Reading as a Creative Process in the Pedagogy of Hugh of St Victor

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Abstract
The pedagogical work of the Victorines represents not only one of the greatest contributions to the history of education in medieval times, but it is also a new and inspirational instrument that combines the reading of classic works with the reading of the Holy Scripture. The topic of this article is to describe the basic lines of pedagogical thinking of one of the doyens of medieval pedagogy – Hugh of St Victor (†1141) – which he introduced in his first medieval didactics, The *Didascalicon*. The work focuses on the topic of reading, which is broadly thematised in the text. It looks at it through the prism of metaphors used by Hugh to explain reading.

Keywords
Hugh of St Victor; medieval reading; John of Salisbury; methods of reading

Introduction

Hugh of St Victor's twelfth-century treatise *Didascalicon, de studio legendi* outlines an ambitious educational philosophy aimed at helping to restore the original integrity humans possessed in their souls and bodies before the Fall. Indeed, it is more accurate to say that Hugh has an ambitious view of philosophical education, since he regards the discipline of philosophy as crucial to the restoration of human nature (Dillard 2014, 203). The aim of this article is to describe some of his pedagogical methods that lead to the formation of man and stimulate his/her creative growth. Because of limited space, the stress will be put only on two of them.
First, it will only consider two alternative pedagogical theories in the Middle Ages presented by Hugh and John of Salisbury, with attention drawn to their common and diverse elements. This will be followed by an exploration of the role and characteristics of reading as the arduous activity of a searching man. The conclusion will be focused on an introduction of two methods mentioned by Hugh in the context of reading and a brief description of them. These methods outline how important it is also nowadays to cultivate slow, deep reading face to face with currently established trends.

1. Two pedagogical works – Hugh of St Victor and John of Salisbury

Two pedagogical works were written at about the same time in Paris. One of them was written by Hugh of St Victor in the Abbey of St Victor, one of three most significant monastical schools of the 12th century (along with St Genevieve and Notre Dame). According to I. Illich, Hugh's pedagogical work *Didascalicon* (written about 1127) represents such an intellectual

revolution that it is possible to talk about the era 'before Hugh and after Hugh". The second pedagogical work was written a few years later by John of Salisbury. Although he was of English descent, he studied in Paris. His work *Metalogicon* (1159) represents an equivalent of Hugh's pedagogical work, but the aim is slightly different – political involvement. This article briefly outlines the differences between the two works.

Didascalicon is, first and foremost, a philosophical text about how to read. There are two things, Hugh tells us in his preface, by which a person "advances in knowledge... reading and meditation" (Hugh 2012, 44). The *Didascalicon* deals only with reading, but its author wants to emphasise that education does not consist of study alone; reading begins, but by no means completes, a process of understanding and learning. *Didascalicon*'s goal, however, is to ensure that the first step is taken properly. "Of all things to be eagerly desired, the first is that Wisdom, in which the Form of the perfect good stands fixed..." (Hugh 2012, 82)

For Hugh, this Wisdom is ultimately Christ, though he speaks about it here as an inner illumination, the one that reveals to people what they truly are. What one must do above all is follow the classic doctrine: Know thyself. "It is written on the tripod of Apollo: gnothi seauton, that is, 'know yourself,' because without a doubt if the human person had not forgotten his own origin he would realise to what extent every mutable thing is nothing…" (Hugh 2012, 83).

Didascalicon therefore proposes a programme of spiritual restoration for fallen man – *reparatio hominis*: "we are restored, however, through learning, so that we may again know our nature and so that we might learn not to seek outside ourselves what we can find within" (Hugh 2012, 84).

Compared to Hugh's *Didascalicon*, *Metalogicon* is certainly more focused in (politically motivated) scope – it treats only the components of logic or the trivium: grammar, rhetoric and dialectic. John does not disagree with Hugh's basic principle regarding the pedagogical goal of wisdom. One of John's overriding concerns involves the relationship of eloquence to wisdom and, like Hugh, he has an Augustinian precedent in *De Doctrina Christiana*. While Hugh drew primarily upon the themes of the first three books of that work, John's interest in the concrete uses of the verbal arts is the focus of Book IV. Augustine recognises that rhetoric (e.g. eloquence) has a purpose in promoting the truth when used well, but he worries about its misuses (Augustine 1995, 119). Book IV, where he discusses how to present Scripture's meanings to others, reveals that underlying ambiguity. John thus focuses on the specific uses of eloquence[1] rather than mastery of its rules (p. 201), but he is wary of the study or use of any rhetoric detached from a scriptural context (Salisbury 1971, 26). This, for him, is eloquence without wisdom (Fitzgerald 2010, 581). In its stated purpose, *Metalogicon* is clearly Victorine in spirit – much as Hugh insists on the significance of even the lowest arts (grammar, dialectic, rhetoric) for the philosophical quest, so does John defend the very foundations of education (Fitzgerald 2010, 580). So what is the difference between their bases and aims?

