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Lectio Divina
The Medieval Experience of Reading

by
Duncan Robertson



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For Susan
Amor ipse notitia est

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Abbreviations

- CCCM *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Medievalis*. Turnhout: Brepols, 1966–
- CCSL *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–
- CF Cistercian Fathers Series
- CS Cistercian Studies Series
- DS *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1937–
- PG *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*. Edited by J. P. Migne. 162 vols. 1857–66.
- PL *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*. Edited by J. P. Migne. 221 vols. 1844–64.
- RB *Rule of Saint Benedict 1980*. Edited by Timothy Fry. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981.
- SBOp *Sancti Bernardi opera*, 9 vols. Edited by J. Leclercq, C. H. Talbot, and H. M. Rochais. Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77.
- SCh Sources Chrétiennes. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1940–
- SC Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica canticorum*.

Preface

What does it mean to read? What faculties does this activity involve? What expectations do we bring to it, what limitations do we encounter? The general question has come frequently into the foreground throughout Western cultural history and in our own time—with notable anxiety—among literary critics, neurologists, literacy teachers, and scholars. This book explores an early phase of this history, the “monastic Middle Ages,” during which the act of reading remained closely associated with prayer in a practice known as *lectio divina*. My belief is that our ongoing scientific and humanistic investigations of reading have not yet sufficiently taken the medieval religious experience into account; additionally, we have much of value to learn from a review of medieval theory and from a rereading of the texts that put theory into practice.

Lectio Divina

Sit tibi vel oratio assidua vel lectio: nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum (“You should apply yourself to prayer or to reading; at times you speak with God, at times he speaks with you”). This saying, first attributed to Cyprian of Carthage (third century), was repeated throughout the Middle Ages¹ and reaffirmed as recently as 1965 in a decree of the Second Vatican Council.² It conveys

¹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Ep.* 1.15, PL 4:221; cited in DS 9:473. Cf. Jerome, *Oras, loqueris ad Sponsum; legis, ille tibi loquitur* (Letter 22.25 to Eustochium [PL 22:411]); Ambrose, *Illum alloquimur, cum oramus; illum audimus cum divina legimus oracula* (*De officiis* 1.20.88 [PL16:50]); Isidore of Seville, *Nam cum oramus, cum Deo ipsi loquimur; cum vero legimus, Deus nobiscum loquitur* (*Sententiae* 3.8 [PL 87:670]); Smaragdus of Saint Mihiel, *Nam cum oramus, cum Deo ipsi loquimur; cum vero legimus, Deus nobiscum loquitur* (*Diadema monachorum* 3 [PL 102:597]), etc.

²“Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred scripture, so that it becomes a dialogue between God and the human

the essence of *lectio divina*, as it has come to be called:³ an intimate dialogue with a living, present, divine interlocutor who will answer when the reader appeals to him.

Medieval readers of Scripture understood, of course, that communication with the Author could not be completely reciprocal. In the Christian belief system, we are transparent to God, who perceives our thoughts and anticipates our prayers before we utter them. But God is not so clearly visible to us. “For our knowledge is imperfect. . . . For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then [in the next life] I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Cor 13:9-12). Meanwhile, we have the Scripture to study in which or through which God “speaks” to us. Applying the effort of faith and intelligence to the text, the devout reader recovers God’s living presence, however indirectly and intermittently, in Saint Paul’s dark mirror of language.

The encounter with the “living word” could prove personally decisive. So Saint Augustine recalls the conversion of Saint Anthony, who happened to enter a church and hear the reading: “Go, sell what you possess and give to the poor . . . and come, follow me” (Matt 19:21). Anthony received the message “as though what was read was being said to him” (*Confessions* 8.12: *tamquam sibi diceretur quod legebatur*), and he proceeded to obey what he had heard. Augustine himself enacts a similar anecdote. Hearing a child’s cry in the garden, “*Tolle! lege!*” he opens the Bible and finds himself urgently addressed by the verse, “not in reveling and drunkenness . . .” (Rom 13:13). Saint Francis enlists his first recruit, Bernardo, in like manner. Opening a Bible at random, they find, “Go, sell what you have . . . take up [your] cross, and follow me.” Francis

reader. For, ‘we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.’” Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), article 25; the quotation is from Ambrose.

³ Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 15, cites early occurrences of the term, often synonymous with *sacra pagina* or *lectio sacra*, in writings by Jerome, Ambrose, and other fourth- and fifth-century patristic authorities. In our time, *lectio divina* has come to signify a systematic reading-prayer exercise, as set forth in a number of modern manuals (see below, pp. •••–••• and p. •••, n. •••)

concludes, “That is the counsel that Christ gives us. So go and do perfectly what you have heard.”⁴ Throughout the Christian tradition, readers are similarly called upon to “listen to” the sacred text, that is to say, to receive it obediently, as though it were spoken to one directly and personally. One has then to engage the text in prayer and apply it in action.

Beyond the drama of conversion, medieval religious readers sought the integration of reading–reception into a way of life. The early theorists of *lectio divina* all stress the need for assiduity, persistence, and commitment. Disciplined application will develop into a true mutuality of response between the reader and the text over time. John Cassian, in the *Conferences* (fifth century),⁵ foresees a progressively deepening dialogue: “As our mind is increasingly renewed by this study, the face of Scripture will also begin to be renewed, and the beauty of a more sacred understanding will somehow grow with the person making progress.”⁶ *Etiam scripturarum facies incipiet innouari*; what does Cassian mean by the “face” of Scripture? Something, perhaps, like what we call the “interface,” the locus of contact between writing and reading. He seems mysteriously to suggest (and Gregory later confirms) that the Scripture itself will be renewed, that it could indeed change as the person studying it changes.

In the Monastery

In practice, the spiritual development prescribed by Cassian would require the shelter of a stable institution. From the fifth century onward, the cultivation of *lectio divina* became primarily associated with the monastery. Literacy was a prerequisite for admission, and further instruction was offered in intramural classes. The Rule of Saint Benedict (RB 48) schedules times for “meditation

⁴ Saint Francis of Assisi, *The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi*, trans. Roger Hudleston (New York: Heritage Press, 1965), chap. 2.

⁵ *Jean Cassien: Conférences*, ed. E. Pichéry, SCh 42, 54, 64 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1955–59). *John Cassian: The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

⁶ Cassian, *Conferences*, 14.11.1; Ramsey, 515; SCh 54:197.

or reading” in alternation with manual labor according to seasonal needs.⁷ Other early rules make similar provisions.

Reading in the early monastic environment was normally performed out loud. Early medieval authorities testify, and modern studies of the manuscripts have shown, that from the second century CE onward, the spaces and *interpuncta* which had been placed between words disappeared, leaving the reader to contend with unseparated text (*scriptura continua*). In the era of Saint Benedict, a monk making his first approach to a text needed to vocalize in order to decipher the writing. Pronunciation remained necessary at all subsequent stages of the reading process, particularly in the work of memorization, which formed the basis of the monastic *meditatio*.

In the early monastic rules, as in classical usage, *meditatio* chiefly means repetition, memorization, and recitation. The term refers to the process of learning texts by heart, and also to psalmody and recitation performed while the monk is at work, away from the written page. When the reader returns to the book, *meditatio* ensures that he will be able to “read” it more easily, as children learning to read today do with texts they have previously memorized. “Reading needs the aid of memory,” Isidore of Seville notes, “and even if memory is sluggish, it is sharpened by frequent *meditatio*, and recovered by assiduous reading.”⁸ Strictly construed, *meditatio* is the continuation of reading and is all but synonymous with reading in Saint Benedict’s phrase, *meditare aut legere* (RB 48.23).

Did the constant recitation of Scripture lead to the ethical internalization that Cassian describes? Often enough, the documents warn against mechanical, thoughtless repetition and hint at a daily struggle against boredom. To some extent, the emphasis on orality was imposed by practical necessity; books were scarce as well as difficult to read. Yet even in later centuries, among educated people in situations where material and social constraints have largely disappeared, reading aloud and recitation continue to occupy a central place in the religious environment. Reading aloud transforms reading into prayer. Pronouncing the words under one’s

⁷ *Rule of Saint Benedict 1980*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 252–53.

