Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing and building; and other silent men, not seen, were sitting in the cold cloister, tiring their eyes and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully copied and recopied the manuscripts which they had saved. There was no one who contended or cried out, or drew attention to what was going on, but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning and a city.


Among the many privileges of her posterity, Rome tends to enjoy a larger space on the metaphorical palate of cultural critics during perceived times of crisis. Narratives comparing her decline to contemporary conditions often bring along an homage to Benedict of Nursia, in many ways the founder of Western Christian monasticism. Newman’s image of “silent men” often rallies would-be cultural preservers toward nostalgic hibernation in response to some imminent and inevitable cataclysm. The trope has recently been taken up in reference to the plights of higher and secondary education. Thomas Benton’s op-ed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* encourages us to “get medieval on education,” forsaking an academy marked by tenure-track cuts and diminishing humanities enrollment in favor of small institutions where faculty poverty is at least intentional.¹ In Septmeber 2015, the Archbishop of Canterbury instituted a “gap year” program of monastic living for high school graduates seeking shelter from a chaotic modern world.² For those not ready to retreat into the cloister, a new PBS documentary, *The Rule*, holds up a New Jersey Benedictine high school as a potential model for urban education.³

In the last decade, particular elements of the Benedictine educational tradition have garnered interest outside the monastery. In an increasingly instrumental environment, intentionally nonpragmatic and nonpositivistic approaches hold an understandable appeal. Among philosophers of education, Angelo Caranfa, Kevin Gary, and Samuel Rocha have recently provided accounts of the potential educational value of both monastic silence and literary modalities.⁴ In light of the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference theme, I would like to further this discussion by examining how principles of monastic learning might inform a poetic and transformative educational vision. As a particular appropriation of Platonic *paideia*, monastic education carries specific ontological, anthropological, and linguistic considerations. When enacted in practice, these positions yield a literacy model that can be described as *metanoia*, or “turning toward.” In this model, readers “turn toward” and encounter an Other in the form of textual expression and are transformed through what monastics considered an organic “digestion” of the Other’s mind.⁵ This essay seeks to contribute to the current literature by advancing *metanoia* as a notional framework and by drawing on the work of Ivan Illich as well as Raymond Studzinski’s recent phenomenological analysis of monastic *lectio*. After proposing a narrative of continuity between Platonic...
paideia and monastic metanoia and delineating potential insights for literary theory and practice. I briefly consider the inherent philosophical assumptions which may impede broader reception of these pedagogical notions.

**PAIDEIA AS CONVERSION**

Although the precise term is not used by Plato in the Allegory of the Cave, both Werner Jaeger and Martin Heidegger locate Plato’s vision of paideia in this segment of *The Republic*. Jaeger draws attention to the centrality of the Platonic Idea of the Good represented by the sun. Just as the sun is in a sense both the source of living things and the vehicle for human sight, the Good is at once the source of Being and the principle by which the soul perceives beings. The allegory thus chronicles the process of paideia, the turning of the soul toward the source of reality.6

Jaeger argues that Platonic paideia is an inextricably religious activity. While some modern scholarship tends to dismiss Plato’s references to the divine as accidental cultural conventions, his educational vision cannot be understood apart from theological considerations. His characterization of the Idea of the Good is identical to the previous definition of the divine found in *The Republic*, and Plato’s disciples clearly take his work as necessarily religious. In fact, in *Theaetetus*, Plato characterizes the highest end of paideia as “assimilation to God.”8 This line of reasoning might warrant classifying Platonic paideia as a sort of religious conversion experience, but the modern connotation of “conversion” eschews the depth of Plato’s thought. The prisoner in the cave literally undergoes conversio — “turning about.” The soul, with all its faculties — intellectual, affective, volitional — turns its gaze toward the ordering principle of reality.

Heidegger’s analysis furthers Jaeger’s understanding of paideia as a “turning about” of the soul. Plato speaks of the blindness experienced upon exiting the cave and the difficulty of adjusting to the sun’s rays. This conversion is arduous, Heidegger explains, because paideia is not mere intellectual change, but involves the reorientation of one’s essence. Growth in knowledge, or familiarity with the Good, implies a decidedly ontological transformation. The knower is in a certain way a new being.

