Reading to Live

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Reading to Live

The Evolving Practice of *Lectio Divina*

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To the Community of Readers of

St. Meinrad Archabbey

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Preface

"Do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:31), the apostle Philip asked an Ethiopian official who was reading Isaiah. It is a question that could be asked of many of us today. We could easily couple it with the question: "Do you know how to read what you are reading?" Today more people are aware that reading certain things, especially reading the Scriptures, requires a different skill set than they usually employ. Some may be aware that reading was for centuries a major source of sustenance for the people who read and found meaning and direction in the Scriptures. This special type of reading is called *lectio divina*. Old and new authorities sing its praises as a transformative, energizing, divinizing practice. Peter of Celle in the twelfth century hailed it as providing "the soul's food, light, lamp, refuge, consolation, and the spice of every spiritual savor." He went on to suggest that this sacred reading is like going to a bread box where "people from any walk of life, age, sex, status, or ability . . . will all be filled with the refreshment that suits them" (*On Affliction and Reading* 11–12).[1] Such reading contrasts sharply with today's reading, which wants only information and as quickly as possible. Desire for a deeper sort of reading has sparked renewed interest in *lectio divina*.

[1] See *Peter of Celle, Selected Works*, trans. Hugh Feiss, CS 100 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987) 135.

In October of 2008 the Synod of Bishops held in Rome centered on the theme "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church" and noted the value of *lectio divina* for the contemporary scene. Propositions issued at the end of this meeting suggest, among other things, that a renewed practice of *lectio divina* is a hopeful indication of people's prayerful engagement of the scriptural word today. Such interest in encouraging a return to this ancient way of encountering the Scriptures has been building over the last century. Through various papal documents and in a special way in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, of Vatican II, the message about the sustaining power of the Scriptures for church life and for the spiritual nourishment of Christians came through clearly. It was only natural that effective methods for reading and assimilating the scriptural word would come to the fore. *Lectio divina*, while an ancient practice, is by no means a static one. It has undergone its own dynamic evolution, and this study is an effort to map out that development and indicate its contemporary contours. The hoped-for result is to provide a fuller appreciation of how *lectio divina* worked for people in the past and can transform people today through a vital relationship with the Word.

My own interest in *lectio* owes much to my early monastic training and to some later expert Jesuit tutelage where I was sensitized to the fact that monastic reading differed from the academic reading I was expected to master as well. Throughout this ongoing exploration of *lectio divina* I draw strength and inspiration from a community of readers that is the monastic community of St. Meinrad Archabbey. It is in that community that I came to recognize the transforming character of *lectio*. Archabbot Lambert Reilly and Archabbot Justin DuVall have both in turn supported this project, perhaps as part of the monastic conversion thrust upon one who, as Benedict would put it, is a perpetual beginner in monastic living. As I have pursued this project over several years I have benefited from the support and interest of Godfrey Mullen, OSB; Guerric DeBona, OSB; and Patrick Cooney, OSB, confreres who were companions on the journey as they pursued their own immersion in various types of academic reading at The Catholic University of America at various times. Mark O'Keefe, OSB, and Denis Robinson,

OSB, rectors of St. Meinrad Seminary, and Thomas Walters, Academic Dean, have afforded me teaching and writing opportunities related to my topic for which I am grateful.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the encouragement of family, especially my cousin Elaine DePlaunty, who was a reading companion even in our early years, and so many friends. Some friends would make a point of directing my attention to some book or article and here I want to express my gratitude in particular to Nathan Mitchell, Ruth Lebowitz, Maria Kiely, OSB, and Abbot Leo Ryska, OSB. I must single out for special recognition Valerian Odermann, OSB, who has so generously spent hours offering editorial suggestions for making my text more readable, a service he had also rendered on an earlier project.

Throughout the time spent on writing this work I have had the benefit of association with faculty colleagues in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America and the interest and encouragement of the deans of the school, the late Stephen Happel, Francis Moloney, SDB, and Kevin Irwin. Some of the research was done during an academic leave and sabbatical granted by the university. Both graduate and undergraduate students have by their questions led me to see things more clearly, and I am a better reader because of them. One graduate student, Elizabeth McCloskey, has done the lion's share of work on the index, for which I am most grateful. It has also been my good fortune, while at the university, to live with a community of scholars and teachers in Curley Hall, and their conversation and example has made for a creative environment for pursuing this work.

Over these past several years I have had the privilege of serving another Benedictine community, St. Benedict's Monastery in Bristow, Virginia. Together each Sunday we celebrate the Eucharist, and in our gatherings I have come to understand the Word more than would have been possible for me without the association with these sisters. They are a true community of readers who make the Word visible in their life and ministry.

