De Vita Lochinis, or Commentary on a Life of Reading

Published by

Kaitlin Heller, et al.
How We Read: Tales, Fury, Nothing, Sound.

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De Vita Lochinis,
or, Commentary on a Life of Reading

I was walking down Spadina Avenue in Toronto, admiring the bright storefronts of Chinatown’s restaurants and retailers, when I noticed a T-shirt that proclaimed, “I was born intelligent but education ruined me.” This slogan will be no doubt be read differently by another beholder, but on my end, it made me pause and think about the reflections colleagues like Kaitlin and Suzanne have been fostering on how we read and write. Education certainly didn’t ruin me — this is what I’ll attempt to convey here. Nevertheless, I could relate to the sense of loss, of before and after “education ruined me,” which Kaitlin described in her original blog post as she realized that, out of mental saturation caused by the PhD, she couldn’t bring herself to read the latest tome of a beloved series she’d been eagerly awaiting for.¹

Like most, if not all of us, I found my way to history because I loved reading, writing, thinking. Yet on some


IMAGE: Years of reading Astérix got me used to the footnote-like practice of coming across a Latin name and looking at its modern-day equivalent at the bottom of the panel.

PHOTO: Lochin Brouillard.

DOI: 10.21983/P3.0259.1.07
days, I would do anything to get away from reading, writing, thinking, rinsing, and repeating. That things have come to this is particularly painful with regards to reading. Out of the elements of this trinity — reading, writing, thinking — I’ve always enjoyed the purest, most unwavering relationship with reading. Writing can be exhilarating but equally capricious, demanding, unreliable. Thinking can easily turn into overthinking, over-rationalizing, over-intellectualizing. Reading — at least before I came to university — was simple, unadulterated pleasure. It isn’t anymore.

Should I blame “academic reading” for ruining my love for reading? I would be lying if I did not admit that it did a little, for the most part because I read fiction much less than I used to. But it would also be inaccurate and ungrateful to fail to recognize how my university training both made me a better reader, and built upon the intuitive joys I’ve had since I was a child.

I divided this opusculum (Latin for “little work”) into three sections, two on reading before and one on reading after my university education.² As a historian of the Western Christian Church, and a medievalist working with hagiography (that is, saints’ Lives), I found this before/after motif meaningful because it implies a critical juncture, an episode of conversion which changes everything and acts as a key for making intelligible what falls on either temporal side of it. Being a scholar in the humanities is construed — for better or worse — as an ascetic pursuit, a calling, a vocation, perhaps not so different from the way the people I study entered the religious life. In writing this essay, I used my academic conversion as the pivot through

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² The term opusculum is often used by medieval writers as part of a humility topos of which I, a modest, insignificant grad student, am availing myself.
which I read my own past, looking for clues for what came later. I turned to my own experiences with a “typological” outlook, to borrow the language of exegesis, and tried to pinpoint which signs prefigured my current circumstances as a medieval historian.³

Hagiography offers different models of sanctity, with saints who struggle and lose their way only to walk the straight and narrow path later in life, while other ones, the *pueri senes* (Latin for “old boys”) who read Scriptures while the average children run and play, are set on a trajectory towards eternal salvation from their time in their mother’s womb.⁴ The narrative I construct about myself conforms to this latter pattern, probably because my historiographical tendencies lean towards continuity rather than dramatic breaks. (It’s apparently a gendered characteristic: female saints are less prone to rupture than their male counterparts.⁵)

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³ In medieval studies, exegesis mainly refers to the practice of biblical commentary. A typological reading connects events, figures, statements or symbols from the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) with those of the New Testament.

⁴ The authors of medieval saints’ Lives might represent their saints as so precocious that they could be said to be “old” (*senes*) though they are only “boys” (*pueri*). Like Christ at the Temple, these prematurely wise children discuss the Scriptures and are turned towards the higher things.

⁵ Julia H. Smith found that female saints are bound to a familial setting in Carolingian hagiography while Caroline Walker Bynum observed that, on account of their lack of control over their property and marital status, late-medieval religious women were less prone to dramatic conversions and to breaking away from their kin, than religious men. See Smith, “The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe, c. 780–920,” *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 25–28; and Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 24–25.
Narrative, repetition and serial reading

I have always been a compulsive reader. My parents like to recount that, before I had learnt to read myself, they would read me bedtime stories every night, and inevitably, once they reached the end of the book, the first word that came out from my mouth was “Encore!” My childhood was spent reading: at the dinner table, in the car, during long baths, at school when I was done with the assignments. Some habits die hard: I still pick up the shampoo bottle to have something to read in the shower.