In a contemporary educational atmosphere wary of comprehensive education as “indoctrination,” it is important to note that Platonic conversion does not imply a loss of autonomy.9 Rather, as Heidegger writes, “the normative bearing that is to result from this turning around must unfold from a relation that already sustains our essence.”10 For Heidegger, paideia is the formation of a person according to a prototype (here, the Good as ordering principle of reality), which bears an innate correspondence with the person even before passage from ἀπαίδευσις (apaideusia, or “lack of education”). As such, the conversion process is better described as the flowering or manifestation of the individual’s essential nature, a nature the source of which is a Platonic ideal.

**CONVERSION AS METANOIA**

Søren Kierkegaard echoes Plato’s acknowledgment of paideia’s ardor. As Norman Wirzba notes, the Dane’s thought serves as a corrective for René Descartes’s confidence in the all-sufficiency of method.11 Wirzba draws on Emmanuel Levinas’s
work to explicate the impossibility of a self-determined “turning-about.” Under an autonomous model, the learner must impose a subject-derived conceptual schema onto the known reality, destroying its “alterality,” its existence as Other. Not only does such an approach constitute a violence to the known, but the learner loses the educative value of the shocking encounter with Being. Platonic paideia suggests that the conversion toward Being is necessarily disarming because the learner undergoes a transformation of essence. As Wirzba explains, “the opening of the self beyond itself is not possible solely in terms of the self…. If teaching is to be possible at all there must be an encounter with the Other. In this encounter a profound change in the self becomes possible. This change we have called ‘metanoia,’ the redirection of the self from interiority to exteriority.”

_Metanoia_ likely brings to mind a specifically Christian connotation. It will be necessary here to delineate its meaning in both Greek and Christian contexts and to identify in what sense the _metanoia_ imagined by monastics might be appropriated to educational philosophy. Linguistically, the term suggests a mere intellectual conversion — a change of νους, often translated “mind.” Within the history of Christian theology, a literal translation was adopted by Reformers — notably Luther and Calvin — in an attempt to rehabilitate _metanoia_ from associations with works of penance. Aloys Dirksen’s survey of the term’s history sheds light on what meanings _metanoia_ invoked for monastic and Greek readers. The earliest Christian writers most often used the term to denote a moral conversion. Their understanding stood in continuity with the Jewish notion of _הבושת_ (“teshuvah” or “repentance”), which was rendered _metanoia_ in the Greek Septuagint and Hellenic rabbinic literature. Aloy’s usage primarily indicated a change of mind but also an element of sorrow or regret. In the Hellenistic period contemporary with the writing of the New Testament, the term took on a decidedly ethical sense, connoting a change of the will. Dirksen argues that the key to understanding _metanoia_’s apparent imprecision is recognizing that classical anthropology featured a profound degree of integration. For the Greeks, νους incorporated all of the soul’s faculties — the intellect, the affections, and the will — in a way that seems quite foreign to our subtly Cartesian modern sensibilities. The early Christians, and in this context the fathers of Western monasticism, adopted both the Platonism of “Athens” and the carnality of “Jerusalem.” Benedict and his contemporaries would therefore read _metanoia_ as an integrated “turning about” — bodily as well as _noetically_. They sought to devise a life in which every facet engendered turning the eye of the soul toward the ordering principle of reality.

For philosophers of education, the question becomes whether _metanoia_ might be more generally applicable. While the specifically monastic conception carries several particular philosophical assumptions (which will be enumerated later), there seems to be space for appropriation of the concept, especially in philosophical accounts of reading. Toril Moi’s recent exploration of Simone de Beauvoir’s philosophy identifies authentic reading as an “aesthetic adventure” through which the reader enters into the lived experience of the author. Contrary to prevailing models of literary pedagogy in which the student aims to “master” the text through analytical tools, de
Beauvoir insists that the text itself sets the interpretive agenda. In this way the reader receives a new metaphysical attitude — the νους of the text — which is completely outside her ability to generate.17

