



PROJECT MUSE®

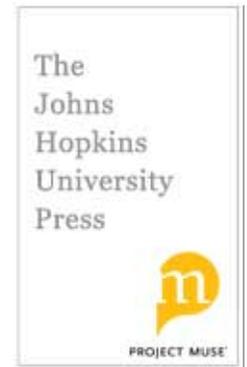
---

*Ethics through Literature: Ascetic and Aesthetic Reading in  
Western Culture* by Brian Stock (review)

Thomas Trzyna

Christianity & Literature, Volume 59, Number 2, Winter 2010, pp. 371-373  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/738884/summary>

*Sanctifying the World* is particularly good at overviewing Dawson's theological and ideological framework. At the heart of Dawson's Augustinian worldview, the book locates the sacramental union of the material and spiritual worlds. History cannot be understood without a sense of the platonic *metaxy* or middle ground that is humanity. For Dawson, religion and culture can never be separate. Culture arises from the *cultus*, which in turn arises out of a desire for the transcendent; therefore, no culture can be said to be truly secular. Indeed, the historian who only pays attention to the material and social elements of a culture is not telling the whole story. Dawson himself was best known for telling this story about medieval Christendom, advancing the thesis that the tension between a world-affirming and a world-denying faith gave a particular energy to European culture. However, Dawson insisted that "I am not bellocite, and my view of Western culture is quite different from 'Europe is the Faith'" (152). Birzer traces Dawson's metahistorical account of the West up through the Reformation and the Catholic Baroque, the later a period which Dawson loved and which served him as a reminder that Christendom and the medieval are not synonymous.

During and after the writing of the Gifford Lectures, Dawson became increasingly convinced that the key to cultural transformation would be found in education. Birzer is careful to connect Dawson's pedagogical program with the historian's Christian humanism. Dawson rejected not only the educational program of Dewey, but in turn the Great Books programs of Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins. He felt that such programs artificially abstracted important texts from their network of cultural contexts and debates. In their place, Dawson argued for a curriculum of Christian culture studies that included not only the theological and literary texts of the Christian West but also a study of the social, philosophical, and economic changes that accompanied them. Birzer is particularly useful here in lining out in some detail what the specifics of Dawson's program would have entailed had they been put into practice (235-39).

Readers of *Sanctifying the World* will find a well-written and interesting introduction to the still too-often overlooked Catholic historian and cultural critic. Birzer's study now serves as the beginning point for those interested in coming to terms with Christopher Dawson and his world.

Philip Irving Mitchell  
Dallas Baptist University

***Ethics through Literature: Ascetic and Aesthetic Reading in Western Culture.*** By Brian Stock. Hanover and London: University Press of New England / Brandeis University Press / Historical Society of Israel, 2007. ISBN-13 978-1-58465-699-9, ISBN-10 1-58465-688-9. Pp. xviii+167. \$45.00.

Brian Stock's *Ethics through Literature* invites several readings because it is several books. Stock, who delivered material in this book as the Menahem Stern

Jerusalem Lectures in 2005, refers to several writers who have asked readers to study their works at least twice, or who wrote with the expectation that their work would be mulled over either randomly or according to different strategies of reading. Stock mentions Montaigne's essays as one example of a book meant not to be read sequentially, but rather sampled. Stock later quotes Schopenhauer's expectation that readers of his magnum opus would read it at least twice to understand its main ideas well. In Stock's own case, his study of ethics in literature encompasses at least three different books. One looks at the history of reading itself, and the ascetic and aesthetic—meaning the ethical and sensual—purposes of reading. A second examines the interesting history of those scenes in literature where critical discoveries or actions take place while characters are in the process of reading, such as when Abelard seduces Heloise by reading with her. A third argument presented in the book concerns the ways in which ethical or ascetic readings framed aesthetic readings, and how in nineteenth-century literature, specifically in the critical works of Coleridge and Schopenhauer, the aesthetic serves, by contrast, as the ground of the ethical. In Schopenhauer's case, it is empathy and the capacity to feel for others that provides a root for ethics that transcends differences of religion and culture. Stock states a fourth thesis in his last paragraph, though it is not a thesis that seems to grow out of the various arguments presented in the study. His last thesis is that mass culture, by increasing literacy, will sustain "spiritual heritage" (139) rather than destroy that heritage, as many have feared.

