

Liberal Education and Reading for Meaning

Kevin Gary
Goshen College

"It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men [sic] die miserably every day for lack of what is found there."

—William Carlos Williams, *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower and Other Love Poems*

In his study *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* Bruce Kimball distinguishes two traditions of liberal education: the tradition of philosophers and the tradition of orators. Philosophers prioritize critical thinking and the pursuit of knowledge as the core of liberal learning. Orators, in tension with philosophers, view liberal education as fundamentally about appropriating established virtues and the cultivation of practical wisdom. Liberal education for orators is a way of living more than a than a way of thinking.

According to Kimball, there has been and continues to be ignorance about these two traditions, which in turn accounts for the present-day confusion surrounding the nature and meaning of liberal education. That said, the philosophical tradition, incarnated in the contemporary research university's pursuit of new knowledge, reigns today. Moreover, the philosophical tradition has proven remarkably nimble. With an eye on an ever-changing workplace, the philosophical tradition of liberal education, with a fair bit of success, justifies itself as equipping students with transferable critical thinking skills, requisite for attaining personal autonomy. While parts of the oratorical tradition remain in university mission statements that call not only for the development of critical thinkers but also for the nurture of virtuous people, this oratorical emphasis, notes Kimball, is eclipsed at the present time. As a consequence, the philosophical tradition of liberal education is presently regarded as simply *the* tradition of liberal education.

My concern in this essay, in light of the decline of oratorical liberal education, is the subsequent loss of a certain kind of reading, and a certain kind of reader, fostered by this tradition. At the heart of the oratorical tradition is a personal and passionate engagement with key texts, or what Søren Kierkegaard describes as primitive reading. More than fodder for critical thinking, texts in this tradition are regarded as sacred, as sources of profound wisdom. This textual reverence, however, does not place such texts beyond questioning and examination. On the contrary, often a rich midrash surrounds such writings, with several distinct interpretations.¹ What endures though is a regard for certain texts as sources of enduring wisdom that personally challenge and edify readers who avail themselves.

While not wanting to reify a culturally exclusive canon, I am interested in how primitive reading can be nurtured and sustained, arguing why it is a worthwhile good. Drawing from Kimball and Pierre Hadot I first situate and clarify the meaning of liberal education, noting the kind of readers cultivated by the two major traditions of liberal education. I then turn to Jean LeClercq's work *The Love of Learning and*

the Desire for God to illuminate a particularly rich instantiation of primitive reading practiced within a monastic milieu. I then consider more recent sources, namely Søren Kierkegaard and Flannery O'Connor. Both deplore the loss of primitive reading, offering insights on the nature of primitive reading and how modern readers evade it. Finally, I consider how teachers might cultivate primitive readers.

In returning to monastic sources it is not my intention to replace the modern university with a monastery or to disregard the fruits of the Enlightenment. The benefits of the critical and discursive thinking that characterize the philosophical tradition of liberal education are well established. Rather, my intention is to illuminate a certain blind spot or weakness within this tradition with respect to reading for edification or personal and passionate engagement with texts. In so doing, I do not seek to establish an either/or dichotomy between primitive and critical reading, for both are valuable. Rather, what I am arguing for is a dialectic that holds both kinds of reading in tension, discerning the proper occasions and texts for each.

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND TRADITIONS OF READING

As noted, Kimball highlights two distinct traditions of liberal education. The first is what he describes as the tradition of philosophers. Philosophers, holding up Socrates as their ideal, value rigorous dialectic, critical thinking, and the tireless quest for truth as the heart of liberal education. They trace a line from Socrates to scholasticism to the Enlightenment to modern science on up to the research university of the present day. Above all else the philosophical tradition esteems critical thinking and the free, open-ended pursuit of knowledge.

