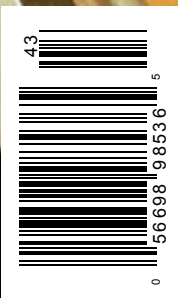


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THE WRITING OF THE HEART

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The word *record* derives from *cor*, the Latin word for heart. Behind this etymology, there is an ancient metaphor, one that says the heart is a text. Familiar from valentines and novelty diaries, this idea may be more important than we realize. In *The Book of the Heart*, the scholar Eric Jager places it at the core of the Western concept of self, tracing its development from Greek and biblical antiquity to the present. As early as the seventh century BCE, the Israelites wrote of divine commandments and the reflections

of conscience as inscriptions made upon the heart. Later, Paul's Epistle to the Romans describes virtuous pagans as having "the work of the law written on their hearts." Ignorant of the gospels, they were nevertheless guided by an inner scripture. The idea of the heart as a text became common in scholastic

Above: Master of the View of Sainte Gudule, *Young Man Holding a Book*, ca. 1480. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art.

writings after St. Augustine, whose *Confessions*—the story of the writer’s heart across his experience of conversion—is an outer text translating the inner text of the conscience and the narrative of its growth. The climax takes place when Augustine, prompted by a child’s voice, opens the Bible at random and begins to read. Just as the codex has opened, Augustine’s heart opens to God: “For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.”¹ Augustine’s parallel between the Bible, codex of God’s word, and the inner text of the heart took hold in Christian theology. The book of the heart was born.

A fresco from the Cathedral of Saint Cécile in Albi, France, depicts a striking scene: the naked figures of the deceased face divine judgment with open books spread across their chests. In this apocalypse, the book of the heart, record of the inner life, lies open before God and the world. As a metaphor, the “book of the heart” fuses the exterior and the interior in a paradoxical unity. The innermost spaces of the self become legible, transferrable to the exterior world, and subject to universal judgment. While opening the book of one’s heart before God was a fearsome prospect, doing so before the beloved became a favorite fantasy of the courtly lover. By the Renaissance, the book of the heart had undergone a secular transformation: it became the text of the self made legible and transferrable to the beloved.

By the end of the fifteenth century, texts in the shape of hearts began to appear across Europe. At least four survive. One is a prayer book—the *Livre d’heures à l’usage d’Amiens*—and the other three are scores of love music. The earliest is a love song by the French composer Baude Cordier. “Belle, Bonne, et Sage” (Beautiful, good, and wise) is composed in the shape of a heart, the stylized, colorful musical notes and lyrics following its curves in an early example of what would come to be known as *augen-music*, or eye-music. In Cordier’s composition, the heart-as-text is no longer a record of conscience to be offered up to God’s judgment, but a synecdoche for the inmost self surrendered to the beloved: “I make you the gift of a new song in my heart / Which presents itself to you.” In the decades following Cordier’s cordiform composition, European aristocrats and men of the church commissioned entire manuscripts

of music in the shape of hearts. The most elaborate is Jean de Montchenu’s *Chansonnier Cordiforme*, a richly illustrated compilation of love ballads in the form of a doubled heart, now housed at the French National Library. Predecessors of the modern valentine, these heart-shaped songbooks were a record of feeling, revealed and made legible to the beloved.

But the book of the heart was not only a figure for revelation and legibility. As a written surrogate for the lover or the beloved, it also highlighted the absence at the heart of both written language and erotic desire, a subject the poet Anne Carson explores in *Eros the Bittersweet*. Just as words stand in for absent referents, desire is premised on lack: “Both [love and language] require the mind to reach out from what is present and actual to something else, something glimpsed in the imagination. In letters as in love, to imagine is to address oneself to what is not.”² The sense of self was bound up in the discovery of the written word, which forced people to confront the “edges” not only between words and things, text and speech, but between individuals: “Words have edges. So do you.”³ For Carson, knowledge of these edges made erotic experience possible.

As Socrates says in *Phaedrus*, the written word is dumb: books refuse to answer our questions. And there is, perhaps, an erotic charge in this refusal, a refusal that echoes the unassailable privacy of the heart. There is a trace of this charge in a fifteenth-century portrait by the Master of the View of Sainte Gudule. It depicts a young man holding a gilded, heart-shaped book, his gray, contemplative eyes fixed beyond the frame. The writing in his book is as illegible as his expression—an expression meant not for the viewer, but for an absent other. Privacy pervades the painting: the book is open, but the viewer cannot read it, nor share in the sitter’s inward reflection. Despite its promises of spiritual and amorous revelation, the book of the heart is perhaps, in the final count, erotic; for “to know desire, to know words, is ... a matter of perceiving the edge between one entity and another.”⁴

1 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.12.29.

2 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Chicago: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988), p. 52.

3 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 35.

4 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 51.