When we teach, what are we actually doing with words?

Our everyday way of talking and thinking about teaching tends to call upon the resources of two distinct models. Although we rarely make our tacit understanding of these two models explicit in our ordinary comings and goings as teachers, they enjoy a vastly unequal status and dictate widely divergent sets of priorities—though both travel under the name of “teaching.” Much of the resulting friction—and, I would argue, the indirect cause of many of our misconceptions about and frustrations in the act of teaching—lies in the way these competing models depend upon mutually incommensurable ideas about the nature and function of language. The first of these models approaches language as an instrument of representation and finds its paradigm in the declarative statement; the second approaches language as a medium of action and finds its paradigm in the open-ended question.

In this essay, I want first of all to disentangle these two models from each other as well as come to terms with the concepts of language upon which either
one depends. The end products of this disentanglement should strike the reader as neither novel nor revolutionary, but this is precisely the point: to make explicit, conscious, and amenable to critique what may otherwise remain implicit, “obvious,” and therefore beyond the reach of argument. I will then turn to an examination of a pair of texts from the Western tradition in which the discursive and practical strategies by which one or the other model is typically realized, for both teacher and student, are carried up to and even beyond their logical limits. Augustine's De Magistro and Søren Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments are “didactic” texts in the eminent sense: because they are about teaching, but also seek in fact to teach their readers, these texts simultaneously articulate certain ideas about the nature and end of teaching as well as pursue the realization of these ideas all the way through to their ultimate ramifications. By exploring the complex and often paradoxical interplay of language and concept in these works, the parallel readings I offer demonstrate that these widely divergent texts turn on the same fundamental problem about the power of language both to represent and to interrogate reality, both to point out and to call out the world. Furthermore, I hope to show that the protracted and still unresolved struggles in scholarly discourse to clarify and justify the central concepts of either writer's thought on teaching—for Augustine, the concept of illumination, and for Kierkegaard, that of indirect communication—stand to gain a great deal from being brought into shared commerce around this fundamental dichotomy in the way we think about language.

By the end, I hope to have clarified how an intellectual and practical distinction within the art of teaching that may at first appear obvious may have only become so because we have successfully forgotten the questions to which this distinction was first addressed as an answer. These are fundamental questions that
concern our habits of thinking about language and understanding, and by rights they should appear no more immediately transparent to us than they did to Augustine and Kierkegaard. Through their answers, at least, we stand a good chance of coming back into contact with the questions themselves. Furthermore, and perhaps paradoxically in light of the work of disentanglement necessary to begin this discussion, I hope to show that the only pathway out of the aporia we arrive at after having followed Augustine's and Kierkegaard's critiques to their conclusions lies in recognizing that these models are necessarily complementary to and even entangled in each other—but that we must carefully rearticulate the nature of this entanglement.

In what ways, then, are our concept of teaching, and by necessity also our concept of the language we use in teaching, potentially divided against themselves? The first model of teaching I want to discuss here seems so familiar and so simple as hardly to warrant scrutiny—and much of the time teachers and non-teachers alike take it to be the only legitimate model. When a teacher understands her own words as communicating a discrete, structured content from her own mind to that of her student, teaching must be defined as an act of *transfer*. The teacher accomplishes this transfer by setting aside the student's own firsthand efforts at understanding the world and offering instead the clearest and most accurate representation of the world, knowledge of which the student then acquires by appropriating the teacher's representation. Within the hierarchy of activities dictated by this model, the successful transfer of knowledge requires that the student accept the teacher's
representation as authoritative—that is, as equal or superior in value to whatever firsthand discoveries or experiences the student could have undertaken on her own.

The transfer model of teaching, as I will call it, thus clearly assigns a distinct and powerful role to the language used by the teacher. The more enthusiastically the student appropriates the representation of the world expressed in this language, the less that language can afford to advertise itself to the student as secondhand representation, and the more the student must believe she has in fact developed a firsthand relationship to "the way things are." The student approaches the world as if, in listening to the teacher speak, she encountered the presence of the things themselves, and not simply the teacher's highly mediated representation of them. The power and the danger of this form of solicitude in teaching should be clear enough even from this brief description. While the world (hopefully) appears brilliantly illuminated in the teacher's language, as something amenable to the student's grasp and responsive to her actions, this luminous version of reality remains the secondhand effect of a single individual's speech.¹ A subtle shadow is cast across the luminous world of the lecturer: at every point, the transfer model of teaching threatens to consign the student to a deep and self-forgetting dependence on the language of the teacher. The teacher's words may indeed liberate the student from the arduous task of learning from firsthand experience, but by that very liberation she is burdened all the more by being forced back into silence, rendered unable to speak for herself. In short, the transfer model leaves in abeyance the idea that teaching should help the student cultivate a self-conscious capacity for firsthand understanding, for arriving at insight quite literally on her own terms—that is, in her own words.
As we turn from the transfer model of teaching to its counterpart, we are immediately struck by the extent to which, in our everyday experience of teaching, we speak the language, as it were, of the transfer model even as we strive in actuality to accomplish the incommensurable aim posited by its counterpart. Whereas in the transfer model teaching is defined as the transfer of knowledge to a student who remains substantially unchanged by the experience, this second model has as its whole purpose the curiously indirect transformation of the student.

Teaching that aims at the transformation of the learner must create a set of direct, firsthand relationships between the learner and what is learned, on the one hand, and between the learner and herself, as the possessor of heretofore unacknowledged possibilities, on the other. The transformative model of teaching, as I will call it, gives the student at once something less and something more than simply another body of knowledge borrowed from her teacher. The transformative teacher seeks to create a set of favorable circumstances for the student to come into possession of her own properly human possibilities for the first time, and hence to make herself into nothing short of a new person. The teacher of the transfer model, as we saw, seeks to safeguard the accuracy and clarity of her authoritative representations and to ensure the ease with which they will be appropriated by the student. In the transformative model, however, the teacher must delicately calibrate her own exercise of authority against the ultimate goal of allowing and even requiring the student to liberate herself from that authority and to forge her own understanding of the world at first hand.

Realizing this aim in practice requires the use of a very peculiar kind of language. It would be impossible to imagine such a procedure unfolding through a form of communication that entirely forgoes the sort of discrete structured content
with which we are acquainted from the transfer model. Nonetheless, when the teacher's aim is to transform rather than simply transact, the positive content of representational speech must take a backseat to its capacity to provoke the hearer's reflection beyond the mere appropriation of “knowables.” Instead, the teacher's primary effort must be to motivate and direct, rather than to replace, the student's efforts toward firsthand understanding. But how can she do this with words? The language of the properly transformative teacher must present not a luminous and amenable version of reality, but instead an image of life shot through with both the darkness of contradiction and the provocation of beauty. This language must offer the student not the palpable, finite relief of the world-riddle at last unlocked in a series of authoritative declarations, but rather the interminable injury and the insatiable desire imposed by the quintessential “hard saying,” a discourse corroded with half-formed questions and obscure imperatives. This refractory vista of words, both defiant and inviting, must be presented in such a way as to stir the student's passion to a pitch that could maintain it for an entire lifetime—or indeed, several lifetimes. Where the transfer model delivers a series of flat declarations addressed to no one in particular, the transformative model must call on the student by name and put to her directly the question of her own being—or, indeed, must put being itself before her in the form of a question. To this end, the real challenge of communication under the transformative model lies in finding and applying a form of speech that simultaneously overperforms and undercuts the authority of the teacher, a method of teaching which, like Penelope at her loom, constantly unweaves what it has woven. The teacher's words must at last leave the student standing alone—not in front of a string of lapidary statements that have been transmitted to her as a finished possession, but before the enormity of an
open question that she and she alone is entirely free to answer, and in her own words, because that question is herself.