Driven by the same impulse that compelled me to ask my parents to tell me a story over and over, I began to read and re-read books again and again. There were bandes-dessinées like my father’s tattered Astérix collection to which I returned tirelessly. I have Astérix to thank for my capacity to immediately recognize Latin place names like Lugdunum (modern-day Lyon) or Massilia (modern-day Marseille). Most of all, I drew this deep pleasure from knowing and anticipating all the jokes and their punchlines, while still noticing, upon another reading, new visual details or word plays.

The illustrated Bible I received for my first communion was also a constant in the rotating pile of books next to my bed. Being from semi-secular francophone Québec, I grew up in a non-practicing, culturally Catholic environment. This mostly entailed going through the liturgical and sacramental milestones but not spending much time on the theological intricacies my parents’ generation had learnt in catechism class. At school, we were taught (and were asked to draw with our array of felt pens) the moral lessons of the New Testament. When I came home, it was the stories of the Hebrew Bible I found most riveting, if more difficult to
understand. Like the tales of Greek or Egyptian mythology I adored, the narratives of Cain and Abel or King Solomon depicted all manners of human behavior: bravery, endurance, sacrifice, violence, jealousy... A lot of it seemed cruel, unfair, or outright distressing to my eight-year-old self—why is it better to offer meat than the fruits of the harvest to God? How could David go from being the courageous boy who had defeated Goliath to a monarch who stole his soldier’s wife and sent him to his death?—when it did not feel mysterious and foreign. Beyond this, it gave me respect, even reverence for texts which feel impenetrable at first, texts which survived for thousands of years and hold an ancient wisdom that can be unlocked with a labor of love.

Like the monks and nuns I study today, I was unwittingly engaging in a light form of *ruminatio*, reading and re-reading the same matter, absorbing it until it had been shelved in the reference section of my mental library. I suspect that I also relished in the intimacy and the omniscience that grows out of repetition. The philosopher Louis Mink pointed out that the reader of history is a reader who knows how the story ends, and can therefore conceive temporal succession “in both directions at once, and then time is no longer the river which bears us along but the

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6 In medieval monastic literature, *ruminatio* is a term “borrowed from eating, from digestion, and from the particular form of digestion belonging to ruminants.” It refers to the twin practice of meditation and reading: “To meditate is to attach oneself closely to the sentence being recited and weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning. It means assimilating the content of a text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavor.” Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and The Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 73.
river in an aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey.”

This quality of knowing how the story ends at times makes certain works of historical fiction too unbearable for me to watch. I had to stop a television series on the Second World War, which covers about a year of the war per season, because I could not handle the increasing persecution of the Jewish characters... and we were only in 1942! In less emotionally harrowing cases, I enjoyed the sense of foreboding and the tragic irony that imbue a narrative whose end I know in advance. There’s a definite thrill to novelty and discovery, but many of the works that have stayed with me are those I’ve re-read or re-watched, armed with the power of hindsight.

A close cousin to this repetitive reading is what I would call serial reading, which is best epitomized by my systematic devouring of Agatha Christie’s crime novels between the age of ten and twelve. I believe that I appreciated their form: there was always a detective, a crime, a number of suspects, an investigation, plot twists, and a grand reveal. It was fun to add up the clues and measure my hunches against Hercule Poirot’s exposition at the end of the book. More than this, I was learning the laws of a genre, the narrative economy that dictates that if a novel counts 250 pages and a suspect is arrested on page 110, they’re probably not the actual culprit but a red herring the author is throwing at you before they lay their cards on the table. Like Astérix or the Bible, Agatha Christie’s novels brought together freshness and familiarity, blended with the delights of being clever and being right.