I want to acknowledge the permission granted by publishers in whose works earlier versions of some of the material included here

appeared. Paulist Press published "Reading and Ministry: Applying *Lectio Divina* Principles in a Ministerial Context" in *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, vol. 2, ed. Robert J. Wicks, 613–27 (2000); *Louvain Studies* included "Assimilating the Word: Priestly Spirituality and *Lectio Divina*" in vol. 30: 70–91 (2005); and Liturgical Press published "*Lectio Divina*: Reading and Praying" in *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer*, ed. Christian Roth and Harry Hagan, 201–21 (2007). Rozanne Elder and Mark Scott, OCSO, have shepherded this book through the review and preparation process at Cistercian Publications, and to both of them I am most grateful.

Reading is a lifelong task; we are destined to be readers. Reading this work is a mere step along the way, and the hope that inspired this study is that *lectio divina*, the type of reading described here, will be not a mere pastime but a pathway to life. Reading becomes reading to live.

Abbreviations

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
CF	Cistercian Fathers Series
CCSL	*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*. Turnhout: Brepols, 1954–
CS	Cistercian Studies Series
CSCO	*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium: Scriptores Syri*. Louvain: Peeters, 1919–
CSEL	*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. Vienna: [various publishers], 1866–
DSp	*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1932–
FCh	*Fathers of the Church*. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 1947–
PG	*Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne. 162 volumes. Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857–66.
PL	*Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, *Series Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne. 221 volumes. Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1878–90.
RB	*Regula Benedicti* (*Rule of Saint Benedict*)
SBOp	*Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 8 vols. in 9. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77.
SCh	Sources chrétiennes

Chapter One

The Problem of Spiritual Illiteracy

Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* opens with the chapter "The One Thing Needful," in which the narrator claims that *facts* are that one thing needful.[1] Facts form the heart and center of the schooling children receive in the industrialized society of Coketown where the novel is set. "Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else."[2] Thomas Gradgrind, "a man of facts and calculations," is the proud sponsor of this approach and his own children suffer because of it. Their starved imaginations are the consequence of such obsessive focus on the world of facts. "Murdering the Innocents" is the apt title for the chapter detailing the operations of Gradgrind's school, where children are known by a number rather than a name. A government spokesperson announces

[1] *Hard Times: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, 3rd ed., Fred Kaplan and Sylvère Monod, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

[2] Kaplan and Monod, *Hard Times*, 5.

to the students: "We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact."[3]

Dickens protests a society that no longer nourishes the imagination. He laments, too, that religion, a stimulus to hopeful imagining, is given short shrift as materialism becomes the all-encompassing creed. As one commentator notes, "Religion too is perverted and slighted, yet emerges fitfully as one of the few forces that can save men from the living death which is Coketown."[4] The children of Coketown are not taught to appreciate the mystery of life or to stand in awe of creation and the wonders of nature. Life is desiccated, devoid of meaning or any deep purpose apart from production and accumulation. "The novel shows," Martha Nussbaum observes, "in its determination to see only what can enter the utilitarian calculations, the economic mind is blind; blind to the qualitative richness of the perceptible world; to the separateness of its people, to their inner depths, their hopes and loves and fears. . . . Blind above all, to the fact that human life is something mysterious and not altogether fathomable."[5]

The concern with facts in Dickens's novel resonates with a contemporary preoccupation with information. It is easy to conclude that the students in the Gradgrind school were only taught to read for facts, for information. They were not encouraged to let reading tutor their imaginations. Consequently their reading probably would not excite or inspire, would not provide purpose. In their environment imagination was foolish and so not tapped. Yet imagination plays an important role in any deep reading and opens up visions of possibility in the one who reads. Where the Coketown children were not supposed to venture was the world of creative imagining, the world of play that would enable them to break out of the stagnant and dehumanizing world they inhabited. Children like

[3] Kaplan and Monod, *Hard Times*, 9.

[4] Robert Barnard, "Imagery and Theme in *Hard Times*," in Kaplan and Monod, *Hard Times*, 394.

[5] Martha Nussbaum, "The Literary Imagination in Public Life," in *Hard Times*, ed. Kaplan and Monod, 436–37.

those in Gradgrind's school are shortchanged in their education. They do not realize that reading for facts is just one way of reading. Deep reading, such as religious reading, escapes them, and yet it would lead them out of their soulless world. To learn to read in this deeper way is to come to imagine differently about ourselves and life around us.