Now we can begin to perceive the centrality of this conflict to the thought of Augustine and Kierkegaard, both of whom sought to think through to the end the question of whether language, which by its very nature constantly receives, reproduces, and retransmits secondhand experiences, has any role to play in teaching at all. The avowedly Christian concerns that animated both thinkers play a crucial role here, not because their thought is only relevant in a confessional context, but because Christianity was for both men primally rooted in the irreplaceable, irreducible individuality of the individual. For Augustine as for Kierkegaard, the truth of Christianity—in conversion, in salvation, in the life of faith as it confronts the world—could only be won through a singularly intimate and inward firsthand understanding. These are indeed thinkers for whom, as Kierkegaard wrote, “When God speaks he uses the person to whom he is speaking, he speaks to the person through the person himself.” Hence the question of language and teaching that so exercised their wits: how can the most characteristically firsthand truths be taught at the secondhand distance of speech? This question formulates not just the basic problem posed by language to Christian belief, but also the problem of language and teaching as such.

More broadly, perhaps, we can also begin to appreciate some of the reasons for the mutual interference between the two models of teaching, an interference we experience so often without our being able to explain or describe its causes. Under the terms of the transfer model, language primarily signifies reality. If the nature of language consists in the way that words refer to or point at the world, then under this model, the referring or pointing itself grants knowledge of what is referred to or
pointed at. Reality, as the intended meaning of language, is made *virtually present* to its hearer in words, without further ado. Granted, this picture of language is obviously faulty and naïve, it dramatically overstates the authority of the speaker, and it has little or no truck with the modern conception of language as an inescapably self-referential system of differentiated values. Nonetheless, it forms part of the essential conceptual background to the participation of both teacher and student in the transfer model, as well as to many of our everyday habits in using language. In order to say something in an ordinary way, and certainly in order to teach something in an ordinary way, we usually assume that the signifying function of speech is strong and supple enough to “get at” reality and hand it over to whoever is listening.

In the transformative model of teaching, on the other hand, the apparent power of language must be deliberately broken—not in spite of, but for the sake of what is taught and, above all, for the sake of the person to whom it is taught. Language that smoothly conveys the mind from sign to signified must now constantly fall short of the presence of the real, must abandon the hearer at some point on the way. Rather than referring to or pointing out a world that is already a coherent and present whole, even the teacher's firmest declarative statements must rebound upon themselves as tacit questions and reflect the world back upon itself as a problem.³ If we think of words that transfer knowledge to the student as bright, supple, and meaningful—in a word, as “strong,” then paradoxically the words that incite the student's self-transformation must withdraw into darkness and indeterminacy: they are and must be “weak.”

In their thinking about the words and works of the teacher, both Augustine and Kierkegaard reckon with the role of language in teaching on both horns of this
dilemma: on the one hand, to arrive at an accurate estimate of the strength of language to teach the truth, and on the other, to deploy the very weakness that they discover in words to teach what words in all their strength cannot get across. For Augustine, the self-aware weakness of a certain kind of teacherly language—a language he gradually learns to employ in his dialogue with his son—simply acknowledges the powerlessness of human language in general to establish presence when measured against the presence of the world without and the truth within, both of which are illuminated by God. For Kierkegaard, the same self-imposed weakness contributes to an ironic critique of the deceptions and distortions of philosophical language, which in the effort to teach spiritual truth by secondhand representation destroys its capacity to enact firsthand transformation. By parodizing and ironizing this language to the very limits of duplicity, Kierkegaard aims to perform for his reader the same paradoxical service Augustine performs for his son: to teach from a distance a truth that is nonetheless learned from up close, to teach through silence something quite other than what one teaches in speech.

Augustine's *De Magistro* (*The Teacher*, 389 CE) balances the failure of language to re-present the world to the intellect against the indispensability of language in directing or turning the intellect toward the inner presence of an eternal truth freely and continually granted by God. Having fought his way through the faulty assumptions of the transfer model, Augustine arrives finally at a theologically qualified version of the transformative model. In the process of doing so, he manages to construe language as *both* incapable of delivering understanding in and of itself *and* constantly provoking the soul to turn itself toward and strive after that
understanding. Arguing thus for both a radical downgrading of the representational power of language and an enormous promotion in its ethical and spiritual significance, Augustine resolves the impasse between the two disparate models of teaching by virtue of a kenotic reinterpretation of both. On the one hand, he gradually “empties out” the representational claims of the transfer model as a product of vain delusion on the part of human language against the immediate “presentation” of truth, here enacted by the divine Word. On the other hand, he formulates the transformative model such that the teacher’s words, by consciously emptying themselves of any authoritative claim, come to possess their proper value as incitements to firsthand inner contact with Christ the Teacher. As Phillip Cary writes, words for Augustine are “fundamentally admonitions, directing our attention, trying to get us to turn our hearts in a different direction from before.”

The literary construction of the work, furthermore, which presents itself as a philosophical dialogue between Augustine and his son Adeodatus, realizes this turnabout in dramatic form. The teacher, by undertaking a (mild, and quickly unmasked) verbal deception, allows the student to free himself from both the authority of human teachers and the false claims of human language to do anything more than point the way to a firsthand encounter with truth. In a masterstroke of irony, Augustine’s bravura concluding monologue at once displays and undercuts the prowess of teachers to engender an illusory world in words: after all, the universe without and the truth within, both created by the divine Word, show themselves without any sign or intermediary in the experience of illumination.