In tension with this tradition from its beginnings is the tradition of orators. Orators trace a line from Isocrates to Cicero to Matthew Arnold. While sympathetic to Socrates, orators were suspect of endless speculation, believing liberal education was fundamentally about cultivating practical virtues. Accordingly, it involved forging not mere thinkers, but orators, or, as they were understood in the classical sense, active citizens who personified civic virtue. The “goal of training the good citizen to lead society” was of supreme concern for orators.² This civic-mindedness in turn involved an established set of virtues — virtues that were illustrated and buttressed by a recognized canon of classical texts. Orators celebrated the person “who would live out the noble virtues and persuade the free citizen of the democratic city-state to adhere to them.”³

Kimball's typology is further illuminated by the work of noted classical historian Pierre Hadot. Like Kimball, Hadot identifies two distinct understandings or traditions of liberal education: one tradition views liberal learning as fundamentally a theoretical pursuit, distinguished by abstract critical thinking, much like Kimball's philosophers. Another more ancient tradition of liberal learning viewed liberal education as fundamentally a way of life, involving a deep, personal transformation that constituted “a mode of existing-in-the-world, that had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life.”⁴

More than just orators, Hadot observes in antiquity several different schools — Stoics, Cynics, Epicureans — dedicated to liberal learning as a way of life. While inspired by different ideals, such various approaches each advanced an exacting practice or way of life as the essence of liberal learning. Moreover, the pursuit of virtue was not simply a call to duty but a response to desire. Tracing back to Socrates, liberal learning offered a therapeutic response to eros' longing. It brought "peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autakeia*), and a cosmic consciousness," offering practical steps to cure humankind's anguish.⁵ An "Epicurean saying puts it clearly: 'vain is the word of that philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man [sic].'"⁶

Given their somewhat disparate aims — a way of thinking versus a way of living — these distinct traditions in turn cultivate a different kind reading. The philosophical tradition promotes detached, impersonal, and systematic reading of texts. By contrast, the oratorical tradition encourages personal and passionate reading of texts. Far from an abstract theoretical undertaking oratorical reading was "considered a spiritual exercise...because the reading of each...text [was] supposed to produce a transformation in the person reading."⁷ It was intended to edify the reader, move them to embody that which they contemplated.

To further illuminate this kind of reading I now turn to the monastic culture of the Middle Ages, where a rich tradition of primitive reading flourished. In so doing, I hope to show why such reading is worthwhile, noting the conditions that sustain it.

MONASTIC VERSUS SCHOLASTIC READING

The whole organization of monastic life, according to Benedict, the father of Western monasticism, was "dominated by solicitude for safeguarding a certain spiritual leisure, a certain freedom in the interest of prayer in all its forms, and above all, authentic contemplative peace."⁸ The chief occupation of monks was *lectio divina* or meditative reading. Comparable to the rabbinic tradition, monastic contemplation centered on sacred texts.⁹

Lectio divina is an active form of reading, "where the reader usually pronounced the words with his lips [sic]" thus enabling the reader to visualize better the words being read (*LL*, 73). This vocalization and constant repetition was intended to inscribe "the sacred text in the body and in the soul" (*LL*, 73). While active, *lectio divina* was a slow kind of reading. The practice was characterized as mastication or "*ruminatio*" in which sacred texts were chewed upon as sources of food and nutrition, so as to savor the full flavor of the text (*LL*, 73). Such careful mastication was essential so that the reader could "weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning" (*LL*, 73).

Engaged in such reading, the monk's orientation was one of receptive vigilance and humility. Such receptivity was not "the acquisition of a scientific principle" but "an experience, a personal growth in real awareness" (*LL*, 33). *Lectio divina* was not directed not toward speculative knowledge but toward the strengthening of one's personal spirituality and practice of compassion.

In tension with the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages was the emerging scholastic tradition of twelfth century Paris. Forerunners of the modern university, scholastics were taken up with *disputatio* or the rigorous and critical examination of texts. While monks were fond of personal and narrative approaches to learning, scholastics favored a competitive style of learning, characterized by impersonal speculation that separated ultimate questions from one's personal life.

Wary of this new dialectics, monastic Bernard of Clairvaux, after visiting Paris, criticized scholastic methods as promoting more pride than intimacy with God, noting that the conversations tended to degenerate into "mere verbal battles, *pugnae verborum*" (LL, 203). Ever aware of human pride, monks viewed with suspicion dialectical methods that seemed to foster more cleverness than wisdom. Such an aggressive approach, noted Clairvaux, lacked "respect for divine truth and sought to penetrate it as if by forcible entry after breaking the seal of mystery" (LL, 203–04).

Perhaps the clearest way to differentiate scholastic from monastic learning and reading is to illustrate their respective fruits. Highlighting this contrast, LeClercq compares monastic and scholastic commentaries on the *Song of Songs*. Favoring an impersonal approach, scholastics treated this text as they would any other text, religious or secular, offering commentaries that were concise, impersonal, systematic, and comprehensive that spoke to the mind more than the heart.