[1] *Metalogicon* Book I., chapter 7, p. 27: "He who despises such a great boon [as eloquence] is clearly in error; while he who appreciates, or rather pretends to appreciate it, without actually cultivating it, is grossly negligent and on the brink of insanity".

If Hugh's pedagogical foundation was to be concisely defined, the motto "education means formation, the shaping of the integral personality under the influence of Wisdom" would probably be most appropriate, while the motto of John of Salisbury, who criticised Hugh's work, would be different: "education is only an unveiling of rules and the realisation of patterns written in nature". The aim of John's education is a politically engaged life described in his work *Policraticus*, the first political tractate of the Middle Ages, and his aim is the ability to confront a monarch/tyrant assertively.

2. Reading as a highlight of the day and the focus of life

In the previous part, the article focused on two fundamental pedagogical works of the 12th century. Now the attention will be paid solely on characteristics brought by Hugh's work in the context of reading.

Both mentioned works have a similar basis as Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. Hugh draws on Augustine's belief in the ethical component of reading, highlighted in *De Doctrina Christiana*. The first three books of *De Doctrina* discuss Christian education with the aim of interpreting Scripture and its revelation of God's wisdom. While Hugh rarely cites them explicitly, it is their concerns which he is reworking, less for exegetical than for pedagogical purposes (Sweeney 1995, 63). Augustine believes that "all teaching is teaching of either things or signs" (Augustine 1995, 125). All words for Augustine are signs that point to the things they represent, such as the word "sheep" represents the animal. Instruction in the arts helps a student understand unfamiliar signs and therefore the literal meaning of the words of Scripture. A classical liberal arts education, then, must be put at the service of the interpretation of Scripture, the definitive Christian text containing all necessary teaching.

While for Augustine reading means that we learn to understand signs (words and their meaning) and thus only *litteratus* can study, Hugh understands education in a wider scope – as getting to know the signs that surround us, i.e., the world, which is written in a language understood by everyone including an illiterate person, *illiteratus* (Blumenberg 1984, 83). This enables him to progress on the journey of Wisdom, because reading stands at the beginning of Wisdom, as Hugh underlines repeatedly. It is the way of discovering signs in the surrounding world that tell us about God. For Hugh of St Victor, "the entire sense-perceptible world is like a sort of book written by the finger of God. For Hugh and also Alain de Lille, 'in this world of mortal creature shows us life in form and feature' («Omnis mundi creatura/quasi liber et pictura...)" (Bloch 1986, 20). Philosophy learned through such an open perception of the world represents an instrument of education; it teaches us how to be friends with God. This is why Hugh sees reading as a highlight of every day, the completion of every activity and the focus of life. He describes the act of reading through various images, mostly from ordinary life.

Hugh focuses on reading mainly in his third book, where he outlines a description of everything that is necessary for reading and introduces fundamental methods (IX–XIX) which could be understood as necessary "attitudes" to reading.

Hugh describes reading as a "bodily, physically demanding activity" that requires action, power, sturdiness and is performed rhythmically, an exercise of breathing and with full

attention of senses. It is no wonder that Hellenic authors compared reading to an energetically consuming ball game or walking. It was an exhausting activity. It required the ability to hold one stable position of the body as well as the involvement of the other senses: hearing, touch, taste. Apart from the phenomenon of reading aloud, which has been used since ancient times for better memorisation (*clara lectio*) (Carr 2010, 110), regular rhythmic breathing was involved, too. Reading of the text aloud transformed a bunch of written signs into a certain "soundtrack" that reached all the senses (Harkins 2012, 274). For this reason, humming monks were called "chewing cows" (*animalia ruminantia*). They chew every word because it was understood as a journey towards Wisdom. However, all of this was a slow activity.

Moreover, in the books inked by scribes, words ran together without any break across every line on every page, in what is now referred to as "scriptura continua". Readers' eyes had to move slowly and haltingly across the lines of text, pausing frequently and often backing up to the start of a sentence, as their minds struggled to figure out where one word ended and a new one began and what role each word was playing in the meaning of the sentence. Reading was like working out a puzzle (Carr 2010, 110).

Reading was as exhausting as a walk in the mountains, hard on breathing and the physical condition, which made this activity even more enriching, if the person was open and perceptive. The progress was slow and it was not possible to overtake or skip anything. This perceptive reading did not condemn and repudiate any kind of text, including pagan: "you should hold no knowledge in contempt, because all knowledge is good. You should not disdain at least reading any book (...) since there is no book, in my estimation, that does not set forth something useful if it treats its subjects in an appropriate place and order. Indeed, there is no book that does not also possess something unique..." (Hugh 2012, 128).