If Augustine’s inquiry ends up affirming the priority of firsthand learning from the divine Word over secondhand learning from the human word, its end is already implied in its beginning. The opening of the discussion rapidly establishes teaching
as the purpose of language, but Augustine’s first move—significantly, in light of what follows—is to eliminate the possibility that learning plays an equally decisive role:

ADEODATUS: How do you suppose we learn, after all, if not when we ask questions?
AUGUSTINE: Even then I think that we want only to teach. I ask you: do you question someone for any reason other than to teach him what you want [to hear]? (1.1.8–12)

By establishing declarative, representational speech as the paradigm and interrogative statements as a variant, Augustine has already imported the assumptions of the transfer model into a working notion of the teacher’s task. Right away, however, Adeodatus voices the theological problem posed by the language of prayer addressed to an omniscient God: “We certainly speak while we’re praying, and yet it isn’t right to believe that we teach God or remind him of anything” (1.2.40–41). How indeed can man presume to re-present a reality already more present to the Deity than to man? We see now that the apparently uncontroversial move with which Augustine eliminated learning as a candidate for the purpose of language has in effect set the program for the rest of the conversation. The agreement persists throughout that we speak in order to teach, but teaching will gradually take on the same spiritual significance as learning—each ultimately a kenotic search for transformation. At the same time, human language in general, and the teacher’s discourse in particular, will be redescribed in terms that bring it very close to prayer: the teacher's words express an abiding inward question, almost a request for illumination, that turns both teacher and student toward the place of encounter with, and understanding in, God. The journey's first step announces this destination: “Anyone who speaks gives an external sign of his will by means of an articulated sound. Yet God is to be sought and entreated in the
hidden parts of the rational soul, which is called the ‘inner man.’ . . . There is accordingly no need for speaking when we pray” (1.2.45–48, 57–58). Human beings, as Augustine has it, require language because we dwell in mutual exteriority: the “I” that I am remains external to all others who say “I,” but by saying “I”—that is, in speech—the “I” quite literally brings itself into communication with those others. God, however, dwells continually not only in the natural universe, but intimately within man—*interior intimo meo*, as Augustine writes in the *Confessions*: “more inward in me than my inmost part.” Like a compass pointer bending toward true north, all the noisy misdirections of language elicited in the subsequent conversation point toward this inner, prayerful intercourse that unfolds in the bright silence of understanding. This absolute telos for the dialogue’s undertaking—no less the telos of language and teaching for Augustine—is here already present at its very beginning, but must be rediscovered on the other end of the conversation’s errancy in the wilderness of representation.

The assumptions about language that undergird the transfer model, despite defeating the initial threat posed by divine omniscience, soon encounter a more decisive challenge from within the signifying structure of language itself. The lengthy exposition of a line of Virgil (*Aeneid* 2.659), in which Augustine asks Adeodatus to define what each word signifies, raises two serious problems with the concept of representation: not only can we not very easily determine what real entity is represented by a whole host of ordinary words, but also the irresistible tendency of language to elucidate itself solely through itself makes it almost impossible to get “outside” of language and back to the entities it allegedly represents. The ironic case study of Virgil’s *nihil* (*Aeneid* 2.3.20–50) conjures for the first time the disturbing possibility that we may in fact be saying nothing when
we say “nothing”—a scandal for the transfer model, which would (no less paradoxically) insist that even “nothing” must mean something. Expanding on Adeodatus’s conjecture about the meaning of *si* (“if”; 2.3.18–19), however, Augustine again averts the worst consequences by construing “nothing” as the name for a certain inner experience: “Given that one doesn’t see a thing and furthermore finds (or thinks oneself to have found) that it doesn’t exist, shall we not say that this word [‘nothing’] signifies a certain state of mind rather than the very thing that is nothing?” (2.3.38–42). This seems acceptable at first blush, but Augustine’s elucidation itself reproduces the obscurity it was meant to eliminate: if *nihil* exclusively signifies the “state of mind,” how can the phrase “the very thing that is nothing” refer to a meaningful entity? The effort to safeguard the strong concept of representation, even without undue pressure from theology, is starting to show the cracks in the edifice of the transfer model.

In other cases, as the discussion of the preposition *de* demonstrates (2.4–3.6), the very strength of language in knitting together ever more precise combinations and substitutions of signs *within* speech renders it weak or even powerless to bring its user back to the world *outside* speech. When Adeodatus glosses *de* by offering *ex* as an equivalent, Augustine demurs:

AUGUSTINE: I’m not looking for this, that in place of one familiar word you say another equally familiar word that signifies the same thing. . . . I’m asking for that one thing itself, whatever it is, that is signified by these two signs. (2.4.54–56, 60–61)
ADEODATUS: What you want can’t be done in my answer while we’re engaged in discussion, where we can only answer with words. . . . First raise the question without words, so that I may then answer under that stipulation of yours. (3.5.2–4, 6–8)

Even Augustine has to concede the justice of Adeodatus’s barb, which addresses the conundrum of strong representation more pointedly than any dry statement of
doctrine. Augustine, here playing the part of the strong teacher, requires language always and only to point to an extra-lingual reality and so to remain wholly dependent upon it, but at the same time he requires language to constitute an independent domain of interaction between human beings that language and language alone makes a reality—if for no other reason than that he needs to be understood by his student. To ask as Augustine does here for "that one thing itself," without words to "get in the way," destroys the reality of asking and answering, since these have language as their condition of possibility. Adeodatus’s rejoinder highlights the fact that we never speak from or toward a reality outside of language, since in and through speaking itself we are already interminably “engaged in discussion,” taking part in the realities perpetuated by speech. Yet in some sense, strong representation presumes that this impossibility takes place as a matter of course, that we are constantly making the transition from words to things and that our language obediently subsides in the face of a present reality. This exchange, then, marks a moment of incipient crisis for the interlocutors’ assumptions. If the power of words to represent reality in the strong sense is strictly limited to the weak capacity to make only words present and to assert the reality that words alone create and sustain, the bright and amenable image of the world we described as the ideal product of the teacher’s language under the transfer model may be nothing more than shadow play. We may be saying nothing even when we are saying something.

That conclusion seems both gloomy and premature, but a certain highly qualified version of it actually ends up being the positive result of the dialogue in articulating a distinctive version of the transformative model rooted in the idea of illumination. What counts for Augustine in the end is not so much the strength of
the teacher’s words to represent the truth but the desire of the learner to search out the truth that these words are always too weak to get across on their own—so much so, indeed, that even the teacher must at last acknowledge himself as a student. The first signs of this destination gradually emerge in the complex discussion of *verbum* and *nomen* (4.9–8.21). Commentators have generally been inclined to dismiss Augustine’s arguments here for the thesis “just as every name is a word, so too every word is a name” (5.12.28), and with more than adequate philosophical justification: the arguments in support of this point are in large part specious and depend on a failure to discriminate consistently between what modern philosophers call use and mention (5.13–6.17). But few have attempted to evaluate this argument in terms of its literary motivation—that is, what these arguments, specious as they may be, make possible within Augustine's text qua text. Here Augustine’s reasoning is more poetic than strictly logical and implies more than it explains:

> Everything expressed by an articulated sound accompanied by some significate (*i*) strikes the ear so that it can be perceived, and (*ii*) is committed to memory so that it can be known. (5.12.46–49)

> What if words are so called because of one of these and names are so called because of the other—“words” (*verba*) from striking (*verberare*) [the ear] and “names” (*nomina*) from knowing (*noscere*)—so that the former deserve to be called after the ears, whereas the latter deserve to be called after the mind? (5.12.54–58)