Stock's method is a combination of reader criticism, the study of topoi, and historical criticism. He is deeply versed in classical and medieval literature, as well as Romantic literature and German post-Enlightenment philosophy.

At the root of Stock's study lies Horace's concern that works of literature offer both sweetness and light. Stock defines ethical reading in terms of asceticism, however, so that in its early sections, the book seems to imply that there is something lacking in any literary work that is not foundationally spiritual, philosophical, or ethical in its content. Stock notes how the reading of spiritual works formed an important part of monastic life, and how many classical and medieval literary works showed the hidden dangers of acts of reading that encouraged aesthetic or emotional feelings, especially when those feelings might overwhelm judgment and purity. Nevertheless, Stock appreciates the reversal that he sees in the writings of Schopenhauer and Coleridge, where the aesthetic impulse takes precedence over the ethical without vitiating the ultimate force of ethical commitments.

*Ethics through Literature* may engage readers who are studying classical and medieval literature, exploring approaches to criticism that focus on readers' responses, or studying works where the act of reading itself plays an important part in the development of characterization or of plot. Stock does not make a single, sustained argument; rather, he explores a wide range of medieval and classical texts, critics, and philosophers to explain the importance of the act of reading and to invite others into an exploration of the light that might be cast on whole periods of

literature if more attention were paid to the roles that reading and the portrayal of reading play in the cultural transmission of ethical and aesthetic ideas and ideals.

Stock's choice to end with Coleridge and Schopenhauer is curious, particularly because he seems to take their analyses of fancy, imagination, and mind so seriously. These writers do not offer views of the mind that are well supported by contemporary work on the nature of consciousness or perception, such as Marvin Minsky's studies at MIT. Moreover, neither Coleridge's criticism nor Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Idea* are notable for clarity. If Stock means to make a more general point that the English Romantics and the German philosophers after Kant were part of a larger reversal of the respective roles of aesthetic judgment and ethical judgment, then he might have made a more extensive case by citing additional figures or at least by saying more about Kant's notion of the purposiveness without purpose that is art. He touches on Kant's later aesthetic only briefly.

Readers of this journal who take an interest in Augustine, Dante, and their relationship to the views of art expressed by Aristotle, Plato, and others may find interesting analyses in Stock's study. Others may find this book stimulating in exactly the same way that it is stimulating to read an essay by Montaigne or a section or two of Pascal's *Pensees*—to be faced with a challenging viewpoint or to be given a fresh perspective. Stock's Conclusion restates the argument of the book well, though this critic must finish by observing that there are probably many riches in Brian Stock's thinking about his topic that would have been clearer had he written a longer book that presented each of the strands of this study more explicitly. Stock does not present a study that is specifically informed by a Christian viewpoint, though of course he offers many rich observations about the reception and uses of reading in medieval literature as well as in medieval Christian monasteries. Schopenhauer, of course, was deeply influenced by his reading of Buddhist texts and by his fascination with the Buddhist understanding of compassion.

To read Stock is to re-enter the world and the worldview of Ernst Curtius. In Stock's case, the topos is the scene where reading takes place, and the historical task is to see the relationships among scenes of reading in major and minor literary works in the context of classical and Christian views of the value of art. This is a comforting and familiar world, though perhaps not the world we now inhabit.

Thomas Trzyna  
Seattle Pacific University

---

***On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts, Volume 1: Classical Formulations.*** Edited by William Franke. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. ISBN 0-268-02884-2 (cloth); ISBN 0-268-02882-6 (pbk). Pp. xi +401. \$70.00 (cloth); \$35.00 (pbk).