⁸ Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae* 3.14.7–8 (PL 83:689).

breath, one quite literally “tastes” them in the mouth, and more profoundly, *in ore cordis*, “in the mouth of the heart.” Sounding words out loud (*voce magna*, or *clare legendo*) engages the sense of hearing and opens the ethical dimension of the listening attitude. By these means, the reader discovers the emotional inflections contained in the meaning of the words and acts out the protagonist’s role. Memorization, finally, realizes an elementary form of Pauline spiritual freedom: singing/reciting Scripture *submoto libro*, “with the book put aside,” at work or wherever one may find oneself, one is liberated from servitude to the “custodian” (Gal 3:25)—the *littera*, the law, the written text. Having memorized the texts and having placed them in the context of one’s own experience, the reader re-authors them and makes them, in effect, his or her own.

Intellectual comprehension in this culture is secondary. That would come late in the course of the reading experience, if at all, as a gift of the Holy Spirit—in sleep perhaps, as Cassian suggests (Conf 14.10.4)—but never completely, of course, in this life. The scriptural text is conceived to be inexhaustible and capable of conveying different meanings to different readers, or to the same reader at different stages of spiritual maturation. Understanding (*intellectus spiritualis*) would result less from any synthesis of ideas than from a patient frequentation, a familiarity grown from long acquaintanceship, as though the Bible were a language which could only be learned by living in the country where it is spoken. Accordingly, theorists and teachers of *lectio divina* concern themselves more with the process of reading than with its result. Reading, like prayer, is an activity performed mainly in the present tense; indeed, one could never finally “have read” the Scripture.

Reading and Exegesis

Where the disciplines of *lectio divina* focus on subjective experience, biblical exegesis springs from the contrasting, complementary belief that the scriptural text has one or more objective meanings to be discovered. That fundamental assumption spans various systems of interpretation and underlies the vast literature of commentary extending from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. Exegesis and *lectio divina* develop, as it were, in tandem throughout this period. The two disciplines overlap, however, whenever (as often

happens) an interpreter assumes the role of a preacher addressing an audience orally or in writing. The discourse in the form of a sermon begins with the reading of a passage from Scripture—a reading “out loud” to other present readers. Exposition then emerges from an implied dialogue. In Augustine’s sermons on the psalms, in Gregory’s *Moralia on Job* and his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, in Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, the real or imaginary audience is constantly invoked. In the process, reading attitudes derived from *lectio divina* are focused upon the work of interpretation; the meaning of the text is sought in the dialectic between knowledge and experience—*scientia* and *sapientia*—and ideally is found at their point of convergence.

As the literature proliferated, an increasing need was felt for consolidation. From the sixth century onward, there appears a number of patristic anthologies and digests—*florilegia*, *sententiae*, *excerpta*—which transmit the teachings of Augustine, Gregory, and other authorities in accessible form. These compilations facilitate the application of reading to moral and liturgical life. They offer practical instances of the reading-reception that Cassian had theorized. In such volumes, we find biblical and patristic sources freely quoted, excerpted, and combined, often without attribution to their original authors. The materials are frequently organized under topical headings, such as justice, faith, patience, envy, idleness, discipline, prayer, and reading itself.

Another kind of compilation is exemplified by Benedict of Aniane’s *Concordia Regularum*, which follows the Rule of Saint Benedict chapter by chapter, listing for each chapter the stipulations found in all the other available rules. Still another kind of compilation is that of the prayer books, which were composed for prominent laity from the eighth century onward; these collections assemble psalm texts and collects, along with patristic excerpts, to be used by individuals or groups in prayer. In a further development of the compilation genre, John of Fécamp’s *Confessio theologica* (mid-eleventh century) and its various revisions offer what may be described as original “meditations” on sacred writings, quoted at length and focused through extended first-person prayers. In these works, reading flows into writing, the quotations into the quoting texts, in an unbroken continuum.

In religious writing at the turn of the twelfth century, we note an increasing theoretical consciousness expressed in introductory statements and in instructions to real or ideal readers. Saint Anselm warns the reader that his *Prayers and Meditations* should be read not hurriedly or in a turmoil but quietly and thoughtfully, a little at a time; the reader should not even strive to read all of the book, “but only as much as, by God’s help, she finds useful in stirring up her spirit to pray.”⁹ The writings of Hugh of Saint-Victor, particularly the *Didascalicon* (written in the 1120s), bring basic formulations concerning exegesis together with considerations of *lectio divina* as moral instruction.