What impedes some today who hunger for spiritual growth is precisely the inability to read in this deeper way, that is, to read in such a way as to be spiritually challenged and not just given information. Despite great strides in reducing illiteracy on many levels, society faces the problem of spiritual illiteracy. The ability to read so as to draw out spiritual meaning is strangely wanting. This illiteracy problem is compounded by the emergence of new types of reading (computer literacy) precisely as old ways of reading seem to be slipping away. Contemporary seekers face no dearth of books on spirituality but struggle with reading them in the spiritual way. Are there "schools" where such reading can be mastered? Commentators who worry about the loss of more classic reading skills in an age dominated by the screen rather than the book repeatedly ask this question. The apparent threat to established culture by the seemingly continuous revolutions in technology underscores the need for such schools.

George Steiner has lamented the end of the "age of the book" and has dreamed of "houses of reading" where the venerable art of reading could be learned again in an atmosphere of silence and with appropriate guidance and companionship similar to what monasteries provided for centuries.[6] As the screen has eclipsed the book, people have become spectators, passive observers of what the entertainment culture brings before them. Their sense of themselves and what they need is shaped by the media. Some, breaking out of such stifling passivity, have turned to self-help movements and literature with negligible results.[7] What about the

[6] George Steiner, "The End of Bookishness?" *Times Literary Supplement*, July 8–16, 1988: 754.

[7] See Margaret R. Miles, *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 2–3.

classic approaches to spiritual development? The retrieval of underutilized and often forgotten tools or methods from the spiritual tradition can provide light for the process of discovering meaning and direction in life. Steiner has argued that the classic way of reading put people in touch with what he calls "real presence," the very energy of life, that which gives fullness to life and banishes emptiness.[8] That way of reading has been threatened not only by technological advances but also by literary theories such as deconstruction and poststructuralism and by psychoanalysis, which questions the relationship between words and meaning, between words and world. As Steiner indicates, the covenant once established between word and world has been broken; the word is in crisis.[9] People are skeptical of what words mean and of what the world means. To read in the ancient way is not only to decipher the meaning signified by the alphabetic characters but also to read the world as pregnant with meaning. It is to read in such a way that one connects with a presence that is the ultimate source of meaning and an unspoken answer to human questions.

Testimony to the ability to read in this way comes from unexpected sources. The teen David Kern in John Updike's short story, "Pigeon Feathers," learns to read in this fuller way in struggling with a question that plagues him, the reality of the afterlife. He wonders what, if anything, awaits him after death. Brought up as a Christian, he turns to his minister at a Sunday school class, but the minister's vapid answer—comparing the afterlife to Abraham Lincoln's goodness living on after him—angers David and even seems to betray Christianity. He looks to his parents for an answer but there confronts a passionless view of life and ineffectual witness to faith. He hungers and aches for more. One day, though, he finds the answer in the feathers of some dead pigeons he is burying. He, in effect, "reads" pigeon feathers and gets his answer. "He lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now broadened and

[8] See George Steiner, "The Uncommon Reader" and "Real Presences" in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 1–19; 20–39; and *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 37–232.

[9] Steiner, *Real Presences*, 90–96.

stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted to cup warmth around the mute flesh. And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him."[10] In "reading" these pigeon feathers David encounters the transcendent, the "real presence" that gives his life meaning and answers his longing.

This chapter will describe different approaches to reading developed in the course of history in order to highlight the shifting attitude toward what is read and how it is received by the reader. If Steiner and others are correct, the retrieval of an ancient method of reading may contribute vitally to contemporary practice and so remedy the spiritual plight of some of today's seekers by reestablishing for them the covenant between word and world. In itself, awareness that there is more than one way to read may open eyes to new possibilities. With so much current emphasis put on reading for information, society may have lost sight of the *formation* reading can provide.[11] Certainly reading has played a very important formative role in Christian and other religious traditions.

Various Approaches to Reading

People take reading for granted and seldom reflect on the activity and what it entails. Alberto Manguel, in *A History of Reading*, has observed: "Reading, almost as much as breathing, is our essential function."[12] It is by reading that people orient themselves, make sense of themselves and of their world. Reading, of course, has to do with more than deciphering letters on a page. Concerned parents

[10] In John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1962) 105.

[11] The formational possibilities of reading receive support in an indirect way from William J. Bennet who has produced what he calls a " 'how to' book for moral literacy." See *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, ed. William J. Bennet (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) 11.

[12] Albert Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996) 7.

read the faces of their children; farmers read the sky; musicians read a musical score—to mention only a few of the many different acts of reading.[13] Yet books are what people would most often associate with the activity of reading. And every reader has his or her own personal history of book reading, begun very often with children's books still remembered decades later.[14] In childhood, reading stories or hearing them read is formative in a lasting way.[15] In a sense, a challenge for adults is learning to read that way again.