Monastic commentaries, by contrast, were personal, affective, and unsystematic. They were written to the individual reader, seeking to touch "the heart more than the mind," prompting the individual reader to a life of charity (LL, 84). Consequently, monastic commentaries were often incomplete, caught up in savoring over the text. Bernard of Clairvaux has more than eighty sermons on the *Song of Songs*, only making it to the beginning of chapter three, of the eight chapters.¹⁰ To the critical and discursive reader, this meandering prose can appear aimless and without purpose. Rather it was the fruit of primitive reading that sought to savor the full meaning of the text being read so as to be personally edified it.¹¹

SØREN KIERKEGAARD AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR ON AWAKENING READERS

While this kind of reading came to fruition within a monastic setting, it is certainly not exclusive or limited to this venue. Rather it is part of a long standing and continuing tradition. Two luminous voices within this tradition include Søren Kierkegaard and Flannery O'Connor. However, unlike their monastic counterparts of the Middle Ages, Kierkegaard and O'Connor cannot assume an audience of primitive readers; rather, they confront a modernity that is increasingly averse to slow, meditative, and personal engagement with texts. Their audiences have become increasingly scholasticized or trained to keep texts at arm's length, resisting personal engagement. Turning to Kierkegaard and O'Connor, I now consider how both diagnose this problem and how, with rhetorical moves, each seeks to awaken the kind of readership their literature demands.

In his veronymous text *Point of View*, Kierkegaard states that his writings, both veronymous and pseudonymous, are informed by his religious teleology, which seeks ultimately to awaken personality, to awaken the moral and ethical

consciousness of his individual reader, thereby putting an end to an objective point of view that abolishes conscience and the subjective, infinite passion of faith.¹² By objectivity, Kierkegaard means a tendency to evade moral self-scrutiny and personal edification, mediated by a personal and passionate encounter with a text. Resisting arguments over the meaning of religious–ethical truths, which Kierkegaard sees as an equivocation, his authorship seeks to promote self-awareness and immediate resolution to embody ethical–religious categories of existence, rather than simply debate or critique such categories. His writings seek to “reduplicate” in the reader the very religious dispositions they speak about.¹³

Given this perspective, Kierkegaard is misunderstood if he is viewed as simply holding certain religious positions. Systematization of Kierkegaard’s thought, as Louis Dupré notes, “risks losing the specific character of his thought.”¹⁴ More importantly, a mere critical and systematic reading of Kierkegaard skips out on the difficult examination of self which Kierkegaard calls the reader to, at times directly peering out to his reader asking, “And how is it with you, my dear READER?” In railing against G.W.F. Hegel’s philosophical system, Kierkegaard, like his hero Socrates, did not produce his own system or theoretical discourse but rather prompts a living into the ideals one holds dear. Kierkegaard’s authorship prompts the reader to take up the task of existence.

Given this task, Kierkegaard creates two authorships, one pseudonymous and another veronymous. His veronymous authorship, largely composed of commentaries on religious texts, much like monastic commentaries, assumes an audience of primitive readers and explicitly prompts personal wisdom and edification. By contrast his pseudonymous authorship assumes an audience of objective readers, who either naively or willfully resist personal edification as they dispassionately and impersonally examine and categorize texts. With this audience in mind Kierkegaard does philosophy by way of examples, fronting pseudonyms that illuminate “the range of real [men and women] and their options, choices, attitudes, passions, and reasoning.”¹⁵ Such characters are held up as mirrors or foils to awaken the reader’s own quest for self-understanding. With an array of existential possibilities Kierkegaard invites readers to imaginatively live such possibilities, greeting them “with a personal response, an existential ‘reduplication’ or an equally existential refusal.”¹⁶

Like Kierkegaard, O’Connor deplores a loss of primitive reading. She also forwards two authorships, a pseudonymous one, composed primarily of fictional short stories and novels, and a veronymous one, consisting of essays, talks, and an abundance of letters written to friends, family, and admirers, where she directly discusses her literature and the kind of reading it requires.

