with his own commentary on those texts, as well as allowing them to comment on one another; at the same time he illustrates both the texts and the commentary with sections of autobiographical material, which itself is illuminated by the passages he quotes. Baker’s description and classification of his own interior experiences in the *Secretum* is a process he has learned in the course of reading the explorations of others; the very form of the *Secretum* is an illustration of the extent to which Baker understands the spiritual life to be mediated by the reading and writing of texts. In effect, we come full circle back to Bernard McGinn’s astute and seminal observation that “rather than being something added on to mystical experience, mystical theory in most cases precedes and guides the mystic’s whole way of life”. At the moments when Baker comes closest to being “autobiographically mystical”, he is simultaneously most powerfully preoccupied by “mystical theory”.

⁴¹ Baker, Alphabet and Order, 13.

My argument, then, has been that the central role of reading in the spirituality of Augustine Baker has to some extent been disguised by the “methodical digest” of his doctrine published in 1657 as *Sancta Sophia*. When we look behind that systematic digest to Baker’s original “world of books”, and consider the forms of writing which Baker actually undertook, we discover a figure who placed the reading of mystical theory at the centre of his life and devoted his energies to exploring the mystical tradition for himself, and communicating it to his disciples. I have suggested that we can discern four aspects to Baker’s interaction with mystical texts in his writings: a pedagogical concern to mediate sophisticated spiritual texts to less experienced readers, a commitment to revitalise the pre-Dissolution heritage of English spiritual writing by re-reading it in the light of 17th century continental mystical theory, the creation of a range of texts occasioned by the reading of spiritual books and intended to promote and support the reading of such books, and an interplay between reading, writing and interior prayer.

An account of Baker’s reading is far from being the whole story of his spirituality. Nevertheless, Baker the monastic reader raises significant challenges for monastics today. The challenges relate to the issues of spiritual pedagogy and initiation into the tradition of mystical thought, matters which we have seen to be central to Baker’s project. How should monastics of today bring the rich resource of the western spiritual tradition to bear upon the concerns of modern people, especially those who come to our monasteries seeking the guidance of those experienced in the ways of the spirit? Are we monastic readers of today able to access and communicate even a fraction of the range of texts Baker counted as familiar friends? Have we the skills and the confidence in using that resource to guide others to spiritual freedom which won so many disciples to “Fr Baker’s way”?

As J.T. Rhodes remarks, Augustine Baker was a man for whom books were always a “primary resource and interest”.⁴² At the time of his conversion to Catholicism, between 1600 and 1603, Baker effectively read his way into the Church; it was from books that he derived

⁴² Rhodes, “Some Writings of a Seventeenth-Century English Benedictine Dom Augustine Baker OSB’,” 110.

much of his training in the monastic life and his understanding of contemplative prayer;⁴³ and when he was removed from Cambrai in 1633 and from Douai in 1638 he might, in both instances, be said to have written his way out of each monastery. Books were both the central tools he employed in his spiritual labours, and the enduring fruit of those labours.

It will come as no surprise after all that has been said above to discover that Baker found time to write a short treatise with detailed instructions as to how books should be safely treasured in a well-constructed monastery library,⁴⁴ but it would be to misrepresent this bookish man were we to fail to note that he also writes that “if all the books in the world were burnt and lost, and that one had not any man to instruct him, yet if the soul will prosecute prayer, abstraction and undergo necessary mortifications, observing God and his call both interiorly and exteriorly, and so forsaking and renouncing himself in spirit and body, having God and his love, will and honour for his final intention such a one would walk clearly, securely, and arrive to an happy end, which God send us all. Amen.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Rees, Daniel. “Some Factors in the Formation of Fr Baker.” That Mysterious Man, Essays on Augustine Baker 1575–1641. Ed. Michael Woodward. Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2001. 13.

⁴⁴ The text of Baker’s “Concerning the Librarie of this Howse” can be found in: Cramer, Anselm. ““The Librarie of This Howse’: Augustine Baker’s Community and Their Books.” “Stand up to Godwards”: Essays in Mystical and Monastic Theology in Honour of the Reverend John Clark on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday. Ed. James Hogg. Salzburg, Austria: Institut fur anglistik und amerikanistik, universitat Salzburg, 2002. 108–10.

⁴⁵ Baker, Augustine. Directions for Contemplation: Book D. Ed. John Clark. Analecta Carthusiana. Salzburg: Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universitat Salzburg, 1999. 107.

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