When people read, they are not functioning like a photocopier; they are doing more than capturing an image of a page in their minds. In fact, reading is an immensely complicated activity; the mechanics and process by which we read are still not completely understood. A number of pieces of the reader's past, including personal experience and what has been read before, converge in a given act of reading. Thus Manguel notes that reading is "a bewildering, labyrinthine, common and yet personal process of reconstruction."[16]

The practice of silent reading, which is the usual manner of reading today, did not become commonplace until the tenth century. Augustine (354–430) acknowledged Ambrose's (ca. 339–397) ability to read silently while also admitting that he himself never did so.[17] Developments such as the increasing use of punctuation and space separating words promoted and facilitated the process of silent reading. With the acquisition of the ability to read silently came a new relationship between the reader and what was read. Words could be read more quickly, could be played with in the mind's eye

[13] Manguel, *A History*, 6–7.

[14] For one testimony to the lasting impact of childhood reading, see Michael Dirda, "The Books That Launched a Love of Reading," *The Washington Post*, 4 March 1997: Health, 7.

[15] See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Madonna Kolbenschlag, *Kiss Sleeping Beauty Good–Bye: Breaking the Spell of Feminine Myths and Models*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); and James Hillman, "A Note on Story," *Parabola* 4, no. 4 (1979): 43–45 where Hillman comments on the value of reading or hearing story and myth in childhood.

[16] Manguel, *A History*, 39.

[17] Manguel, *A History*, 43. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.3.

in creative ways. This evolving relationship between reader and book, between reader and text is a crucial dimension of the unfolding history of reading and bears directly on the concern here with a way of reading spiritually. Changes in the mechanics of reading—for instance, whether one reads out loud or silently or reads from a book or a screen—are not without significance for this relationship.[18]

To be sure, learning to read represents a rite of passage, a movement away from dependence to independence, for any member of a literate society. To be unable to read is to be blocked from full participation in adult society and confined to a situation of enforced dependency. Campaigns to end illiteracy are, in effect, campaigns for the emancipation of people who are enslaved, who lack the freedom reading provides. But what should also concern us is not only the ability to decipher the words that letters stand for, but also the ability to extract lifegiving meaning from those words. The tragedy of spiritual illiteracy is found precisely in being able to read the words but not derive the meaning.

What bears on our situation is the changing attitudes people have had toward the book and the text. It will be illuminating to begin with the present time and move backward through the centuries to chart the shifts that have occurred in how the book and the text are regarded. Ivan Illich has noted that the modern-day reader is more like a tourist or commuter who wants to get to a destination as quickly as possible rather than a pedestrian or pilgrim who takes in everything along the way at a more leisurely pace.[19] Readers of the past were not in such a hurry and stayed with what they were reading. Furthermore, we live in an age of rapid communication in which "hypertext" and "virtual reality" are becoming common terminology and the whole notion of book and text is changing.

[18] Manguel, *A History*, 49–51; see also Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[19] Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's "Didascalicon"* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 110.

Digital Text

In this digital age the person seated at the computer screen never reads the text itself but only a virtual version of the original stored in the computer's memory. As a consequence the text is more sharply differentiated from the object on which it appears, whether that be the pages of a book or the computer screen. In fact, for the computer devotee the book itself may come to be recognized as simply a machine for handling text, a piece of technology. As George P. Landow has observed: "We have already moved far enough beyond the book that we find ourselves, for the first time in centuries, able to see the book as unnatural, as a near-miraculous technological innovation and not as something intrinsically and inevitably human."[20] The cursor that appears on the computer screen represents in a way the user who now moves about in the midst of the text.[21] The qualities of the computer are now associated with text, so text is thought of in terms of flexibility, fluidity, and interactivity rather than the stability and authority associated with printed books.[22]

Some have argued that in today's world visual representation is triumphing over textual representation. Whereas in the past a visual image was used to illustrate a text and stood in subordination to that text, the image now seems to have the upper hand; the text in turn seems to require some visual representation to be convincing.[23] Newspapers and newsletters increasingly make use of visual images such as graphs and tables to get a point across. In fact, people today are assaulted by images in the popular media. The harmonious relationship of text and image seemingly present in previous ages is gone. In the medieval period images were used creatively to deliver a message to a large illiterate population but, it would seem,

[20] George P. Landow, "Twenty Minutes into the Future, Or How Are We Moving Beyond the Book?" in *The Future of the Book*, Geoffrey Nunberg, ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1996) 214.