Apart from its dubious claims to authenticity, this invented etymology achieves two significant steps away from the transfer model. Augustine has enriched the conversation with a significant and ultimately decisive distinction: the dichotomy between the perceived sound of the word that strikes (*verberat*) the passive ear, and its cognitive sense, which the mind actively construes in learning (*noscere*). At the same time, and as a result of the first step, this passage marks the redirection
of focus from the production of language by the teacher-speaker to the interpretation of language by the student-hearer. Implicit in the adoption of the new sound-sense dichotomy, first of all, is a turn against the assumption of the transfer model that meaning is already positively present in and transferred by the teacher’s words. From the perspective outlined by Augustine’s etymology, all the teacher gives, can give, or should give the student is a pattern of resounding *verba*, the manifest weakness of which the student overcomes by active understanding and interpretation. We were right to be afraid, because language does indeed *say* nothing—but only if we assume that saying alone achieves the presence of reality to the mind in knowledge in such a way as to render the supporting signs immediately superfluous and, indeed, the mind of the hearer-student entirely passive. In part to save the value of saying in teaching, Augustine has to give this saying a new content by foregrounding the active, constructive, even desiderative character of the learner’s mind as it *makes sense* of what it hears—and in the process *makes itself* into something new as well.

Some pages later, this foregrounding of the learner is precisely what happens—but it transpires on the dramatic rather than the argumentative plane, and it dictates the trajectory of the text from here through Augustine’s peroration. Augustine, playing the part of the traditional classical *magister*, tells Adeodatus to offer a *recitatio* of the argument thus far (7.19.1–2). Adeodatus’s exceptionally cogent summary—which at one point even adduces an entirely new argument for a prior point—instigates a response from Augustine that stands at the crux of the entire text (7.19.3–7.20.87). This happens, I think, in part because Adeodatus’s exercise of a sort of counter-authority in his *recitatio* liberates Augustine at last from the impossible burden of strong representation—both as a concept of
teacherly authority and as an argumentative justificandum. In effect, Augustine
discovers that in spite of his rote performance as strong pedagogue, he really has
been “engaged in discussion” after all, in more than one sense, with a student who
has now shown himself more than ready for a certain kind of transformation:

AUGUSTINE: You have accurately recalled from memory all I wanted. I must
admit to you that these distinctions now seem much clearer to me than they
were when the two of us, by inquiry and discussion, unearthed them from
whatever their hiding places were. . . . Maybe you think we’re playing around
and diverting the mind from serious matters by some little puzzles that seem
childish. . . . Well, I’d like you to believe that I haven’t set to work on mere
trivialities in this conversation. Though we do perhaps play around, this
should itself not be regarded as childish. (8.21.1 –4, 6–8, 12–13)

Why these sudden and unprecedented anxieties about indulging in triviality, about
squandering one’s energy on “signs rather than the things themselves that are
signified” in the earnest search for the “happy and everlasting life” (8.21.18 –19,
15)? Why, above all, these scruples about engaging in play? Commentators for the
most part have proven either uninterested in or befuddled by this passage, largely
because it does not advance the explicit argument of the dialogue as they read it.
On the level of dramatic narrative, however, Augustine’s hemming and hawing here
functions as a kind of preemptive apology for the playful trick he is about to pull.
This lengthy and somewhat evasive plea that Adeodatus—and the reader as well—
not accuse Augustine of childish caprice underlines the fact that Augustine feels
compelled by a real pedagogical necessity in the immediate sequel: not so much a
need to articulate a certain truth, but a need to conduct himself toward his student
in a certain way. For Augustine, a specific kind of playfulness in teaching, with the
right intention and outcome, can become—and is about to become—the proper
instrument of a higher seriousness.\textsuperscript{14} This passage, moreover, is the strongest
evidence offered yet by Augustine that he is in the process of discovering the non-
representational dimensions of language as a medium of instruction, the weak possibilities thrown up by the virtual reality of words as a domain of action. In short, he is discovering he must not only engage in discussion, but engage with discussion itself, with the equivocal and obtrusive reality of words.

This reality finally declares itself outright in the playful sophistic question Augustine then asks Adeodatus—utrum homo homo sit, “whether man is man” (8.22.26). The ensuing discussion, during which Adeodatus compliantly falls into the trap Augustine has set only to work his way out of it again, allows for a twofold emancipation. First, Adeodatus as student is liberated from Augustine's strong teacherly authority by being forced to cultivate a self-possessed wariness that signals an advance in intellectual autonomy. The equivocation on homo turns the student back upon his own resources while it smashes the machinery of strong representation once and for all. Second, this new turn in the discussion has liberated language from its effacement within the transfer model, in which words serve only as a transparent window to a “real” reality of which they have no part. In place of this effacement, the possibilities given in language as a virtual reality, a medium of interaction and mutual transformation between individuals in teaching and learning, begin to emerge. Augustine's analysis of the sign homo, in which the disintegrated syllables ho and mo are each declared self-identical in a way that the semantically freighted sum of the parts (homo) is not (8.22.68–8.23.93), converts his trick into a recognition basic to the transformative model of teaching: once we are among words, our tendency to move immediately beyond words conceals the reality of words themselves. That signs are never self-identical with their meaning means that we generally hurry past them, just as Adeodatus did in his original response, but this hurrying-past can carry us toward misunderstanding, if we fail to
interrogate the frail and tangled words from which we began. Augustine's trick, then, has tacitly encouraged Adeodatus to linger a while among words themselves in their materiality and indeed, even in their resistance to saying anything at all in the strong sense. The anecdote about the lion that comes out of the mouth of the man who says the word “lion” (8.23.94–109) clinches this last point and sounds the death knell of strong representation by caricaturing its most basic assumptions: words resist assimilation to the reality they signify because they constitute a noisy and recalcitrant reality unto themselves. Consequently, the teacher who aims at understanding must speak in the form of a question: his words must be sought out, elaborated upon, even “helped along” in their weakness by the student, rather than “speaking the lion,” presenting their (ferociously) strong meaning and then disappearing from view.