This unobstructed journey across a country is like wandering from page to page, and each of them is different. During a journey across a country one gets to know new horizons, and it is the same with reading – every page unveils new continents. Hugh interprets this theory based on etymology. He is convinced – together with Plinius – that the meaning of the Latin word *pagina*, "page", is also related to "line" (Lat. *pagus*), and the roots of a vine are implanted in those lines. He believed that reading (Lat. *legere* = pick up) is derived from the Latin word *lignum* – "wood" – which is usually picked up in the forest or vineyard to build a fire – and that reading can also be interpreted as a picking – looking for wood to build the fire, picking the letters and sounds that create words where wisdom is hidden (Illich 1996, 58; Nemec 2021, 52).

3. Methods of reading

Apart from the fact that in *Didascalicon* Hugh adopts and comments on the rules of reading by Augustine (*De Doctrina Christiana*), he also mentions six methods that should help readers read better and appear to be more interesting to us: 1. a humble mind (*mens humilis*), 2. an enthusiasm for inquiry (*studium quaerendi*), 3. a quiet life (*otia quieta*), 4. scrutiny (*scrutinium tacitum*), 5. frugality (*paupertas*), and 6. in exile (*terra aliena*). This article will briefly touch on only two of them.

There is something that defines all these methods or "attitudes" – a fundamental openness and listening. Sensitive perception, which is supposed to forge from the "outside" to the "inside", where this reading continues in a form of meditation. These methods support better preparation for a given text, exhorting to adopt attitudes which "mellow the soil" of the reader's interior and stimulate its growth.

Hugh describes reading as a "strenuous activity". However, he uses the expression *"otia monastica"* or *"otia quieta"*. Both terms refer to something that is difficult to translate from Latin, but it is the opposite of activity and strenuousness. In a way, both expressions speak about "otiosity, rest, peace, tranquillity", when we are not involved in any activity (*negotium*), but we have a certain form of *"otium"* (*scholé* – leisure – Pieper 2017, 11). A medieval monk reached out for a book as a yearned moment which followed after a long day of labour.

Hugh refers to the spirit in which this life of reading ought to be lived. He uses the word *vacare*, which says all but cannot be translated well into English. Rufinus (cca. 435–510) was the first to define the monk as someone "who in solitude makes himself free for God alone," *solus soli Deo vacans* (Illich 1996, 61). Vacate means "to have been set or become free." When Christian authors use the term, the stress is not on the release a person receives, but on the freedom he takes of his own volition.

Hugh thus demands that the reader who desires to reach perfection engage himself in leisure (*otium*). "For it is especially meditation that removes the soul from the din of earthly activities and even in this life gives it a certain foretaste of the sweetness of eternal tranquility." (*Ea enim maxime est, quae animam terrenorum actuum strepitu segregat, et in hac vita etiam aeternae quietis dulcedinem quodammodo praegustare facit*) (Hugh 2012, 125–126).

Through reading, man breaks free from all burdens. Free from the burden of work, he sees things in a different perspective; he views his prejudices from distance and becomes aware of them, just because he realises how much he does not know yet and how much he can learn from every other human being. According to Hugh, such an openness is the sign of a wise man.

Apart from this, Hugh also mentions another method – silent scrutiny. Although from ancient times people used to read aloud, as we could see, Hugh and Richard were the first supporters of "silent reading". This fact suggests that Hugh understood it as the most important formative and educational activity. Integral formation starts inside the man, from where he observes and perceives any text. This is because "there is no book, in my estimation, that does not set forth something useful if it treats its subjects in an appropriate place and order. Indeed, there is no book that does not also possess something unique..." (Hugh 2012, 128)

Hugh sees a book not only as a subject that deserves respect, but in his eyes it is literally worth adoration. A book is like a temple with its entrance (introduction), as well as its centre and conclusion (like in the temple where everything is directed towards the tabernacle). Pages of the book are like windows through which people are illuminated by the light that shapes them like in the beginning of the world. Signs and words are the bearers of Wisdom, illustrations and ornaments in the book are metaphors that stimulate and provoke our imagination. According to Hugh, reading a book represents an activity very similar to adoration, but he

actually sees it as a crucial process, the process of education which takes place within us during this slow, silent and "ruminant" reading. It may look like "inaction" at the first sight – like reading – but Hugh believed that in fact something sublime takes place during this activity.

Conclusion

Due to shortage of space, this article presented only two of Hugh's methods of reading and outlined several moments of his pedagogy. It seems that Hugh bases the entire formation of man on the correct act of reading – from the moment of preparation to a thorough inner reading that could be described as "ruminant". The text itself is "creative" (from the word *creatio*) and affects the person only to the extent desired by the reader.

Hugh's pedagogy has certain interesting aspects even today. In a time of worsening concentration of students, widely spread lack of concentration, when reading became a race and browsing through pages and reflecting has been replaced by scrolling and skimming, it allows us to realise that philosophy and theology clearly contradict this trend, trying to lead students to slow reading with critical distinction.

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