[21] Landow, "Twenty Minutes," 232.

[22] Jay David Bolter, "Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality, and the Future of Writing," in Nunberg, ed., *The Future of the Book*, 256.

[23] Bolter, "Ekphrasis," 260.

they were used more judiciously. Hence the religious art found in a cathedral served as a text to nurture the faith of those who came there. But at the same time this sacred iconography was at the service of the word. Today the growing prominence of images over literary text may suggest that we are entering a postliterate era.[24] What appears certain is that literacy today needs to be understood as encompassing more than reading printed text.

What is further forcing a reconsideration of the notions of text and reading is the existence today of hypertext. The term refers to electronic text linked to other texts, images, sounds, and so forth. Readers can move through the text and pursue whatever connections they care to explore. In some ways this diminishes the power of the author while increasing that of the reader, who is now free to follow his or her own interests. The reader can enter hypertext anywhere, can edit, delete, rearrange. Children are introduced to hypertext fairly early in their education via the World Wide Web, a simple hypertext system.[25] The full implications of this form of text and reading for our understanding of self and our culture have yet to be spelled out.

Perhaps even more radical in its possible impact on people today is virtual reality. Here we are confronting nonverbal text that takes us even farther away from "book" culture. Virtual reality seems to be an answer to the contemporary quest for immediacy inasmuch as it provides a direct and seemingly unmediated experience of another world. Readers of virtual reality find themselves dropped inside the data rather than observing it from the outside on a page or screen.[26] Here again the visual seems to dominate over the textual as the reader has a direct visual experience without text.

[24] Bolter, "Ekphrasis," 262–63. See also Umberto Eco, "Afterward," in Nunberg, ed., *The Future of the Book*, 296–98.

[25] Landow, "Twenty Minutes," 225–27; see also Manguel, *A History*, 318–19; and Luca Toschi, "Hypertext and Authorship," trans. Christine Richardson, in *The Future of the Book*, 169–207. For more extended treatment of some of the issues surrounding hypertext, see Landow's *Hypertext in Hypertext* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) and *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

[26] Landow, "Twenty Minutes," 232.

Whereas contemporary art and writing have viewers and readers oscillate between looking at and looking through the text or the piece of art so that we are in part conscious of the medium, such as a painting or a novel, in virtual reality there is nothing to look at, for we suddenly find ourselves in the other world the computer presents to us. Although people in the past may have longed to see the world in a word, people today may find themselves influenced by the possibilities of virtual reality and long to see the world by means of ever more sophisticated technology.[27] The book may be increasingly seen as a very primitive piece of technology. And yet, precisely as computers are introducing a new type of literacy, these same digital wonders stimulate needs in the computer literate that these machines cannot satisfy. This plight has led Umberto Eco to remark: "In my periods of optimism I dream of a computer generation which, compelled to read a computer screen, gets acquainted with reading from a screen, but at a certain moment feels unsatisfied and looks for a different, more relaxed, and differently-committing form of reading."[28]

The Printed Book

Aware of the challenge computer technology poses to our understanding of text and approach to reading, we can benefit from reflecting on the reaction of past ages to somewhat similar disruptions. Indeed, some perceived the arrival of printing technology as posing a major threat to an existing lifestyle. In the late fifteenth century the Benedictine abbot Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516) wrote a treatise, *De laude scriptorum*, in which he lamented that print technology would undermine monastic culture. He saw the writing done in the monastic scriptorium as a superior labor that bore great spiritual fruit for the monastic scribe. Furthermore, he argued for the superiority and durability of the scribal manuscript over the printed page. Perhaps he correctly perceived that the new technology would eventually deal a blow to the established order

[27] Bolter, "Ekphrasis," 265–71.

[28] Umberto Eco, "Afterward," in Nunberg, ed., *The Future of the Book*, 300–301.

within monastic circles.[29] Yet even Trithemius made use of print (his *De laude scriptorum* was printed) and so in a sense was a part of the new age.[30]

With the printed book the text had become a stamp that could be imprinted on many pages and distributed broadly. Typography meant that the accuracy of texts was more assured and that texts could be indexed. This technological breakthrough was to have tremendous repercussions in the development of the humanities and sciences as learned disciplines.[31] Because of movable type and the relative ease of producing reliable copies, texts could be read by many more people. With the simultaneous emergence of a middle class in Western Europe, there were now possibilities for what George Steiner has called "classical reading."[32] Such reading, whereby the reader felt addressed by the text and answerable to it, required not only books but also space, time, and silence for reading that only a class with some means would have.[33] To read in this way was to engage in an activity we might associate with the concentrated reading done in an academic context. This manner of reading has roots in both the scholastic age and the monastic period. With printing, books became more common possessions and personal libraries appeared in the homes of the more advantaged.