Weak language, then, is all that is left—but, as Augustine’s concluding monologue demonstrates, this kind of language is precisely the ideal means for the student to attain a truly firsthand understanding of truth, whereby its weakness is converted to a peculiar kind of strength. When Augustine posits the thesis that “nothing is learned through its signs” (10.33.115), he has returned to the territory of the opening pages of the dialogue, but with a changed perspective—that of the learner who seeks rather than the teacher who grants—as well as with a changed understanding of the powers of speech. Crucial to his argument is an idea that gradually arises from his examination of the cryptic term *sarabarae* in the biblical book of Daniel: all genuinely firsthand understanding takes the form of a real or figurative *autopsis*, an unmediated seeing-for.oneself. Words may point the way, but it is the eye of the soul that has to turn and look:
When I learned the thing itself, I trusted my eyes, not the words of another—
though perhaps I trusted the words to direct my attention, that is, to find out
what I would see by looking. . . . Words have force only to the extent that they
remind us to look for things; they don't display them for us to know. Yet
someone who presents what I want to know to my eyes, or to any of my bodily
senses, or even to my mind itself, does teach me something. (10.35.168–71;
11.36.1–4)

While the teacher's words are, as we have seen, powerless to achieve an autopsis
by direct action, their very impotence and needfulness call forth the desire of the
student to achieve autopsis for himself, through a passionate effort that derives its
strength from being wholly the student's own. As Rowan Williams writes, the
“absence and deferral” inscribed within this kind of language “are the means
whereby God engages our desire so that it is freed from its own pull towards
finishing, towards presence and possession”—the kind of presence and possession
that are falsely promised by strong representation. “It is precisely mortality itself,
limit, incompletion, absence, that is the speech of Wisdom with us.” The pale
effort of human words to re-present the world must yield before that which makes
all things, visible and invisible, present to the mind as they are in themselves:

Doesn't God or Nature show and display to those paying attention, by
themselves, this sun and the light pervading and clothing all things present, the
moon and the other stars, the lands and the seas, and the countless things
begotten in them? (10.32.110–13)

When we deal with things that we perceive by the mind, . . . we're speaking of
things that we look upon immediately in the inner light of Truth. . . . Under
these conditions our listener, if he likewise sees these things with his inward and
undivided eye, knows what I'm saying from his own contemplation, not from my
words. . . . He's taught not by my words but by the things themselves made
manifest within when God discloses them. (12.40.29–37)

For Augustine, then, words are ideally suited to point, but the pointing they achieve
is always at best a pointing-out—that is to say, words indicate something by
selecting it out of a preexisting totality of presences that it does not create or
present on its own. The tangled system of pointers we use in language thus
achieves its end in the soul's turning-toward and beholding the truth silently and directly. The errancy of the dialogue, like the errancy of the student in search of truth, finally comes to rest right where it began: there, the question and the prayer seemed exceptions to the rule of language, but here all language is seen to have the force of a prayerful question. Where Augustine himself played the authoritative magister to a fault, he now humbly recognizes that he has done nothing more than conduct his student to what was already within him—indeed, has remained himself a student throughout: “If you know that what has been said [in the entire dialogue] is true, then if you were questioned about each of the points you would have said that you knew them. Therefore, you see from Whom you have learned these points. It isn't from me” (14.46.28–31). Neque enim a me: this last is all the teacher can truly say of his student's transformation.

But what does it even mean to talk about transformation in this way? Language invites the learner to turn inward and behold there, in the “inner chamber” of her mind, the truth itself in the light of a divine illumination. Don't the self-transparency and self-possession of the learner throughout this experience stand in stark contrast to the demand of the transformative model that learning effect nothing less than a fundamental reorientation, even a re-creation of the individual in whom it takes place? If transformation is to have its fullest possible meaning, the learner must encounter the person she used to be as a fundamentally different person from the person she is now. Above all, the encounter with the language of the transformative teacher must be the decisive force in provoking this break within the learner. Such language as this does not represent a truth, or even (pace Augustine)
point toward a truth the learner ultimately seeks out for herself, but must in fact expose a chasm across which the learner must leap, alone as she has never been alone before—a leap from the shores of one way of being to those of an entirely other way of being. Is there a language that calls us to perform this terrifying leap, that afterward lets us say not merely "I was blind—but now I see" but also "I was not—but now I am"?

Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) in large part formulate a critique of the transformative model along these lines, in which the experience of transformation is radicalized to the level of the learner's very being. But if this is what Kierkegaard wants to teach us about language and teaching, why does his own language, in place of straightforward exposition or even dialogue, present us with a refractory labyrinth of irony, parody, and pseudonymity—by which we are perhaps far more mystified and frustrated than instructed? Kierkegaard is keenly aware that the firsthand transformation from non-being to being experienced by the learner defies communication in the philosophical language used by Kierkegaard's pseudonym in the *Fragments*, Johannes Climacus, or really in any philosophical language devoted to rigorous conceptual purity: it must be the proverbial stumbling block, a *skandalon*, to the progress of logic. Climacus develops dialectically the paradoxes that arise from the individual's radical transformation into a new self through the experience of conversion—what Climacus calls the thesis of the Moment. In so doing, however, Climacus elaborates the language of philosophy to the limits of irony, the outer shores of non-being, where it reveals at its heart an offense at the very transformation it claims to teach and to enact. Here we meet again something of the kenotic impulse of Augustine’s text in defining the teacher’s task, and we also encounter the kind of directing misdirection that was
characteristic of Augustine's trick on his son and that proved so crucial to the latter's argument. With Kierkegaard, however, the chief instrument of benevolent deception and the chief source of resistance to its kenosis lie in one and the same phenomenon: the domination of philosophical language by the figure of recollection. Climacus demolishes this language with its own weapons: by means of an ironically overblown dialectic of recollection, he demonstrates the impossibility of just such a recollection as a pathway to authentic transformation. One by one, the language of the Climacean author-teacher withdraws the props and crutches of philosophical language, abandoning the reader-learner to herself and leading her by turns to leap freely into the being of the transformative Moment.\textsuperscript{23} For Kierkegaard, the teacher's language does not persuade the learner simply to look inside herself, either to recollect a truth already present in the mind (per Climacus's Socrates) or to consult a divine light that gently guides her reason to understanding (per Augustine). Instead, it should paradoxically impel her to look \textit{outside} herself, outside her human teacher, outside the borrowed categories of her human language and her human reason, for a shattering encounter with the truth of a transforming paradox: the incarnation of God in man.

We have seen how Augustine made a case against the transfer model of teaching and the strong representation of truth by discovering the transformative effect of weak indication. Kierkegaard, by contrast, implicitly criticizes versions of the transformative model along the lines of Augustinian illumination as only a veiled rehabilitation and misapplication of philosophical recollection. Any such model of teaching and learning, so the argument runs, excludes as a logical impossibility the transition from non-being to being that takes place in the learner, and along with it excludes the very possibility of Christian rebirth. But rather than earnestly re-
presenting Protestant Christianity as the winning alternative to philosophy,
Climacus’s cobbling-together of the Moment from a welter of dialectical mediations can only be understood as a deeply ironic gesture that seeks to enact the strong de-presentation of the Moment, its effacement not just from philosophical language, but also from the representational plane of the text altogether—because only through silence, misdirection, and illegibility can the learner be led towards the threshold of that Moment at all. “So long as I live,” Kierkegaard writes elsewhere, “it is part of my task to employ about two-thirds of my strength in confusing, in working against myself and weakening the impression.” If the teacher aims to transform her student with her teaching, to bring her strongly to the Moment, then she must speak so as to take the truth and the Moment away from her student as much as possible—to take everything away from her, in fact, except the singular encounter with the Paradox in which the Moment can happen.