Considering her audience, O’Connor notes an impatience for “the Instant Answer.”¹⁷ Stories in English classes have “become a kind of literary specimen to be dissected” (*MM*, 184). Imagining one of her own stories taught from an anthology she conjures up an image of a frog being sliced up “with its little organs laid open” (*MM*, 184). Something, she deplores, “has gone wrong in the process when, for so many students, the story becomes simply a problem to be solved, something which

you evaporate to get Instant Enlightenment” (*MM*, 108). Seeking straightforward enlightenment, O’Connor’s prospective readers often ask, “‘What is the theme of your story?’ and they expect [her] to give them a statement [like]: ‘The Theme of my story is the economic pressure of the machine on the middle class’ — or some such absurdity. And when they’ve got a statement like that, they go off happy and feel it is no longer necessary to read the story” (*MM*, 73).

Rather than instant answers, contends O’Connor, fiction should “leave us, like Job with a renewed sense of mystery” (*MM*, 184). “It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners.” “Mystery,” notes O’Connor, “is a great embarrassment to the modern mind...the mystery is the mystery of our position on earth, and the manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery” (*MM*, 125).

By contrast, the aim of modern learning, contends O’Connor, is to eliminate mystery. Given this aim, fiction that is concerned with ultimate mystery “can be very disturbing, for the fiction writer is concerned with mystery that is lived” (*MM*, 125). Rather than personally encountering such mystery, O’Connor finds readers and teachers of literature evading it.

One popular evasion, she notes, is the tendency to teach literary history instead of literature, focusing on the historical context of the text, thus avoiding an encounter with the text. Or similarly there is a tendency to treat literature as sociology or stories as representative of “certain social problems of topical interest” (*MM*, 126). Both the historical and sociological perspectives enable readers to neatly encapsulate the point of stories, as if anticipating the familiar student query, “What is the point of this story?”

Another clever evasion, O’Connor observes, is to focus on the psychology of the author, musing, for instance about why Edgar Allen Poe drank or what made Fyodor Dostoevsky a compulsive gambler. “These ruminations,” notes O’Connor, “can take up endless time and postpone indefinitely any consideration of the work itself” (*MM*, 126).

Not dismissing the importance of historical context or social and psychological issues, O’Connor contends that these approaches are ultimately secondary and “not enough to sustain the student’s interest in [literature] when he [sic] leaves school” (*MM*, 126). While not in anyway wanting to pander to student interest, O’Connor seeks to attend to and awaken the right kind of desire that animates the right kind of reading. Towards this end, O’Connor sees the role of the English teacher as changing “the face of the best-seller list” to cultivate in students discernment about what is tawdry and clichéd from what is enduring and substantive. More than a best-seller list, O’Connor implies that the right kind of literature or certain texts educate the desires, illuminating which desires are most worth having. However, this can only occur if readers approach such texts with an existential longing.

Given the distaste for mystery and the modern penchant for instant enlightenment, O’Connor, like Kierkegaard, employs literary devices to awaken and stir the

existential consciousness of her readers. Her stories often employ violence and depict grotesque, impoverished characters to shock and capture the attention of slumbering, detached readers. Commenting on this approach, she remarks: “It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially...the [person] in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in [their] personality, those qualities which are all they will have to take into eternity with them; and since the characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity, it is appropriate to think of what they take with them” (*MM*, 34). Stated more bluntly, O’Connor famously retorts: “To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (*MM*, 34).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON PRIMITIVE READING AND TEACHING

Considering monastic, Kierkegaardian, and O’Connorian sources, two distinct conditions emerge as requisite for primitive reading. The first is a reader or learner who has what Rene Arcilla characterizes as a metaphysical yearning or, in Allan Bloom’s words, an erotic longing for ultimate meaning and purpose; all the better if this longing is consciously acknowledged.¹⁸

The second condition is an established canon of texts worthy of reverence. While it is not my intention to reify a culturally exclusive canon, primitive reading does require, it would seem, a reverence for certain texts as enduring sources of wisdom that address and nourish our metaphysical longing. Accordingly, more than autonomous judges of such texts, we allow ourselves to be judged and edified by them. Stated differently, texts in this tradition act like icons. Different than an image that *we look at*, an icon *looks at us*; an icon addresses us.¹⁹

On this point, the oratorical tradition of liberal education is clear: certain texts matter very much. This is not the case in the philosophical tradition. Holding up critical thinking as the ultimate aim, the substance of what is studied becomes somewhat arbitrary in the philosophical tradition of liberal education; while the texts chosen, according to philosophers, should be well reasoned, they serve more as foils for critical engagement to foster a way of thinking.