[29] Johannes Trithemius, *In Praise of Scribes: De laude scriptorum*, ed. Klaus Arnold, trans. Roland Behrendt (Lawrence, KS: Cornonado Press, 1974). Trithemius's work contains chapters entitled: "How Appropriate Copying Is for Monks"; "How Good and Useful Copying Is for Monks"; and "The Monks Should Not Stop Copying Because of the Invention of Printing." See the fine discussion in James J. O'Donnell's "The Pragmatics of the New: Trithemius, McLuhan, Cassiodorus," in Nunberg, ed., *The Future of the Book*, 43–46.

[30] As Klaus Arnold remarks in his introduction to *De laude scriptorum*, "Trithemius knew very well that a printed book was bound to reach a much larger audience than a manuscript. If his instructions in the art of copying were to be effective, he had to ensure the greatest possible circulation for them" (15).

[31] See Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early–Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[32] Steiner, "End of Bookishness," 754.

[33] Steiner, "The Uncommon Reader," 6–9.

If Ivan Illich's thesis articulated in his *In the Vineyard of the Text* is correct, the printed book represented a later phase in a larger epoch in which the text, whether on a scribal manuscript or on a printed page, had already acquired an importance in its own right.[34] The text as a record of thought could be considered independently of where it was recorded. This is taken so much for granted by us that we find it hard to imagine that there was a time when text did not have such independence, when it was inextricably linked to the book or the page. The emergence of certain writing techniques and their general adoption, which allowed for the autonomy of the text, marks the first phase of this "textual" epoch that has the production of printed books as its second phase.

Scholastic Text

Ivan Illich places the emergence of the text from the page at around 1150, some three hundred years before moveable type was invented.[35] Manual techniques of scribes allowed for the text to be seen as an externalization of a logical thinking process in which words were mirrors for concepts. Rather than words running together and text undivided into lines, paragraphs, and sections as had been the case in preceding centuries, the page was now optically arranged so the structure of the argument, the thinking, could be clearly seen. All this is so commonplace to us who have grown up in a textual age that we are largely unaware of how revolutionary some of these techniques were when first introduced. But with these twelfth-century innovations, the text could rise off the physical page and be visualized in the mind without the page. The text had acquired autonomy and did not need the page as it once did. In fact, what was written on the page could now be seen as simply a shadow of the text, whose existence transcended the concrete page. The text became an object in its own right in which thought is

[34] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 116. Illich's persuasive presentation of the historical evolution of the text and reading is guiding the exposition throughout this chapter.

[35] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 3–4.

captured and presented.[36] The book was now a storehouse, a mine, a treasury where text was stored. Indeed, a couple of centuries before printing made it possible to refer to a page number for a particular passage, devices were developed so that the book could be used as a reference tool.[37] The book on which the text had been dependent now became itself a symbol for the text. In philosophical and theological books one found a thought process externalized, an ordered set of reasons carefully arranged on the page. The visual arrangement of the page made it easier to remember the text.

Parallel to and perhaps stimulating this liberation of the text from the page was a focus on the nature of universals in philosophy. The intellectual climate witnessed a movement away from pre-occupation with the particular such as the concrete page to concern with the abstract, with universal ideas. Reading itself could be seen as an act of abstraction; the text represented a materialization of abstraction. Exegesis and hermeneutics were performed on the text that described the world and not on the world of concrete particulars to which the text referred.[38] The text, the book, were pointers to the mind where ideas were lodged. In this way the text assumed hegemony and, according to Illich, reading, writing, speaking, and thinking all became text-molded.[39] Even the mind was thought of as analogous to a text. And with the notion of the text established, the notion of a self that could be similarly scrutinized became possible.[40]

This text-dominated age elevated the role of clerics, for they, in effect, became the official readers. They had acquired reading competence in the schools. The reading they were taught was a solitary activity done in silence. Clerics read in order to manage laws and

[36] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 116–19.

[37] Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) 49.

[38] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 116–21.

[39] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 116–17.

[40] Illich and Sanders, *ABC*, 71–72. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) esp. chapter 3, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" 82–109.

recite religious formulas. Others who wanted to read followed the clerical model of reading, reading geared to very specific purposes.[41] Inasmuch as written documents regulated more and more social interactions, reading assumed greater importance. Society focused less on oral traditions and more on documented agreement.[42] Scholastic reading, with its focus on the text, became the standard way of approaching a page.