In terms of a language for teaching and learning, then, what exactly gets de-presented in the first chapter of the *Philosophical Fragments*? Exactly the same thing as Climacus’s language openly claims to re-present there: the Socratic model of learning as recollection and the projected alternative to this model posited in the transformative Moment of faith. Do I really mean to say with this that either Climacus or Kierkegaard wants us to believe that both recollection and faith are practical impossibilities, that they have no real existence except as phantasmatic verbal constructs? By no means. The only achievement of the strategy of de-presentation is to confront the learner—perhaps for the first time—with the task of articulation and understanding that belongs to her alone as an individual. As in the paradigm case of Diogenes, the strategy does this by systematically depriving the learner of a ready-made vocabulary, a secondhand solution, and in turn demanding
that she speak and think for herself. Above all, the learner must confront the paradoxes posed by transformation itself, by the transition from non-being to being that is posited in the very fact of learning.

The starting point for the text's de-presentation lies in Climacus's exposition of the Socratic response to the paradox of teaching treated in Plato's *Meno*: “One cannot seek for what he knows, and it seems equally impossible for him to seek for what he does not know”—in the former case, because he knows it already, in the latter case, because he does not know what to seek. In terms of the philosophical challenge posed by the experience of transformation, Meno's paradox rests upon one of the primordial problems of Greek philosophy and is easily enough translated back into its language: how is change or becoming (e.g., learning) possible at all, if something cannot become what it already is (i.e., we cannot learn what we already know), and at the same time whatever it becomes has no existence whatsoever prior to becoming (i.e., we do not know in advance what we wish to learn)? The paradox posited by the transformation of the learner is simply a species of the ontological paradox posited by change of any kind. Socrates's solution, of course, is epochal: “Socrates thinks the difficulty through in the doctrine of Recollection, by which all learning and inquiry is interpreted as a kind of remembering; one who is ignorant needs only a reminder to help him come to himself in the consciousness of what he knows. Thus the Truth is not introduced into the individual from without, but was within him” (11). If we perform the same operation on Climacus's language as above, we see that the concept of recollection seeks to resolve the ontological paradox of transformation by declaring change an illusion. Learning changes nothing in the soul of the learner except in reestablishing the soul's contact with a
truth that was already fully intact and present within it: as learners we really do only pass from being into being, becoming what we already were.

As Socratic teachers, therefore, however dramatic our successes may appear, our words can and should do nothing for our students but help them discover what is already within them: “The Truth in which I rest was within me, and came to light through myself, and not even Socrates could have given it to me, as little as the driver can pull the load for the horses, though he may help them by applying the lash” (15). The teacher’s outward prompting to turn toward an inward truth here marks the most significant point of resemblance with Augustine’s theory of illumination, and indeed, commentators on both Plato and Augustine have long debated the shape and degree of Augustine’s Platonic inheritance. What counts for my purposes here, however, is the fact that whether the soul apprehends an inner truth per recollection or receives it from a divine teacher per illumination, the truth is significantly depicted in either model as something that is received from within.

The philosophical implications are enormous: Climacus’s Socrates assumes that the truth is fundamentally at home within the soul and within the categories of rationality that furnish its rooms, and that the language of the teacher only serves as an occasion for the soul to return to something it already possesses. From the way it resolves the ontological paradox, we can see that recollection operates on the basis of two assumptions: on the one hand, that the logical scandals that arise from the very idea of transformation—non-beings that somehow participate in being, beings that somehow participate in non-being, and the like—must be suppressed, and, on the other hand, that the soul does not need to undergo any transformation whatsoever in its being in order to learn the truth. The implications for teaching and learning then also become clear: the transformation of the learner,
as with transformation in general, is fundamentally offensive to a philosophical language intent upon maintaining the integrity of rational categories. Philosophy must replace such an account with one founded on the eternal stability and logical transparency of being and being alone.

Within the ontological structure of Socratic recollection, then, Kierkegaard has indirectly uncovered the same psychological pattern of offense and counter-offense that Climacus describes so eloquently: “The highest pitch of every passion is always to will its own downfall. . . . The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think” (46). In these terms, Socratic recollection is an expression of reason’s passion to think the unthinkable transition from non-being to being, the logical scandal of transformation that transpires over and over again in teaching and learning. The recollection model traces out a complex and self-canceling movement within the soul of its exponent: at once a vehement pursuit of the object of its passion, the paradox of transformation, and a desperate flight away from this collision and back to the “homeliness” of logical categories, which deny any significant discontinuity in the learner’s being. Above all, this psychological movement resounds within the very language of the offended individual. Trapped in its passionate, self-reinforcing passivity in the face of the paradox, reason can only express its offense in language that constantly reasserts and reechoes the very paradox it seeks to dismiss:

While therefore the expressions in which offense proclaims itself, of whatever kind they may be, sound as if they came from elsewhere, even from the opposite direction [i.e., from the offended individual], they are nevertheless echoings of the Paradox. This is what is called an acoustic illusion. . . . The offended individual does not speak from his own resources, but borrows those of the Paradox; just as one who mimics or parodies another does not invent, but merely copies perversely. (63)
The relationship between the language of recollection and the transformative paradox that it seeks to explain will thus be a relationship of mimicry, parody, and distorted echo. It will sound as if it is spoken in the voice of human reason, perhaps even the voice of philosophy, but here we make the same mistake as children who believe the puppet is speaking rather than the puppeteer. The voice we hear only passes through the offended mind as through a conduit: its origin lies in the unthinkable, the ineffable, the properly transcendent. Even in the midst of this unconscious imitation, the offended individual only refuses and rejects the very transformation he seeks to articulate and embrace, the passage from the merely logical to the wholly transcendent, from non-being to being.

Here we begin to perceive how Kierkegaard’s text actually provides the best exposition of its own rhetorical strategies, and how those strategies, even while claiming to re-present two divergent models of teaching and learning, actually enact their joint de-presentation. If we bear in mind the psychological form and expressive manner of the offended consciousness when we turn back to chapter 1, we cannot fail to notice that the articulation of the “B” alternative to recollection, the transformation of the learner in the Moment, unfolds through a series of rigorously executed negations of the recollection model: the learner is not already in possession of the truth, the teacher is not merely a reminder to the learner, and so on (16–27). The style of the whole section is marked by a noticeable reliance on categorical if-then statements, predicated on unquestioned dialectical binaries, as well as statements of logical necessity that so seduce and overpower the reader that it scarcely seems possible to disagree. Climacus’s magisterial display of dialectics, however, skillfully diverts attention from the fact that it generates whole
cloth the purported alternative to recollection by a process of recollection itself.29