Hugh confirms a widening of the concept of “meditation,” already apparent in Anselm, as extending beyond the retention of the sacred text emphasized by the ancients. “Meditation takes its start from reading, but is bound by none of reading’s rules or precepts; for it delights to range along open ground” (Did 3.10).¹⁰ Meditation remains integral to the whole reading-prayer process, which Hugh outlines in five steps: reading (proper), meditation, prayer, action, and contemplation. The term also recurs with extended connotations in the titles of collections of original writings; for example, the gnomic *Meditationes* of the Carthusian prior, Guigo I, or the *Meditativae orationes* of William of Saint-Thierry.

It remained for another Carthusian prior, Guigo II, to formulate a complete summary, “after the fact” as it now appears, of the *lectio divina* process. The steps of Guigo II’s *Ladder of Monks* are four: *lectio* (the first reading), *meditatio* (repetition and reflection), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (rest in the presence of the Spirit). Action, which Hugh of Saint-Victor had proposed as a fifth term, remains implicit throughout Guigo II’s treatise. Each stage is carefully defined and illustrated with reference to the gospel verse, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8). Prescriptive as well as descriptive, Guigo II’s outline anticipates the

⁹ Saint Anselm, *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), 89.

¹⁰ Hugh of Saint-Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 92.

systematic prayer methods of the following centuries, those that will be summarized in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola.

Turning from theory to practice, we find in the twelfth century an outpouring of works illustrating *lectio divina* in process. The various commentaries on the Song of Songs produced during this period inflect exegesis toward tropology, that is to say, toward moral psychology and individual spirituality. On the horizon there appears a new convergence of objective and subjective interpretation, which is exemplified *par excellence* by the *Sermons on the Song of Songs* by Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard's conviction, repeatedly restated throughout the *Sermons*, is that the Song cannot be read or heard from the "outside"; only in a personal *experientia* can one apprehend its meaning. He seeks not only to translate the love poem into religiously meaningful terms, as traditional commentators had done, but also to participate directly and actively in the text as a protagonist, ultimately as the Bride in the dialogue. Beyond exegesis, his line-by-line analysis chronicles a day-to-day struggle to realize this objective and to transcend the limitations of the human reader's role.

With Guigo II's didactic outline of *lectio divina*, and even more definitively with Bernard of Clairvaux's exhaustive exploration of its possibilities, we reach a terminus in the development of reading culture. Accordingly, the year 1200 will serve as the limit of the present study. That date marks the beginning of a sea change. In the following years, the dominant monastic tradition yielded to the scientific theology taught in the nascent universities. Developments in reading and writing technology led to improved legibility, enabling silent and individual reading, releasing readers from a live and present audience environment, and eventually releasing them altogether from the pedagogy of memorization. The thirteenth-century proliferation of books allowed more readers to gain access to the texts, and also to exploit the freedom to turn their pages at will. The heritage of *lectio divina* survived, however, along with the yearnings and instincts associated with it—the reciprocities linking reading, experience, and writing—in vernacular spiritual writings from the beginning of the twelfth century onward. Women religious, whose vocations had typically been hampered by the lack of clerical Latin education, took an increasingly significant

role in this movement, introducing the later medieval flowering of religious poetry and prose in all the European tongues. These thirteenth-century developments lie beyond the scope of the present study, which is concerned with the earlier monastic reading culture and with the writing that sprang from it.

Reading beyond Reading

Modern reading-theorists have rediscovered certain transcendent dimensions of the act of reading that were altogether familiar to medieval readers. As one scholar notes, “Reading is a thoughtful activity. . . . It is creative and constructive, not passive and reactive.”¹¹ Moving away from a passive, mechanical text-reception model, we have come to recognize the ways in which reading *overflows* itself in all directions and at every moment. The process begins with expectations and predictions that precede contact with the text; it proceeds through the perception of letters and words, continues through the visualizations, inferences, and syntheses that orchestrate comprehension, and, at last, quite possibly takes leave of the written page altogether. Reading is surrounded always by an extratextual, experiential context, an aura integral to the essence of the act. In this concentric zone is located the creativity of the reader’s response, his or her contribution to creating the text that is read, and also the conditioning, virtual presence of other readers—the “interpretive community,”¹² or, in medieval culture, the church—with whom the reader remains in constant communion.