The dominance of text began roughly in the middle of the twelfth century. Text freed from the page of the handwritten book became in the middle of this long epoch the text reprinted in numerous books produced by the printing press. Today people are witnessing the end of that era as the screen for many replaces the book as a vehicle for the text. They see even more cogently how much minds have been molded by text; it becomes more difficult to conceive what pre-textual reading and writing would have been like.

The Monastic Book

A time when texts did not hold the upper hand is the time when the page was, as Illich describes it, "a score for pious mumblers."[43] Monastic men and women read texts aloud when monasticism began in the West; they lived a life centered on such reading. They called it *lectio divina*, sacred reading. Saint Benedict (ca. 480–ca. 550) legislated for such reading in his *Rule*, the document that shaped monasticism in the West. The book, for monastics, did not serve as a storehouse for text but as a window on the world and God. The book was a vineyard or a garden where one could go to gather wisdom. Reading, because it was done aloud, had a social and physical dimension. Since a person mouthed the words, part of their impact came from hearing them. One chewed and digested them, as it were, so that they became part of oneself. A reader responded to how they felt to the mouth, to the ears, to the eyes. Reading involved the physical; it engaged the body. Illich informs

[41] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 82–86.

[42] Illich and Sanders, *ABC*, 31–41.

[43] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 2.

us that monasteries are sometimes described as "dwelling places of mumblers and munchers,"[44] a sort of commentary on the biblical verse: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Ps 119:103).

Reading as a way of life in monasticism has its roots in the Judaic tradition. The books the monastic cherished above all were the canonical Scriptures, the revealed word of God. Monastics were exposed to that book of books in daily gatherings in choir to sing psalms and hear readings, as well as in times alone reading and meditating on the sacred Scriptures.[45] Through those Scriptures they came to understand themselves and the world around them. The scriptural stories became *their* stories, *their* biographies.

Lectio soon took on the dimensions of a liturgical activity done in the presence of God and others. Because words on the page were first of all triggers for sounds rather than mirrors for concepts, reading created an auditory ambience. Reading, not a mere individualistic activity, had clear societal dimensions. To read was to engage in a public act. Before the word read aloud, all were equals. Whereas scholastic reading was in effect restricted to clerics, monastic *lectio* was to be open to all, an egalitarian activity. Furthermore, monastic reading was pursued for its own sake and not for utilitarian purposes as it often seemed to be with the later clerics.[46] The Scriptures provided the monastic reader not with logical arguments (which the scholastic reader would look for in texts) but with a sacred narrative that would lead the reader to wisdom.[47] Indeed, for monastics reading was engaging in an act of incarnation, not of abstraction. Reading gave birth to the sense waiting to emerge from the page.[48] In this monastic approach to reading one finds what George Steiner sees as reading in the classical mold. As he comments, "Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text (the piece of music, the

[44] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 54 but see also 51–58.

[45] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 58–60.

[46] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 82.

[47] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 105–6.

[48] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 123.

work of art) *incarnates* (the notion is grounded in the sacramental) *a real presence of significant being*."[49]

The ornamentation that graced monastic manuscripts assisted in birthing the meaning of the words. Illuminations served the word. Since the book was a sacred object, a focus of worship, these ornaments were the sacred vestments that clothed the word. They provided cues to the reader in grasping the meaning of the page. To the sounded words they provided artistic images as visual accompaniment. They helped readers to remember the sacred narrative through which they had journeyed.[50]

In this monastic age the book was a metaphor for reading, for discerning the divine meaning to be found in all things, for the monastic reader saw nature itself as the primordial book waiting to be read. Augustine had drawn attention to the two books God had written—creation and redemption.[51] To read meant to comprehend not only written books but most especially the world, God's primal text. The symbolic, pointing by means of visible things to invisible things, dominated all their reality. Symbols were in the medieval mind not arbitrary but rather, according to Gerhart Ladner, "were believed to represent objectively and to express faithfully various aspects of a universe that was perceived as widely and deeply meaningful."[52] The monastic reader acquired wisdom through appropriating the symbols. Through *lectio* the monastic reader found a place within the symbolic order, much as computer-

[49] Steiner, "Real Presences," in *No Passion Spent*, 35.

[50] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 107–9.

[51] Augustine of Hippo, *De Genesi ad litteram*, PL 34: 245; cited in Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 123.