The objections of the imaginary reader sketched out at various points in the argument, who regularly complains that Climacus is simply plagiarizing the orthodox Protestant Christianity that is already public knowledge, actually further conceals this crucial point (26–27, 43–45, 66–67). The dialectic of recollection does not plagiarize Christianity so much as it seeks to re-create Christianity’s transcendent and paradoxical truth through a distorting elaboration of its own purely immanent and logical categories: in effect, reason plagiarizes itself and calls it Christianity. Climacus’s recollecting dialectic treats the Moment as if it had been a possibility already present within the conceptual fabric of recollection, a hazy, latent memory simply waiting to be awakened and actualized through the practiced “reminders” of the philosopher.30

This becomes quite clear when we examine the conclusion of Climacus’s dialectic in chapter 1, which explicitly raises the question of transformation only to demonstrate that recollection cannot represent it coherently. The recollection of the Moment in chapter 1 negates the Socratic assumption that the learner undergoes no real change in his being, assuming instead that the learner undergoes the most radical change imaginable, from a state of non-being to a state of being:

In so far as the learner was in Error, and now receives the Truth, . . . a change takes place within him like the change from non-being to being. But this transition from non-being to being is the transition we call birth. Now one who exists cannot be born; nevertheless, the disciple is born. Let us call this transition the New Birth, in consequence of which the disciple enters the world quite as at the first birth. (23)

The seed of the logical scandal, which will burst into bloom much later in the interlude, is planted here through a lightly sketched paradox: “One who exists cannot be born; nevertheless, the disciple is born.” In the language of the
ontological paradox: something that already has being cannot undergo a transition from non-being to being, because it already is, but the transformation of the learner in the Moment is no less real for undergoing this very transition and defying its underlying binary. Unlike the Socratic learner, who is no more or less after learning than he was before, the learner of the Moment must recognize his past self as a non-being in comparison to the being he now is. How, indeed, can this be?

Climacus’s brilliantly executed dialectic has here brushed against a truth that can only be expressed by recollection in the language of paradox, that is, the equivocal and ambivalent discourse of offense. Reason has encountered an absolute barrier to its progress, and recollection’s attempt to construct an absolute alternative to itself from within itself has, perhaps predictably, revealed the limits of its own vocabulary. Balanced tenuously upon this outermost limit like a tightrope walker, Climacus now treats us to some dazzling acrobatics of offense enlivened by typically Kierkegaardian self-parody:

When one who has experienced birth thinks of himself as born, he conceives this transition from non-being to being. The same principle must also hold in the case of the new birth. Or is the difficulty increased by the fact that the non-being which precedes the new birth contains more being than the non-being which preceded the first birth? But who then may be expected to think the new birth? Surely the man who has himself been born anew, since it would of course be absurd to imagine that one not so born should think it. Would it not be the height of the ridiculous for such an individual to entertain this notion? (25)

The suggestion that “the non-being which precedes the new birth contains more being than the non-being which preceded the first birth” amounts to an outright logical pratfall: the earnest rhetoric of dialectical systematizing deduces a cutting irony exacted at its own expense. But Climacus knows precisely what he is doing: this falsification of both recollection and the Moment, this deliberate mistake, is a supremely calculated move. The comedy deepens: if being, as being-born, is
thinkable only to one who has passed from non-being to being and who now is, then being newly born in the Moment is thinkable only to one who has passed from the non-being of ordinary being to the being of reborn being. When we bear in mind that Climacus’s very language places him within the logic of Socratic recollection and outside the paradox of faith, this second hedge poses an even more hilarious self-mutilation of logic than the first. Climacus’s elaborate scruples about potentially thinking something properly unthinkable are expressed in a language that has already reduced everything to thinkability on its own terms: Climacus has himself reached the “height of the ridiculous” about which he then ironically asks. His implicit point, at last, is that humor—including his own—is the voice of the paradox speaking to us through the mouthpiece of offense, the triumph of a truth that only teaches itself in silence over a world that never stops chattering.31

Amid the spectacle of all-too-earnest cogitating touched off by the exorbitant claim of dialectical reason to teach not just all of history, but all of faith as well from within its own resources, Climacus is performing a delicate and deliberate piece of satire that at a stroke places the transformation of the learner far beyond the reach of philosophical legibility. Rather than correct the inveterate error of philosophical language by teaching the truth directly, however, Kierkegaard communicates it indirectly by repeating philosophy's original error under the mask of irony: the language of covert offense now becomes the overt agent of the paradox. Climacus’s ironic repetition of philosophy’s error does nothing more than take away from the learner the possibility of committing this error in the same way. He enacts not a philosophical re-presentation of faith, but its de-presentation in this form and under these conditions. Each learner, in the end, must think through the unthinkable paradox of her own transformation for herself, as she undergoes it, and
the most a teacher can do is to deprive her of a language that delays or distorts this primordial point of contact. In terms of the task of forging a positive understanding of the paradox, Climacus has simply abandoned us to ourselves. When we as readers and learners—including many of Kierkegaard’s commentators—get carried away by the subtlety of Climacus’s dialectics, we are simply becoming intoxicated with what we already are and already know, and with the way in which we already are it and know it. Kierkegaard’s brilliance lies in his orchestration of these false ecstasies, these seductions and ravishments of the student by the teacher, only to awaken us abruptly in a hard and solitary light, to face the radical and transformative otherness of a paradox that no text can contain, no word can speak, and no teacher can teach, but from which we are nonetheless called to learn.

So: when we teach, what are we actually doing with words?

It may at first seem that we are further from an answer to this question than at the beginning of this discussion. Augustine proceeds with his critique of the transfer model as far as the threshold of the transformative model—but only, perhaps, the threshold, since the enactment of transformation by divine agency may ultimately mask a dynamic of recollection that casts the possibility of transformation in doubt. Starting from the problem of recollection, Kierkegaard proceeds from the point where Augustine left off to the remotest frontiers of the transformative model. Here, the only acceptable language for teaching is an endless recursion of weak ironic dodges, in which the teacher consistently deprives the student of any ground to stand on. So: if we understand the teacher's language as
strong and representational, as granting all the answers and removing all questions, then along with Augustine we must admit that the student somehow possessed all the answers already. If we understand the teacher's language as weak and de-presentational, as voicing nothing but questions and taking away all the answers—even the ones the student thought she had beforehand—then along with Kierkegaard we must admit that the teacher has nothing, or even less than nothing, to teach.