The historical study of reading, like the act of reading itself, tends to overflow scholarly boundaries as we become aware of the modern intellectual, spiritual, and even political contexts in which this study has come of age. The first chapter of this book offers orientations; I recall the pioneering work of Jean Leclercq and Henri de Lubac in relation to the *ressourcement* movement preceding the Second Vatican Council. I also summarize more recent medievalist

¹¹ Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read*, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 27.

¹² Stanley Fish was among the first to develop this concept, in “Interpreting the Variorum,” *Critical Inquiry* 2 (Spring 1976), 465–85.

research and developments in academic literary theory—notably the reader-response criticism of the 1970s—and in reading-cognition theory. Chapters 2 through 7 study the medieval history of reading and offer discussions of pivotal authors and texts presented in an approximate chronological order. This study extends from the third century through the twelfth. Rather than attempting a comprehensive history of this populous field, I have chosen to offer readings of writings—readings of readings—undertaken each for its own sake and ideally on its own terms, with attention to individual complexities and nuances. A final chapter, *in libro experientiae*, summarizes reflections on reading experience, both medieval and modern.

Medieval commentaries on Scripture teach us to “taste” the texts in their own order, rather than rearranging references in a critical synthesis in the modern academic manner. In following medieval expositions, I am conscious of imitating at times the reading methodology that I purport to describe. In this spirit, I have not resisted the temptation to quote liberally in Latin and French as well as in translation in order to allow my readers to taste the beauty of these writings for themselves. There is an indefinable benefit to be gained from the contact with original texts in their own languages; we need to approach their *presence* reverently, as closely as intervening manuscript traditions will allow us to do. As Cassian comments, we feel the power of the texts even before we understand them intellectually (Conf 10.11.5). Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard wrote with urgency and elegance in Latin, as did Henri de Lubac and Jean Leclercq in modern French prose. The aesthetic value of their writings cues us to a deepening process of appreciation that should not be cut short. I do systematically translate all quotations, referring to published English translations whenever they are available, occasionally emending these for clarity. The Bible is quoted in Latin from the Vulgate, *Bibliorum sacrorum iuxta vulgatam clementinam nova editio* (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1959), and in English from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha. Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). With other texts where no reference is made, the translation is my own.¹³

¹³ I follow also the great example of Henri de Lubac in *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64). In *Mémoire sur l'occasion*

It is a pleasure to acknowledge at this time the help and advice received from colleagues east and west in the course of this study. I have derived particular encouragement from the scholars and priests who have created the Institute of Cistercian Studies, under the leadership of E. Rozanne Elder, at the annual Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI. Several chapters in this book originated as papers given at that forum. I also wish to thank Fr. Luke Anderson, Marsha Dutton, Martha Krieg, Br. Simeon Leiva, Thomas Renna, John R. Sommerfeldt, and especially Fr. Mark Scott, the executive editor of Cistercian Publications, and Eric Christensen of the Liturgical Press. Closely associated with this group are the memories of two extraordinary scholar-priests whom I can no longer thank in person: Fr. Louis Bouyer (1913–2004) and Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell (1930–2008). I have been aided also over many years by medievalist teachers and friends: the directors of my studies at Princeton, Alfred Foulet (1901–1987) and Karl D. Uitti (1934–2003); and among others, Gabriel Bianciotto, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Peter Dembowski, Ángel Gómez Moreno, Catherine Jones, Barbara Newman, Mary Speer, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne. I also wish to thank my patient colleagues at Augusta State University, including especially Jana Sandarg and Lillie B. Johnson, the chair of the English and Foreign Languages department, who obtained released time from teaching for me during a critical phase of the project. The most joyous debt I have to acknowledge is to my wife Susan. To her this book is dedicated.

de mes écrits (Namur, Belgium: Culture et Vérité, 1989), 86–87, de Lubac comments, *On m'a aussi quelquefois reproché d'abuser des citations latines. La part faite à la négligence, ou à la hâte excessive, je dirai pour ma défense que j'ai souvent conservé le latin des textes, en raison de leur singulière beauté, que toute traduction efface* ("I have been criticized sometimes for excessive use of Latin quotations. Admitting some negligence or haste on my part, I will say in my defense that I have often kept the Latin of the texts for the sake of their striking beauty, which translations obscure").