In my research, I might have gravitated towards hagiographical sources for the same reason that I liked reading

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Agatha Christie’s detective fiction. Scholars of hagiographical literature have highlighted its conservative character, if not in terms of production than in terms of edition. The same saints and the same references tend to predominate, no matter the century.\(^8\) Saints’ Lives themselves are redundant and rarely deviate from their well-trodden path. Yet, *vitae*, like Agatha Christie’s novels, could almost be considered an acquired taste, a literature that keeps on giving the more and the better you become acquainted with it. Having read a handful of major works is not enough to truly get the feel for it. You need to have gone through dozens of them to arrive at the joy and the ability of identifying common tropes and of spotting idiosyncrasies.

*Comprehensive reading, the canon, and the bibliographical impulse*

As a scholar and as an individual, I am keen on systems and patterns, organization and structure. I find it satisfying to enter a field, get acquainted with its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, and assimilate a well-defined body of knowledge. It’s important but also pleasurable and empowering for me to learn to determine authoritative sources, collect my own data, and compare it to what others have found. In my day-to-day, this translates into

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\(^8\) While thousands of saints’ Lives were composed in the medieval period, only a fraction of these reached a wide audience. The saints whose Lives were assembled by editors for a collection or an anthology were often the same usual suspects. Monique Goulet, *Écritures et réécritures : Essai sur les réécritures de Vies de saints dans l’Occident latin médiéval (VIIIe-XIIIe s.*)* (Turnhout: Brepols 2005), 13–14.
keeping lists of all kinds (board games, ciders, favorite songs). I rarely chance upon things: I consult lists on the top 10 bibimbaps in Toronto or I follow the Cannes film festival for movie recommendations. Building a bibliography or establishing a framework for grasping a specific topic are not just research skills: they’re concrete life skills.

Again, it is easy to trace back these traits to my childhood. I always had an interest in fictional world-building: between the age of eight and twelve years old, I went through a Star Wars, followed by a Lord of the Rings, and a Harry Potter phase. Then just as now, I was emotion-ally invested in the characters and the story arc, but I also immersed myself in what is referred to by fans as the “lore.” It didn’t matter that it wasn’t “real” — I had to know ever-ything. Even before this, I remember being fond of a book based on the movie The Pagemaster, in which Macaulay Culkin travels to a fantasy world populated with characters from fairy tales and horror and adventure classics. It was a Where’s Waldo type of book, divided by genres, which asked its readers to identify well-known stories based on key visual details. I was not overly interested in the Where’s Waldo exercise. Instead I flipped to the last pages of the book which provided a summary of each story, presented in bland, encyclopedic columns. I was utterly fascinated by this repository of knowledge which allowed me to learn about all these essential books in a couple of sentences.

I didn’t know it then, but The Pagemaster served as a primer for the works one might expect to encounter in popular culture or in English courses on the “Western tradition.” Decades later, I would no doubt go back to The Pagemaster’s overwhelmingly male, Western-centric
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selection with a critical eye. I have become a firm believer in the idea that the “traditional canon” of any area or discipline should be questioned, opened up, and diversified. Some think that we should do away with canons entirely—I’m not one of them. Perhaps because of the way in which my brain functions, both in my research and my teaching, I see the use of having canons as starting points from which we can depart.

Besides this attachment for mastering canons, I’ve long had a bibliographical itch, which ties in with my Agatha Christie obsession. Indeed, as I kept on reading Christie’s works, I eventually felt the need to keep track of my progression, and thus created a sheet, which recorded the title of the book, the detective featured in it, my review (out of five stars), and additional comments. Looking back, I am surprised—but maybe shouldn’t be—that a child of eleven found this an appropriate use of their time. Why did I do this? This was not part of a school project. I might have showed it to my parents since I share everything with them, but I don’t recall supplying it to my friends. As far as I can tell, this was simply something I did for my own entertainment.

This impulse of drawing lists and exploring the canon was consummated at around the same period. Before the days of Wikipedia, my family owned the Encarta encyclopedia on CD-ROM which I spent hours perusing. Again, the hopeless nerd I was gathered and typed for fun short lists of the “most famous Russian authors,” the “most famous French authors,” etc. I then dutifully went to the public library to pick up Crime and Punishment or Lolita, which I proceeded to read at the “nymphet” age described by Humbert Humbert. Truth be told, I abandoned many
of these great classics, which passed quite over the head of the ambitious young reader I was. Nonetheless, I am glad that it even occurred to me to try, and that I saw some worth in difficult readings.

