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In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon (review)

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REVIEWS

IVAN ILLICH, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 154 pp.

As many have noted, medievalists of the early twentieth century were among that era's most influential humanist scholars.[1] Writers such as E. R. Curtius, Johan Huizinga, Erich Auerbach, and C. S. Lewis interpreted the significance of western cultural origins for several generations of general readers, a task that now seems to have passed largely to students of the early modern era. Ivan Illich's new book, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, in many ways hearkens back to these grand interpreters of the Middle Ages. While it is by no means a product of old-fashioned humanism, it vividly demonstrates how medieval studies can still bring fresh perspectives to contemporary concerns.

Illich takes for his subject a moment in the early twelfth century, exemplified by Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*, when he claims the modern habits of "bookish reading" began. By "bookish," Illich means an attitude towards the written word which sees it as an abstract object, a text conceptually separate from the page upon which it appears. Implicit throughout the work is a contrast with contemporary attitudes, in which Illich sees the end of the epoch that the twelfth century began. He invites readers to consider their own habits of literacy in a historical context, not, as he puts it, "as a logically necessary step in the progress toward the rational use of the alphabet" (3). In this respect, Illich presents a gentle rebuke to those who have loudly proclaimed the death of literature, as if the habits of reading in which we have been traditionally schooled were an inevitable apex of humanist achievement, from which any deviation is necessarily a decline.

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[1] See, for example, chapter 1 of Lee Patterson's *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison and London: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

Although a thin book, the low page count should not be taken as a sign of light intellectual weight. Illich's writing is both compendious and considered, his footnotes an excellent introduction to further study. Illich states in the introduction that he does not attempt to provide a new scholarly tome for medievalists, but to use the twelfth century to reflect upon current debates over the role of literacy in society. Such expansive contemplation is a salutary addition to the more specialized studies upon which he builds.

As reflected in the subtitle, Illich uses the techniques of medieval commentary to structure his analysis. He begins by examining Hugh's incipit in order to unravel, word by word, the differences between Hugh's assumptions about literacy and our own. Illich first explores how Hugh understands the purpose of reading. Wisdom, for Hugh, is synonymous with God, and study, by increasing wisdom, brings one closer to God. This wisdom brought both metaphorical and literal illumination, for according to medieval understanding of optics the eye projected beams of light in order to see. Reading thus illuminates and redeems, lifting the reader from the darkness of original sin. Although the *Didascalicon* belongs to a long line of propaedeuctic literature, it simultaneously reflects a concern with the self as an individual new to the twelfth century. Hugh wants the pilgrimage of study to lead not to the community of the celestial Jerusalem, but to an awareness of self.

Illich next examines the notion of order, which for Hugh was not arbitrary convention, but objective reality. As an instructional handbook, the *Didascalicon* gives the student rules for constructing an internal, ordered storehouse of knowledge. Hugh revived the memory training of antiquity, but where the Greek and Roman rhetoricians used this *techne* for public oratory, Hugh employed it for religious understanding. Where antiquity organized memory around the image of a rich garden or villa, Hugh used biblical history.

The monastic reading which the *Didascalicon* teaches is both meditative and active. Readers vocalize their texts, a habit reflected in the many metaphors of chewing and digesting associated with reading. This kind of reading was a lifetime's pursuit, a way of life rather than mere activity. For Hugh, it was the only legitimate way to read, and in this opinion he represents the end of an age. Later, such pious meditation would be only one of a number of different ways to read.

To the tradition of monastic reading, Illich then contrasts the growing practices of scholasticism. He interprets the *Didascalicon*'s

preface as addressing a community of uncloistered readers, and the entire work as straddling the line between monastic and scholastic worlds, at once valorizing the old habits of reading and creating the conditions necessary for the new ones. A series of different but related practices abruptly became normative in the twelfth century: the spacing of words, alphabetic and subject-based indexing, the layout of glossed texts, increased use of paper—all contributing to silent reading and to that shift in which a text ceased to be heard as an author's speech, but was seen as the manifestation of unvoiced thought.