There is reason to assert that any profound ideational change might be described as metanoia. Mátyás Szalay has described philosophical growth as an evolution of Husserlian “natural attitude” — one’s fundamental disposition toward things and overarching metaphysical vision.18 The authentic philosophical act involves something akin to metanoia — taking on a new νους, a new disposition toward reality. Consistent with the highest ideals of Greek paideia, this conversion addresses the learner as an integrated being situated within a network of human relationships:

This “fundamental attitude” opens new horizons in the following spheres of reality that are strongly intertwined: (1) There is a new relationship to the ontological reality, i.e., to “everything that there is.” (2) Based on this, the converted person naturally revises his bonds of affection with his fellow beings and to the whole community (polis). (3) There is no conversion without a new relationship to one’s own self.19

If we treat a text as an expression of its author’s νους, reading can become an encounter with Levinas’s Other. In this encounter, as Szalay and Moi intuit, the reader is able to take on the lived experience of another whose gaze is presumably broader or more attuned to reality. By taking on the gaze of another, she finds her own soul’s gaze, her νους, turned toward reality as well. Far from a mere notional exercise, this metanoia changes her relationship to Being. Thus, she experiences a new self, in the sense of an ontological change, as well as a new relationship with the human community.

MONASTIC EDUCATION AS TRANSFORMATIVE METANOIA

The monastic tradition is worth examining in this context, as it provides a concrete manifestation of paideia as metanoia. Many of the fathers of Western monasticism received a liberalia studia, a Romanized paideia.20 As the empire fell and Christian culture gained ascendency, the monastic project became a search for a “new paideia.”21 For John Cassian, a contemporary of Benedict, monastic education took the ideals of Greek education — civic and personal virtue — and added an element of sublime prayer.22 From its inception, reading of all sorts has been foundational to monastic life. The Rule of Benedict outlines times for communal, liturgical, and personal reading to such an extent that a monk would spend the majority of his waking hours in the company of a text.23 To this day, a typical Benedictine ordo (the order of the day) includes five different times of communal Scriptural prayer, preceded in the morning by the “Office of Readings.” Meals are taken in silence while a monk reads from a religious or secular work.24 At least a half hour each day is given to the heart of monastic literary practice: lectio divina.

The last half-century has seen a popular recovery of this monastic practice. In brief, lectio comprises four stages: lectio (simple reading), meditatio (often understood as “meditation,” but traditionally a process of internalization by imaginative memorization), oratio (spontaneous prayer), and contemplatio (contemplation of divine mysteries). This process generates metanoia — literally “putting on the new mind.”25 The monastic conception of educational conversion differs only slightly
from the Platonic or Heideggerian notion. For both Plato and Heidegger, being is revealed through *Logos*, the ordering reasonable principle of reality. In Christian theology, *Logos* does not indicate an impersonal entity but rather the second Person of the Trinity. *Metanoia* through monastic *lectio*, therefore, is a process through which the monk turns toward and participates in the νους of Christ, who is a *personal* Heideggerian prototype. Heidegger’s vision of *paideia* corresponds perfectly with the monastic conception: the monk already possesses a sustaining relationship with the prototype as his source of being. Turning toward the *Logos*, who is also the Good, does not somehow co-opt or disintegrate his autonomy but rather enables flourishing according to his essential nature.

**INSIGHTS FROM MONASTIC READING**

Literal *reverence* for the text generates an approach to literacy that is at once transformative, poetic, and intimate. It expresses a decidedly nondualistic anthropology. In his commentary on Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon*, a twelfth-century monastic reading primer, Ivan Illich calls the monastery a “community of mumblers and munchers.” While the idea may seem odd to the modern mind, reading has not historically been a silent activity. In antiquity, doctors might prescribe reading as a form of light exercise. Benedict’s *Rule* cautions monks to use a low voice when reading in their cells at night to avoid disturbing others. Especially during *meditatio*, *lectio* is an inexorably carnal act. Illich describes this beautifully:

> The modern reader conceives of the page as a plate that inks the mind, and of the mind as a screen onto which the page is projected…[but] reading is conceived by Hugh as a bodily motor activity. In a tradition of one and a half millennia, the sounding pages are echoed by the resonance of the moving lips and tongue. The reader’s ears pay attention, and strain to catch what the reader’s mouth gives forth. In this manner the sequence of letters translates directly into body movements and patterns nerve impulses…. By reading, the page is literally embodied, incorporated.