[52] Gerhardt Ladner, "Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: a Comparison," in *Images and Ideas in the Middle Ages: Selected Studies in History and Art*, vol. 1 (Rome: Edizio di Storia e Litteratura, 1983) 245. On the difference between modern approaches to symbols and medieval understandings Ladner notes: "One can observe that some of the most interesting and characteristic modern interpretations of symbolism attempt to coordinate or even identify symbols with myths, whereas in the medieval understanding and tradition of symbolism symbols were mainly seen as representing facts and events, phenomena in and beyond nature and history, in such a way that they lead to the meta-physical and meta-historical realms encompassed by faith and theology" (252).

literate readers find themselves with the cursor in the midst of the text. The sacred history chronicled in the sacred books became the reader's history for the sacred narrative encompassed and gave meaning and coherence to the reader's life.[53]

The practice of *lectio divina*, developed through the monastic centuries, could bring healing to those who had been blinded by sin. Reading would illuminate them and they would come to see with the eyes of faith. Most especially, readers would come to see themselves as they really are before God. The sacred book would serve as a mirror in which they could see themselves truly.[54] As the scholastic period began to emerge, *lectio divina* distinguished itself more sharply from scholastic reading, which focused on intellectual questions and disputations.[55] *Lectio* was from the outset a *studium*, a study of God's word and immersion in that word that would transform the reader. Later centuries would reserve the notion of study for intellectual pursuits and separate such study from "spiritual reading," the term that gradually replaced the much fuller notion of *lectio divina*.[56] Monastic reading was the first (and necessary) step in a process of transformation that would lead through meditation to contemplation. Through *lectio* readers acquired a sense of the order of the world and their place within it. The words read spoke to monastic readers and gave meaning to their lives. Such reading was more formative than informative. This approach, developed centuries ago, could be the type of reading to heal some contemporary ills. The first task is to retrieve its fullness.

A Method of Retrieval

Margaret Miles has suggested that discovering a means of cultivating the religious self is of crucial importance in the present

[53] Ladner, "Medieval," 249; Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 31–33.

[54] Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, 11–22.

[55] See Monica Sandor, "Lectio Divina and the Monastic Spirituality of Reading," *American Benedictine Review* 40.1 (1989): 99–101.

[56] See Hermann Josef Sieben, "De la lectio divina a la lecture spirituelle," DSp 9 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976): 487–96.

time.[57] She further argues for the retrieval of overlooked or underutilized tools from the tradition as a creative way of fashioning a contemporary practice of the spiritual life.[58] *Lectio divina* is precisely a tool that can be put at the service of fashioning a spiritual self for contemporary seekers. Yet this tool cannot simply be extracted from the centuries when it was first developed and appropriated without some critical awareness and sensitivity. Historical method requires that documents prescribing and describing *lectio divina* be studied in the light of the context, the presuppositions and values of the period in which they were written. As Miles notes, practices, of which *lectio* is one example, are a response to pressing interests of comprehending life, achieving self-esteem, and ultimately of gaining salvation. Although such practices can be correlated with certain theological ideas, the ideas in themselves do not adequately reveal the religious dimension of how such practices worked.[59] The fuller explanation of such phenomena should propel historical investigation. *Lectio* should be looked at not only from a critical historical perspective but also from the standpoint of an appropriative method. This latter methodology is concerned not only with correct historical interpretation but with an understanding that is ultimately transformational as well. Using the appropriative method moves a reader beyond the analysis of texts to a critical correlation of past insights with present understandings of the spiritual life.[60] Such an approach welcomes the findings of contemporary social sciences such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology.

Reading under the ancient form of *lectio divina* is suggested here as a metaphor for living the spiritual life. Such a metaphor may have special relevance to the current time of rampant spiritual illiteracy. In the chapters that follow, foundational texts that speak of *lectio* will be analyzed in an attempt to reappropriate this classic practice for today. One will see through the analysis of texts how

[57] Miles, *Practicing Christianity*, 183.

[58] Miles, *Practicing Christianity*, 13–14.

[59] Miles, *Practicing Christianity*, 6.

[60] Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997) 129–31.

such an approach to reading was transformational then and can be today. Currently, under the tutelage of contemporary science, we are coming to look at nature as encoded and intriguing information. Once again the natural world is seen more as it was by medieval monks, as something to be read. By reading it not as a cold scientific equation but as a symbolic reality pointing toward the invisible and infinite, one can come to a new experience of awe and wonder. These, Rudolf Otto has reminded us, are the peculiarly human responses to the Holy.[61] Reading that occasions awe and wonder is reading that recognizes the real presence that gives meaning to life. To read that way is truly to live. As Gustave Flaubert once wrote, "Read in order to live."[62]

[61] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non–Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950) 12–40.

[62] Letter to Mlle de Chantepie, June, 1857, cited in Manguel, *A History*, 1.