Finally, Illich explicitly considers how the thesis that the twelfth century created the abstract notion of the text affects our understanding of the history of the book. In his interpretation, the advent of print does not inaugurate a new age, but adds additional features to already established ideas. The true era of the bookish text, he argues, extends from the mid-twelfth to the late twentieth century, when the new technology of the computer has broken the old paradigm. Illich freely admits himself to be a product of the old age, and exhibits more than a little identification with his subject when he admits a fondness for the notion of a quasi-monastic house of reading in which one can retreat from the world to pursue an older form of study.

There is much in Illich's analysis that is provocative and persuasive. The twelfth century was clearly the beginning for many of the reading habits we now take for granted. More than anything else, he demonstrates that these habits are not the inevitable consequence of literacy itself. Instead, they arose from the demands of a particular historical moment. At the same time, his analysis seems too schematized, partly as a result of his deliberate choice to examine the conceptual understanding of reading and writing divorced from the practical exigencies that encourage their use. If Illich's account of the twelfth century revises conventional notions about the era of the book, his own periodization can also be questioned at both ends.

Illich generally ignores the Carolingian age, which Rosamond McKitterick's recent work shows to have had a well-developed literary culture extending beyond clerical circles.[2] Many concepts Illich attributes to the twelfth century were also exhibited by the Carolingians. Careful attention to page layout and a hierarchy of script forms both indicate that Carolingians understood the text as a visual

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[2] Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).

unit. They were also systematic catalogers, book collectors, and even textual editors, demonstrating a desire for organization parallel to their twelfth-century descendants. Indeed, the great glosses of the twelfth century depended on the basic work of library building initiated by the Carolingians and continued through the Gregorian reforms.

Further, the claim that the Roman alphabet "became a phonetic recording device for the registration of actual speech" only in the twelfth century is highly questionable (73). Illich himself mentions some counter-examples, dismissing them with the unargued assertion that the exception proves the rule. In fact, before the twelfth century the Roman alphabet was frequently used to represent other languages where there was a practical need. Old English literature, which Illich mentions, is no mere exception, but testifies to an active culture of the written word in a vernacular language, symbolized largely with the Roman alphabet. King Alfred's program of translations demonstrates an effort to create a bilingual educational system parallel to the training in both Greek and Latin of the Roman Republic and Empire. Old English did not have the religious prestige of Latin, but it clearly had the status of a full language.

Illich entirely omits mention of Old Irish, where the Roman alphabet was used to transcribe a language with significant phonemic differences from Latin. Like the Anglo-Saxons, the Irish largely abandoned their old epigraphic script, ogham, for Roman letters, in part, presumably, because the later were easier to write and less likely to be misread. In contrast to their insular neighbors, the Irish did not add new characters although Latin lacked, among other things, many of Irish's fricatives. The letter *m*, for example, was used for the conventional nasal, as well as two voiced nasal fricatives. Perhaps even more significantly, consonants in Irish can have two phonemically distinct qualities: broad or slender. The Old Irish scribes solved the representational problem by introducing "glide-vowels," which were themselves unpronounced but indicated the pronunciation of an adjoining consonant. The evidence of Old Irish orthography indicates that its developers undertook a rather impressive abstract analysis of the phonemes available in Latin and devised a series of representational rules based upon but by no means identical to Latin pronunciation.

At the other end of Illich's period, his idea that computers have splintered the habitual notion of a static text also seems overstated. First, the attack upon the notion of bookish texts has largely come

from poststructuralist thought, developed years before computers gained widespread importance. Second, an alternative view of computers might argue that they represent a more efficient development of the same technologies developed in the twelfth century. A hypertext is nothing more than a mechanized index, and the constellation of software devoted to drafting and transmitting the written word seems designed to produce an even more reliable final product: the abstract text. The computer speeds writing and revision, but it is unclear how attitudes towards the text have changed because of it. Modern user interfaces employ the old visual metaphors of desktop and paper document, and even inveterate computer users still do most reading away from the computer screen. Early predictions that computers would create a paperless society have proven wildly off the mark. Instead, there has been an explosion of documents. The computer screen itself has become the modern wax tablet, ideally suited for provisional composition, but still an intermediate stage.

If the transition between different types of reading habits is less pronounced or drastic than Illich would have it, many important changes did occur in the twelfth century. His book provides a valuable focus on a key moment in western cultural history and shows how relevant the twelfth century can be for understanding our own situation.

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