Following a Jewish precedent, monastic writers use the language of bodily digestion to describe reading. Meditation is often described as *ruminatio*, the activity of “ruminators” — livestock that chew their cud. The reader “tastes” the text with *palatum cordis* — the “palate of the heart.” Sam Rocha has connected the idea of eating the Word (which in Christian theology indicates the *Logos* or person of Christ) to various religious or folkloric traditions of metaphysical change via digestion. Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Eucharistic rites form the obvious connection in this context, but cannibalistic practices in myriad historical iterations bear witness to this metaphysical intuition: “Only a person sacrificed and consumed has the magnitude to be able to move another person.”

*Meditatio* seeks bodily internalization of the text’s author in order to take on the author’s νους.

It is important to note that text consumption is not at all akin to indoctrination, at least in its negative connotation. Just as digested food contributes to the growth of the body according to its own genetic code, *lectio divina* retains Heidegger’s principle of growth according to the person’s essence. For this reason, Raymond Studzinski observes that no two people draw the same insights from *lectio*. Kevin Gary intuits the relational (as opposed to authoritarian) dynamic of monastic reading in comparing the monastic text to an icon: “Different than an image that *we look*
at, an icon *looks at us*; an icon addresses us.” This analogy is helpful but needs historical clarification. Illich writes that Byzantine and medieval iconography does not portray figures as illuminated by light (such as we might expect from a more realist aesthetic, like Caravaggio’s) but depicts them as possessing their own source of light. In *lectio*, the light communicated (in the sense of *communion* or Platonic participation) through the text gives ontological substance to the reader in the pattern of her essential nature (as opposed to the pattern of a dogmatic agenda).

“Reading for ontological change” might not gain traction in educational research or practice, but, insofar as participation in the Good indicates moral formation, there may be avenues for reception. Several years ago, Karen Krasny lamented the contemporary deficiency of moral education and tied it to a lack of aesthetic considerations. I would propose that *lectio* fosters both moral and aesthetic formation. Although contemporary curriculum theorists often deplore any emphasis on memorization, much of a monk’s preparatory work for *meditatio* involved weaving complex imaginative memory banks. Young students in the monastic school undertook exercises to place all of Scriptural history on a visual timeline, which they could mentally jump between, retrieving events and passages instantaneously. Each event was “enfleshed” through imaginative visualization of Scripture. *Meditatio* involved placing oneself in the scene — imagining the smell of sea air, the feel of dusty streets, the clothes of people in a crowd. The result was what Hugh called “a treasure chest of the heart” — an elaborate mind-palace comprising all of sacred and much of classical profane literature, which could be recalled at an instant. The act of reading essentially became a creative reimagining of the self through the νους of the text.

Creating a “treasure chest of the heart” also required receptivity to the affective and poetic power of words. In *contemplatio*, the reader fixates on those words that strike her or elicit an emotional response. Over the course of a lifetime of *lectio*, certain terms become “hook words,” sparking a chain reaction of linguistic, visual, and affective associations. Even a short passage holds the possibility for de Beauvoir’s aesthetic adventure. At its best, a monastic education offers a life steeped in poetic experience. Gary Bouchard, a professor of English literature and himself a product of Benedictine schooling, recalls a life ordered by rhythm, harmony, and lyrical and symbolic sensitivity. At the very least, the monastic school is a place where intuitive, pre-rational knowing is not discarded in favor of discursive analysis.

