



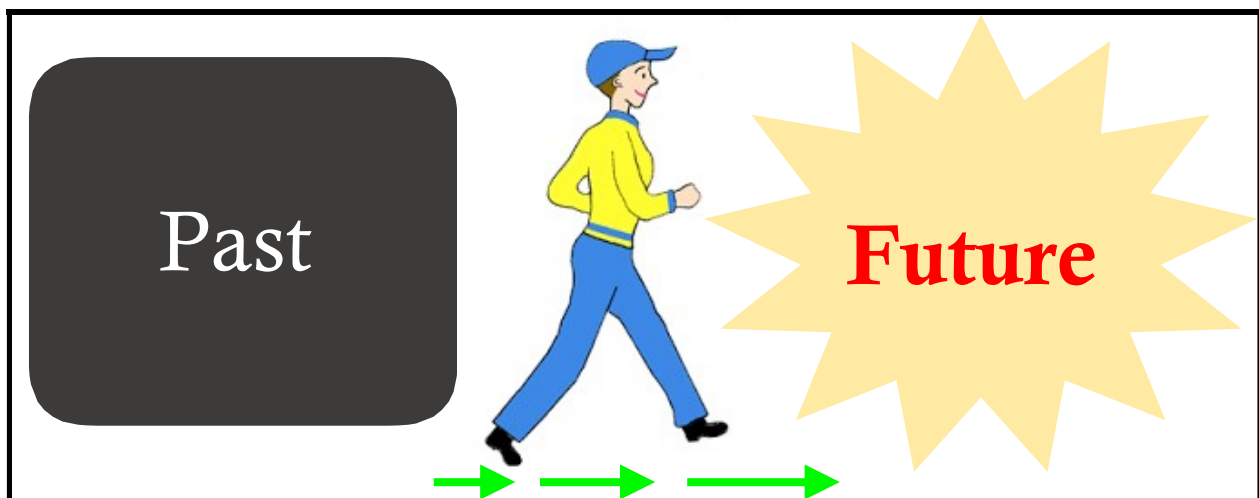
Teaching the Great Books with Josh Gibbs

Lesson 4: Ancient and Modern Modes of Interpretation

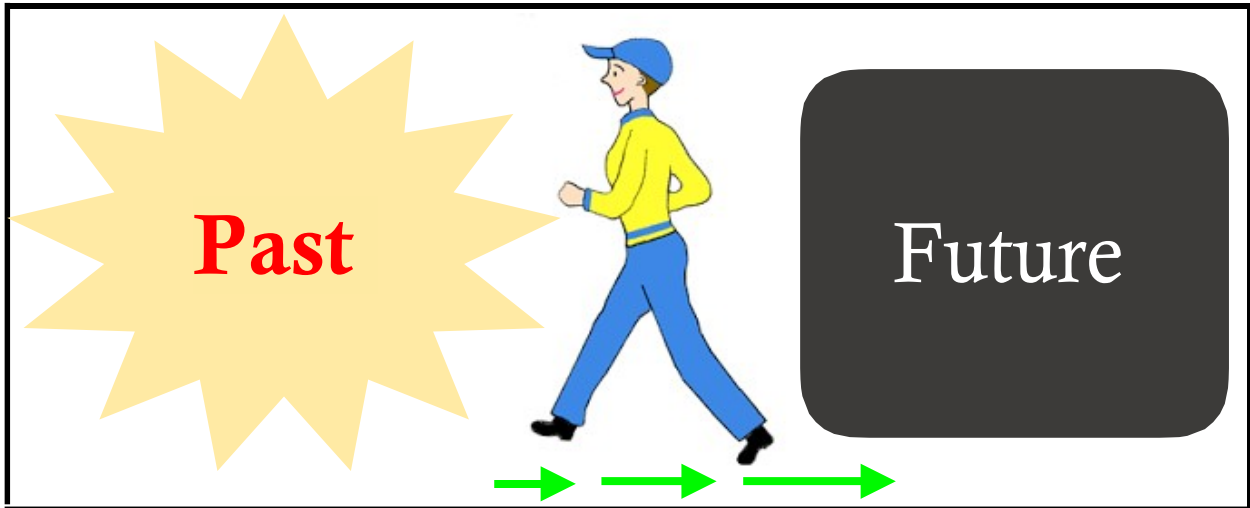
Outline:

How to View the Past

- Patristic interpretation of Homer and the Bible often seem strange, open, loose, and malleable to modern ears.
- Modern readers read like cops collecting affidavits — seeking fresh and prompt eyewitness accounts as soon as an event has happened.
- Example: The Dates of Christmas and the Annunciation on the Church Calendar
 - The medievals celebrated the birth of Christ on the darkest day of the year (winter solstice) because the sun gets brighter after that day and the annunciation of Christ's birth to the Virgin Mary on the spring equinox because it is a perfect balance between day and night.
 - The immovable heavenly bodies were seen as an ideal way to determine what days these things ought to be celebrated for people with classical mindset like the Medievals. Paper records could be faked but the heavy bodies could not because God created the earth with right order.
 - Modern mindset seeks paper records such as a hotel registry to figure out the date of these events.
- Intention can never be expressed in words. When explanation of intention comes, it comes in words so it only represents thoughts again.
- Words always come as representation NOT as whole presentation. Only God is pure presentation.
- Enlightenment ideals see man as walking and facing forward from the dark past to the bright future. Man is always improving as time goes on:



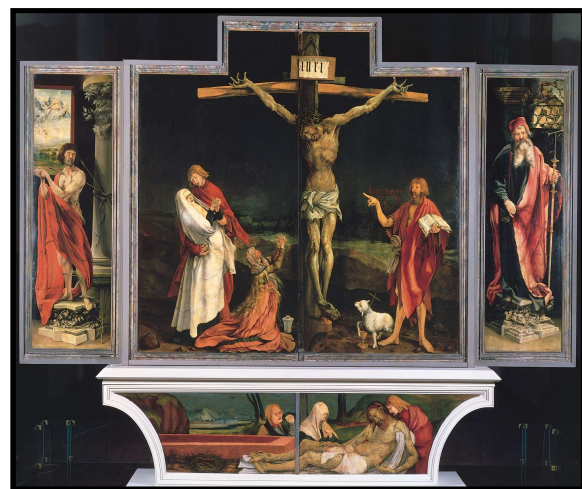
- Classical ideals see man as facing the past (that can be seen and understood since mankind has been there) and walking backwards into the future (that is not yet understood because it has not yet happened):



- Just as looking at a billboard from two inches and ninety feet away gives very different perspectives, so the classical mindset allows for different views of the past because it keeps on looking at the past.
- We have a unique perspective on things written in the past because of our distance from them. However, the work of remembering (viewing) the past in herculean work it takes lots of time and effort (sometimes ages) to fully remember something since different distances produce different views.

Two Examples: The Isenheim Altarpiece and The Road to Damascus

- You can view the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald (below) rather quickly, but it would be very difficult to be able to properly understand and describe it to someone who has never seen it.
- Christ is painted with ergotism in the Isenheim Altarpiece as if Grünewald has found some new aspect of the crucifixion. Recalling is communal. In a way, Grünewald added his part to the memory of the crucifixion.





- The passage of time adds more clarity to events. Our understanding deepens in time.
- The book of Acts demonstrates this same type of remembrance. The way the story of Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus is told changes each time:

Luke as Narrator (Acts 9:1-9)	Paul's Early Description (Act 22:6-11)	Paul's Later Description (Acts 29:13-18)
<p>Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.</p>	<p>As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.</p>	<p>At midday...I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'</p>

- The Apostle Paul seems to gain a clearer view of the light of Christ during that encounter each time he tells the story. Each telling gives a deeper understanding of Christ's voice and light.



Icon of The Road to Damascus

- Paul is like the man trying to explain the Isenheim Altarpiece. It is hard work and it takes time to achieve more understanding of a past event.
- When trying to explain things like the light of Christ, you do not gain a deeper understanding using a “hotel registry” or a picture someone snapped, you gain it by the passing of time and the “changeless stars.”

Answering the Question: “Aren’t we reading into this too much?”

- Question assumes that things are best understood in their immediacy rather than in their perpetuity.
- Presentational Art (like “Transformers”) IS best understood in the moment, but Representational Art is not.
- It would be wrong and it would be going “too deep” to try to treat Presentational Art as Representational and keep looking after the immediate moment of experience. That would be to treat pure materiality as if it has a soul.
- You must teach students to tell the difference between the art that you give them and the art they might seek out on their own.