By contrast if the aim of liberal education is a way of life, a life with purpose and meaning, then the kinds of texts chosen matters significantly as guides that offer normative substance about how to live well. Thus, related to this, quality matters even more since, as O’Connor observes, poorly “written novels — no matter how pious and edifying the behavior of the characters — are not good in themselves and therefore not really edifying” (*MM*, 174).

Recently, I had the privilege of teaching *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky. More than the history and sociology of Russia and Russian Orthodoxy or the psychology of Dostoevsky, I hope my students encountered in the *Brothers* an icon that will address and speak to them personally for the rest of their lives, as a text that has something profound to say about the meaning of life. Each brother embodies a certain way of living wherein Dostoevsky’s masterfully illuminates the interior and exterior costs of a particular worldview. It strikes me that this is the way such texts are supposed to be read.

In previous iterations of this course I have only taught excerpts from the *Brothers*, usually the Grand Inquisitor's speech, as narrated by Ivan to his brother Alyosha. This section is often excised and placed in anthologies under various headings. I too, as a redacting editor, have excerpted this piece, placing it neatly within a unit I was teaching on theodicy and free will. The more I consider primitive reading, the more problematic I realize this choice was. My selection was an act of categorical hubris, keeping the text at a distance, as I neatly placed it within an overarching category. Rather than a source of personal wisdom, I treated the text impersonally, employing it simply as an eloquent discourse on how human beings generally avoid freedom. In so doing, I most certainly communicated and encouraged this critical and detached approach to my students, teaching them unwittingly to read for "the main point" rather than for edification.

Understandably, this reading for "the main point" was motivated by an economy of time, as I sought to cover more material than time allowed. Thus, I took shortcuts, teaching by excerpts and summaries, rather than with whole texts. Likewise, my students were implicitly conditioned by me to read for the gist, learning how to skim and plunder, and thus never learning *how to read* the *Brothers Karamazov*.

Such reading for the gist strikes me as particularly acute in the field of education, where rather than taking time to read educational masters like Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Maxine Greene, and W.E.B. Dubois in their own words, let alone some of their texts in their entirety, the field is plagued by trade textbooks that redact, summarize, and excerpt such seminal thinkers, producing texts that are intended only to be read critically and thereby quickly, as students hastily size up the educational landscape. In part, I think this is a way of evading the canon question by including everything and thereby avoiding having to ask the question of what is most worth reading, fearful that answering this question might thereby invoke a hierarchal and exclusive perfectionism.

Such slow, meditative, and primitive reading is certainly not applicable to every kind of text. It would be foolish to apply it to newspapers and perhaps to trade textbooks. With such texts fast, critical reading is altogether appropriate and useful. However, there is a tradition of texts that seek transformation of living as well as transformation of thinking and for texts such as these we must prove ourselves worthy readers.

1. On the rabbinic tradition of Midrash see Gerry Bruns, "The Hermeneutics of Midrash," *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 104–23.

2. Bruce Kimball, *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 37.

3. Kimball, *Philosophers and Orators*, 18.

4. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 265.

5. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 265.

6. *Ibid.*, 267.

7. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Bellknap Press, 2004), 155.
8. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 19. This work will be cited as *LL* in the text for all subsequent references.
9. Bruns, "The Hermeneutics of Midrash."
10. Dennis E. Tamburello, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Essential Writings* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000), 104.
11. For greater explication on the contrast between scholastic versus monastic learning see Kevin Gary, "Leisure, Freedom, and Liberal Education," *Educational Theory* 56, no. 2 (2006): 121–36.
12. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 23.
13. Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), xii.
14. Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian: The Dialectic of Christian Existence* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), xi.
15. Paul Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Philosophy," in *New Themes in Christian Philosophy*, ed. Ralph McInerney (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 18.
16. Mackey, *Kierkegaard*, xii.
17. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1969), 184. This work will be cited as *MM* in the text for all subsequent references.
18. Rene Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education* (New York: Routledge, 1995), x–xi.
19. For this insight I am indebted to a talk given by Paul Griffiths at the Kuyers Institute Conference on Christian Teaching and Learning at Calvin College in October of 2009.