

## Book Review

*Slow Philosophy*

*Reading Against the Institution*

Michelle Boulous Walker

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017

pp xxiv + 305, pb, ISBN 9781474279925, £17.99

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This weighty 300-page book of 'continental philosophy' offers a theorised but compelling vision of something simple and appealing: how to read well. Philosophers will want to engage it as a work of technical subtlety, well-resourced from across a range of philosophical writers. The author is, after all, senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of Queensland in Australia, and deserves to have the work read thoughtfully and critically by fellow philosophers. My interest here, as a theologian writing for those with an interest in 'theology and ministry', is to distil some of its wonderful insights into a different register. For a start, the main text ends on p.189, followed by 115 pages of notes, bibliography and index. Where Boulous Walker dives into Levinas, Irigaray, Beauvoir and Cixous to ponder the mysteries of taking time and reconstructing the experiencing of wisdom, I wish to comment as an interested bystander. And where Boulous Walker ends with a reflection on reading that borrows Simone Weil's language of grace, I want to borrow in turn that language of grace to reflect theologically on the achievement of this book. For at root, there is something of profound importance for Christian reading here. But first, the shape of her argument.

There is a sense that Boulous Walker is a lover of reading, and indeed of wisdom, who has been vexed by the demands of the academy, where texts are forced to be consumed at high speed, distilled into content, and left, shelled and abandoned, on the floor. The 'enemy' of her narrative is the institution, by which she means the academic institutionalisation of philosophy. Ruminative reflection is bypassed in the rush to 'publish or perish'. Alternate testimonies to the institution are canvassed: they are highly regarded if generally seen to be self-consciously odd. So here we have Nietzsche and Wittgenstein railing against shallow thought. Ironically, most philosophers who write about Nietzsche and Wittgenstein do so in the very register that they themselves disparaged. If philosophy is a way of life, then we need slow reading. After this (appropriately discursive) introduction, the argument unfolds in leisurely fashion across six chapters. One is on habits of reading, distinguishing between masculine approaches that dominate the text, and open, receptive feminine readings. The male/female dichotomy here is surprising and a bit

problematic, but the distinction itself is fair, with a high valuation being offered of readings 'open to the future'. A second chapter considers the essay – the unsystematic probing of a topic from various angles – and urges the adoption of 'essayistic reading', that does not seek to 'contain' the text in pre-judged systems. Third comes 'rereading', in a chapter that drifts into the language of love and wonder, seeking out the voice of the other as an act of love. That relational dimension only grows as the chapters unwind their way onwards: reading as attentive listening; reading as 'authentic' romance; reading as intimacy that receives writing as gift, and practices the abandonment of self in an act of grace towards the pursuit of wisdom. A conclusion parses slow reading as 'the attentive work of grace'.

Note immediately how much of this language is quasi-theological. There is something entirely winning about this approach, and it is doubtless true that philosophical reading in pursuit of wisdom would benefit from being more like Bouldous Walker describes. By extension, theological or spiritual reading can look a lot like what she describes, and perhaps the point of application to reading in theological study would translate straightforwardly across the 'institutional' structures of academic programmes. It is striking that she makes no use of theological resources that also discuss reading. Much of what is helpful here overlaps with much of what is helpful in the two leading theological accounts of reading of which I am aware: Alan Jacobs' *A Theology of Reading* (Westview Press, 2001) and Paul Griffiths' *Religious Reading* (OUP, 1999).

What is lacking, by contrast, is any space to reflect on the nature of the text being read. Bouldous Walker's main texts are philosophical works in the continental tradition. These almost demand thoughtful reading if they are to be read at all, much like great literature requires deep engagement before one can say whether the literature in question really 'works' or not. (Such texts are what Umberto Eco called 'open texts': they require that one enter in before one can really evaluate.) It is not difficult, though, to think of a couple of examples of kinds of texts that really require the reader to move to other approaches. Lightweight and low-key texts (some kinds of fiction – Eco used James Bond as an example – or a simple 'how to be a long-distance runner' guidebook, ...) presumably intend themselves to be consumed and packaged up relatively quickly? How open and attentive do I have to be to benefit from *Doctor Who and the Planet of the Daleks*? More seriously, deeply repugnant texts propounding morally bleak or hate-filled views presumably require fairly rapid critical vigilance, rather than profound self-emptying in abandonment to wherever the text leads?

It is slightly surprising that Bouldous Walker does not divert to these sorts of considerations, offering only 'there are times when other forms of reading are called for' on her penultimate page. Earlier discussions of problematic texts (in Sartre, for example) are unclear with respect to what sort of virtue is being exercised by a reader who judges them unworthy. Presumably the reason for this lack is that her exemplar texts, works of probing philosophical reflection, do largely attempt to lead the reader towards a wisdom that would be widely recognised as life-affirming in some sense or other? (As a not irrelevant aside, and in case readers of this review are wondering, I read some parts of this book very slowly, and others at some speed –

and this was based on various judgments about how far the book's agenda and interests intersected with where I found my own wisdom-interests to be. Of course this involves a contestable value-judgment, but the oddity is that the book does not really address the question of how to develop such inevitable judgments, or what criteria there are for assessing them.)

The pay-off, however, follows quite quickly for Christian readers interested in reflecting on their reading as a kind of spiritual discipline, whether as readers of scripture or any major work of the spiritual (theological) life. If the texts in view for such a Christian practice also qualify as inherently worthy of our time and attention, then the kinds of 'slow reading' advocated by Bouldous Walker will justify themselves time and again. Here I arrive at the heart of a real appreciation for this book: she gives us categories and approaches for reflecting on how we too might practice slow reading; reading that is loving, attentive, open, discursive, 'essayistic', intimate, and above all that seeks wisdom. Conscious that I offer a reading against the grain of the book at hand, I therefore recommend this work to all those interested in the project of theological and spiritual reading for the purposes of transformation. Because of its slightly tangential relationship to theological concerns, I would not recommend this book above those of Jacobs or Griffiths. But as an additional resource for furthering and deepening our reading, this is a deeply rewarding read.

There is more work to be done on the nature of our reading in the theological/ministerial 'institution'. That work will be well served by grasping Bouldous Walker's insights into 'slow reading'.

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