Although I can only outline it here, the way out of this aporia is suggested by the very language in which I have expressed it. If the transfer model ultimately offers nothing but answers, and the transformative model nothing but questions, what if, rather than vaunting one model over the other, we simply remind ourselves that questions and answers naturally complement each other? The question calls forth the answer as easily and as naturally as the answer calls forth another question. In the concrete continuity of teaching, then, we can say that language works to establish and maintain the natural circuit between questions and answers that we encounter in dialogue. The disentanglement of the two models by virtue of which we were first able to examine the role of language in either one is now completed by their reintegration, but on a new foundation. Like the language of conversation on which it is based, a teaching practice rooted in dialogue constantly circulates between polarized positions without ever settling on one or the other. In a word: the teacher of dialogue must walk the razor's edge of speech.
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1 See King, “On the Impossibility of Teaching,” 184–85.
3 On the pedagogical function of questions in Augustine's thought, see Miner, “Augustinian Recollection,” 445.
4 The crucial background to this point as well as the entire the reading I develop here is M. F. Burnyeat's disentanglement of knowledge (scire) and understanding (intellegere) in Augustine: "If it is correct to suggest that Augustine thinks of understanding rather than justification as the differentiating ingredient of knowledge, the main thesis of the *De magistro*, that no man can teach another knowledge (scientia), can now be glossed as the claim that no man can teach another to understand something. The argument will not be that information cannot be transmitted from one person to another, but that the appreciation or understanding of any such information is a task that each person must work at for himself" ("Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro,*" 7–8).
6 Burnyeat is among only a handful of commentators who have taken seriously how the literary form of *De Magistro* performs its philosophical content ("Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro,*" 5).
7 On this renegotiation of paternity, see Cary, *Outward Signs*: “this wonderful boy, given by God (a Deo datus), is nothing Augustine can claim as his own” (91).
8 All quotations from *De Magistro* are from the Peter King translation, *The Teacher*. References to this edition will appear parenthetically, identified by section and line number.
9 On this interplay between exteriority and communication in Augustine's thought, see Ando, “Augustine on Language,” 48, 56, and esp. 64–68; James K. A. Smith offers the most wide-ranging contemporary treatment in “The Time of Language.”
This is in part the motivation for the long and knotty discussion of signs that signify mutually in 4.7.13–4.9.94; the main implication here is that the overwhelmingly strong power of reference cannot ultimately be contained by one-way referentiality of words to things: this very strength is in fact a source of the weakness of words.

Hence Louis Mackey (“The Mediator Mediated”) and Luke Ferretter (“The Trace of the Trinity,” 260) justifiably give interpretation a central role in *De Magistro*.

Compare Gerard O’Daly’s argument that meaning “is not communicated from an active sign-giver to a passive sign-recipient. The latter must conceive it in his own mind. Something is indeed ‘transferred,’ but it would be more accurate to say that what one mind has apprehended is, in consequence of the expression of the sign, apprehended by another mind” (*Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind*, 177–78). Just when O’Daly is poised to let go of the transfer model, it returns: strong representation dies hard.

Jason Drucker intuits the importance of a playful “indirect communication” in *De Magistro*, but without drawing on the present passage: “The structure or status of language as pointing demonstrates the very difficulties in the teaching enterprise—teaching shows itself more as a game than as any straightforward pursuit” (“Teaching as Pointing,” 112).

Mackey gives this lingering a deeply Christological coloring: “Can we lower ourselves to the signs as the Word condescended to our flesh?” (“The Mediator Mediated,” 145). Ferretter offers a fuller treatment of the Christological and sacramental dimensions of Augustinian semiotics that also takes account of Derrida (“The Trace of the Trinity,” esp. 260–63); these questions are central to Cary, *Outward Signs*. Rowan Williams is brilliantly insightful on this question as well as many others; see “Language, Reality, and Desire in Augustine’s *De doctrina*.”

I do not, however, share O’Daly’s view that “the tendency of the argument in *De Magistro* is to devalue the importance of signs in the process of learning” (*Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind*, 176) nor that of Clifford Ando that Augustine’s discussion of signs “is simply part of a demonstration of the incapacity of language to serve as a tool for teaching” (“Augustine on Language,” 47); cf. Drucker, “Teaching as Pointing,” 117. My reading implies that signs become more, not less, important to the task of teaching the more we acknowledge their fundamental inability to represent reality. In essentials, I agree with Drucker when he writes: “Augustine does not demonstrate the incapacity of language to serve as a tool for teaching, but shows it to be quite necessary, only inadequate” (“Teaching as Pointing,” 118).

See the admirable pithiness of Burnyeat: “Augustine has no *argument* for the thesis that knowledge requires first-hand learning,” but instead attempts “to make the thesis persuasive to us by calling upon our sense of a great gap between the epistemic position of an eyewitness who watches an event with his own eyes and that of the jury later” (“Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*,” 20). On *autopsis* and the inward light in Augustine, including an overview of the scholarly debates, see David Chidester, “The Symbolism of Learning,” esp. 84–90; on the Platonic inheritance in Augustinian *autopsis*, see Cary, *Outward Signs*, 96–97.
20 Ibid., 149; emphasis in original.

21 The literature on intelligible objects and the theory of illumination in Augustine's thought is copious and controversial, and does not allow of detailed treatment here. The erstwhile consensus in Markus (“Augustine,” 364–70) and still accepted as late as Mackey (“The Mediator Mediated,” 144–45) has been revisited in recent decades as scholars have questioned the degree to which Augustine's theory presents a Christianized anamnesis; David Chidester gives a recent overview of the debates, which stretch back more than a century in “The Symbolism of Learning in St. Augustine.”

22 In his earlier works, Kierkegaard frequently made use of pseudonyms, which he sometimes developed into full-fledged intellectual personalities, in order to distinguish the viewpoints and arguments he presented in his works from his own. He puts forward one such pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, as the author of the Philosophical Fragments. In using the names “Climacus” and “Kierkegaard” for separate entities, I assume that Climacus is a literary character created by, and hence non-identical with, Kierkegaard. Even Climacus scarcely offers his own opinions in a straightforward way (see, for instance, the preface to the Philosophical Fragments, signed by Climacus), let alone Kierkegaard, but none of this prevents careful examination of what Kierkegaard makes Climacus say, what Climacus means by it, and what Kierkegaard might mean in making Climacus say it.

23 The idea that the teacher communicates what is taught primarily by abandoning the student is a central metaphor in Kierkegaard’s theory of indirect communication; see, for instance, Lübcke, “Kierkegaard and Indirect Communication,” 32–33: “The most one can do is to make it more difficult for someone else not to choose” (33). The account of indirect communication in Edward Mooney’s “Exemplars, Inwardness, and Belief” has proven widely influential, although it has now been roundly and, to my mind, convincingly refuted by Jamie Turnbull in “Kierkegaard, Indirect Communication, and Ambiguity.”


26 Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments, 11. Throughout this discussion, I use the older Swenson and Hong translation rather than the standard Hong and Hong translation (Princeton University Press, 1985), used by most scholars of Kierkegaard, because I find the former more transparent in argumentation and more forceful in style. Subsequent references to the Swenson and Hong translation will appear parenthetically.

27 Cf. Ferreira, Kierkegaard, 72.

28 See Evans, Passionate Reason, 80–84 and Howland, Kierkegaard and Socrates, 132–33 for helpful discussion.

29 See Daise, “The Will to Truth in Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments,” 3–4; and Daise, Kierkegaard’s Socratic Art, 38–39.

30 See also Ferreira, Kierkegaard, 71.

31 For a different take on Climacus's use of humor, see Evans, Passionate Reason, 8–12, 16–18.