Becoming a better reader

Like Kaitlin and Suzanne, I remember a point during my undergraduate degree when I realized that my studies had spoiled reading. Instead of simply enjoying the novel in my hands, I was scanning the page, looking for the “most relevant information” or the “overarching point” to each paragraph. Unmitigated, freeing pleasure came back after some time spent in the arms of a real page-turner, but it remained jarring to acknowledge that something which used to be so natural had been tainted by an imperative for efficiency.

I maintain though that university did not ruin reading for me. Rather, it changed the way I interact with a text. I credit Nancy Partner, my mentor at McGill University, for this. In a classroom, I am usually very engaged, a second away from raising my hand to speak my mind. Nancy Partner’s classes were a distinct experience for me, closer to the one that medical students in the past would have had, as they huddled together to observe their professor slicing a body open and giving a lecture on anatomy. This is because no one dissects a text like Nancy Partner. She possesses an acuity, a precision, an insightfulness into the ways in which narrative and the human mind work that I have never witnessed in anybody else. I would sit in silent awe, frantically
recording every observation being pronounced, and bristle at those who interrupted the master class.

The most memorable reading exercise she assigned the class consisted in locating, organizing, and commenting on all the instances of theft, writing, or food in Galbert of Bruges' chronicle on the murder of Count Charles the Good in Flanders in 1127. That simple technique of isolating one thematic element in a text was a revelation, something that I have used ever since, and have passed on to my own students. Before Nancy Partner, I would not have been able to articulate strategies for pulling apart, zooming in, and zooming out on bits and pieces of a text like I learned during my BA.

Nancy's seminars also made me a better reader because they introduced me to — or more accurately, made me fall in love with — medieval texts. Like any premodern texts, medieval texts can baffle us because they were not meant for us: they defy the narrative logic we are used to; they jump from one topic to the next in flabbergasting bouts of parataxis; they treat bizarre events in a matter-of-fact manner or explain them in ways that appear completely outlandish. University taught me to be a “resisting reader” who reads against texts, but it also taught me to read texts who, by their very nature, resist me.

Since these early steps in medieval studies, it has been rewarding to close the gap produced by the alterity of the premodern text, by learning everyday a little more about medieval society, culture, and thought. Now, when I plunge into eleventh-century monastic chronicles, I am on board with my brothers or sisters. I understand why it's absolutely outrageous that a certain bishop refused to confirm the election of an abbot, or what a glorious event it
is when the Pope himself consecrates a newly built church! Granted, I am still bewildered and greatly amused by the quirks and wonders of medieval texts... Who could keep a straight face when reading about, *mirabile dictu*, flesh-eating mice sailing waters atop the rinds of pomegranates?9

I am constantly moved too by the closeness I have developed for the often anonymous authors of my medieval sources. I recall breaking down into tears as I came upon Henry of Huntingdon’s address to the reader at the end of his twelfth-century *Historia Anglorum*:

Now I speak to you who will be living in the third millennium, around the 135th year. Consider us, who at this moment seem to be renowned, because, miserable creatures, we think highly of ourselves. Reflect, I say, on what has become of us... I, who will already be dust by your time, have made mention of you in this book, so long before you are to be born, so that if — as my soul strongly desires — it shall come

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9 “I have heard a man of the highest veracity telling how one of the emperor [Henry IV]’s adversaries... was leaning back one day as he sat at dinner, when he was suddenly densely beset by a wall of mice that he had no means of escape... I am the less disposed to think that remarkable, because it is a known fact that in Asia, if anyone has been bitten by a leopard, an army of mice at once gathers to make water on the wounded man... The man who told me this had seen the victim of such an attack who, in despair of surviving on land, had put out to sea and cast anchor. Without delay, ever so many mice sailed after him, enclosed, believe it or not, in the rinds of pomegranates of which they had eaten the flesh.” William of Malmesbury, *The History of the English Kings*, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, Rodney M. Thomson, and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 525.
about that this book comes into your hands, I beg you, in the incomprehensible mercy of God, to pray for me, poor wretch.¹⁰

There’s an unfathomable poignancy about reading the existential anxieties of a man who lived centuries ago, and feeling kinship and sympathy for him across the vastness of time. The child I was would be ecstatic to learn that she would later turn these passions for grappling with challenging texts and writing about them into a full-time occupation. It is a privilege and a pleasure I try to honor as much as I can.