Perhaps the most profound insight that the monastic literacy tradition might offer philosophers of education concerns its unique understanding of the relationship between the text and the reader. The typical secondary student or undergraduate sees assigned texts as a forum for “work,” raw material for an activity. The medieval use of *studio* — “study” — implies an affective attachment, following or pursuing something because of an innate inclination. Hugh describes the spirit in which *lectio* is undertaken as “*vacare voluerit*,” a phrase that Illich notes has no adequate English translation. It might best be rendered “wills to be engaged with,” but in the monastic tradition, the phrase essentially means conversion of personal direction or freeing oneself for.
While Plato or Heidegger might treat the inner logic of a text as an impersonal transcendent principle, Christian theology posits a personal Word. Certainly, this is a specifically religious claim and thus has a contentious generalizability, but treating a text as the linguistic expression of the author’s νους presents some interesting implications and may correspond more accurately to phenomenological accounts of reading. George Poulet describes reading as “the act in which the subjective principle which I call I, is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my I, I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me.” If we avoid reading in a reductive way, reading carries all the weight of the encounter with the Other. In the words of Carol Zaleski, “A memorized work (like a lover, a friend, a spouse, a child) has entered into the fabric of its possessor’s intellectual and emotional life in a way that makes deep claims upon that life, claims that can only be ignored with effort and deliberation.” Interestingly, for the monk, the Word is his spouse. By taking monastic vows, he more intimately participates in the Christian belief that the Church is the “bride of Christ.”

Spousal relation provides what I think is a unique analogy for transformative reading. The encounter with the Other — a text or a person — is first motivated by studio — pursuit of an object of affection. As the reader spends more time with the Other, it becomes more familiar and occupies a greater space in her life. She begins to adopt its idioms, partly out of habit, partly from a growing fondness. She delves deeper into its viewpoint, respecting it as equal to her own. Her worldview evolves in conversation with the Other, and her will is changed as well. Her actions are made with its considerations in mind, her preferences and pattern of life are shaped by its continual friendship, her I is no longer her own. But far from being immolated, her I is expanded as it now contains the I of another. And even at the end of a long life together, she still approaches the Other with a sense of wonder, for it cannot be reduced to something to be analyzed but holds an indefatigable mystery.

Considerations for Implementation

A religiously derived pedagogy does not differ from others in making anthropological, epistemological, and ontological claims, but its positions are perhaps more totalizing and contentious. Metanoia in the monastic context assumes — as does a large swath of the continental tradition, including Heidegger and Plato — that reality possesses a rational and intelligible order and that beings (as participants in Being) share a common nonmaterial source. These traditions view growth toward that source (whether a divine personage or merely an immaterial conception of truth or goodness) as constitutive of education in its broadest sense. I think it may be difficult to propose this decidedly receptive educational vision as a normative model. It raises the question, “From whom or where are we receiving?” It requires definite philosophical or religious affirmations that may not be appropriate in a common school.

On a more practical level, transformative reading of this sort requires a certain faith in the goodness of a text. As previously mentioned, digestive reading does not imply uncritical acceptance, but, just as we assume a good deal about the worthiness of a potential spouse or the edibleness of our dinner, this sort of reading requires
trusted authorship. As Gary notes, “the kinds of texts chosen matters significantly as [they are] guides that offer normative substance about how to live well.”42 This sort of curricular position is difficult in an environment marked by the hermeneutics of suspicion. Especially in secondary and higher education, students often equate intelligent reading with criticism. As Poulet mentions, we experience reading as a kind of imposition on the self-sufficiency of our person. Under such conditions, to view a text as “friend” or “spouse” may indeed require, to use Heidegger’s words, an “arduous conversion.”

8. Jaeger, Paideia, 286–287; See, by way of comparison, Plato, Theaetetus 176b–e; The Republic 379b.
12. Ibid., 139.
15. Ibid., 167–175.
17. Ibid., 125–140.
19. Ibid., 503.


24. In my own experience as a guest in monasteries, the variety of meal readings has been fascinating. Often one meal is reserved for spiritual reading or biography, but I have heard topics ranging from British history to economic theory at table.

25. See, by way of comparison, 1 Cor 2:16 and Rom 12:2. In Romans, Paul does not use μετάνοια but μεταμορφοῦσθε (metamorphosis) of νους.


34. Even “pagan” literature served to further aid an aesthetic sense of style and to broaden the imaginative faculties.


41. See, by way of comparison, Eph 5:22–23.