

Renaissance exegesis

Michel Jeanneret

Debates on hermeneutics play a prominent role in Renaissance intellectual life. How should one read in order to grasp the full meaning and value of a text? What issues should the commentary address? Whether applied to the Bible or to ancient poetry, these questions arise constantly.¹ Two very different methods are at work. One considers that old texts are still relevant and alive; interpretation, in this case, stresses examples worth imitating or hidden meanings that will affect readers' morals or beliefs. The other is more historically minded and attempts to understand a work according to its cultural context, as a witness to a lost civilization. Let us consider these two methods – allegorical and philological – in turn.

Among the Fathers of the Church there arises a principle that will command biblical exegesis throughout the Middle Ages: the Scriptures have several simultaneous meanings. Each episode or statement is normally endowed with four stratified senses: the literal or historical meaning, its connection with the teaching of Christ, its moral value and finally its spiritual or eschatological dimension.² The designations of these four steps can vary and their order can change, but two rules remain firm: (a) the hidden senses are superior to the obvious story; (b) this grid imposes a compulsory method on the commentary.

In the Middle Ages this 'quadruple interpretation', with its mechanical procedures, was applied early on to pagan literature and, more particularly, to ancient myths. The most spectacular illustration is the systematic unfolding of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* according to the fourfold method. In its different versions, Latin or French (from the early fourteenth century till around 1530), the *Ovide moralisé* aims thus at making ancient mythology appear compatible with Christian truth: Phaëton

¹ See Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani and Michel Plaisance (ed.), *Les commentaires et la naissance de la critique littéraire. France/Italie (XIV^e–XVI^e siècles)* (Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1990); Lee Patterson and Stephen G. Nichols (ed.), *Commentary as cultural artifact, The south Atlantic quarterly* 91, 4 (1992); Jean Céard, 'Les transformations du genre du commentaire', in *L'automne de la Renaissance*, ed. Jean Lafond and André Stegmann (Paris: Vrin, 1981), pp. 101–15.

² See Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64).

represents Lucifer and his revolt against God; Diana is a figure of the Trinity, and so on.³

Allegorical reading was particularly active in Italy, where (there being no gap between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance) it continued well into the sixteenth century. In his *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (1350–74) Boccaccio credits myths with something like three different meanings, relating to history, natural phenomena and ethics. Two centuries later, mythographers like Lilio Giraldi, Natale Conti, and Vincenzo Cartari still follow the same method.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the idea that ancient texts conceal hidden revelations was given new vigour in the Neoplatonist circle of the Medicean Academy.⁴ Philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola were fascinated by mystery; in nature as well as in ancient poetry, in pagan fables as in the Bible, there lies much more than meets the eye. The more enigmatic a sign is, the deeper and richer it is likely to be. The belief that profane garments veil metaphysical truths was founded on the assumption that primitive poets – Orpheus, Homer, Pythagoras – were divinely inspired and, like prophets, had access to supernatural knowledge. In that early age, when Gods shared their secrets with men, poetry, natural philosophy, and theology were one and the same. Homeric tales and Olympian stories may seem frivolous, occult traditions and hermetic symbols may appear incompatible with Christianity, but they are to be read as figurative and coded messages.

The doctrine of parallel revelation, common among Renaissance Neoplatonists, was to strengthen this conception of reading as unveiling. The divine truths that God shared with his prophets and apostles, available to us in the Bible, were thought to have also been indirectly conveyed to a few magi in the pagan world. Similarities between Plato and Moses, Socrates and Christ, Orpheus and David were considered proofs of the profound unity of the two traditions. Either because the Sages were not aware of the true content of their message or because they meant to conceal it from profanation by the crowd, their discourse is misleading. But it is the scholars' task to extract the sacred from the profane, the edifying from the morally dubious. In their commentaries on Homer, Virgil, or the Orphic hymns, Florentine exegetes like Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, and Angelo Poliziano bring to light a wealth of moral advice and metaphysical

³ See Jean Seznec, *The survival of the pagan gods: the mythological tradition and its place in Renaissance humanism and art* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961); Ann Moss, *Poetry and fable: studies in mythological narrative in sixteenth-century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁴ See Edgar Wind, *Pagan mysteries in the Renaissance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967); D. P. Walker, *The ancient theology: studies in Christian Platonism from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century* (London: Duckworth, 1972); Frances A. Yates, *The occult philosophy in the Elizabethan age* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

revelations. Trojan epics, Aesopic fables, Greek tragedies may seem to be untrustworthy channels to convey the True and the Good, but fiction might turn out to be more suggestive than abstract and analytical statements. And has not the Bible, with its prophecies and parables, used exactly the same means? Ultimate mysteries cannot but be transmitted indirectly, ‘through a glass, darkly’ (1 Corinthians 13: 12).

Furthermore, the parallel proved to be a powerful way to lend ancient poetry a badly needed respectability. Plato had banished the poet, as a liar, from his Republic and the Church held pagan tales as false and immoral. Interpreted as allegories, they appeared to be loaded with useful knowledge, edifying examples, or religious revelations. To moralize and Christianize seemed the best way to defend the past and adapt it to the new culture.

The targets and methods of philology could not be more different.⁵ Here, the first objective is to reconstruct the genuine version of an antique text, either biblical or classical. Through the critical study of the manuscript tradition – identifying the oldest source, eradicating the interpolations and the copying errors – scholars aim at no more and no less than just editing the correct original text.

Nonetheless in many cases philologists add their own contribution: either a running commentary or, more and more, merely marginal notes or footnotes. Interventions by editors like Poliziano, Joseph Scaliger, and Henri Estienne are selective and technical. To explain, for them, is to make sure the literal sense and the author’s intention are understood; whereas allegorists favour polysemy, philologists work at dispelling ambiguities in order to secure one single and clear meaning. To achieve this, they analyse the words and grammar, thus harking back to the model of antique commentaries. They elucidate allusions to the historical background – scientific or religious ideas, geographical or political references, and so on. Notes also carry information on the likely sources of a given passage (the Greek paradigm behind the Latin text) as a clue to its meaning. Finally, attention is often drawn to stylistic, rhetorical, or prosodic peculiarities; literary qualities are also adduced as examples for students to follow.

A basic principle underlies this philological research: a given work or statement is best understood as the product of a specific milieu and time – hence the vital role of chronology and the urgency of tracking down anachronisms. As Lorenzo Valla showed, proper reading – along with all types of historical investigation – depends on a rigorous analysis of the linguistic and semantic means available at the time, since words and structures provide the precise framework within which knowledge and

⁵ See Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: a study in the history of classical scholarship*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983–93).

signification take place. To read according to the new demands of philology is to look for the specificity of a text and of its cultural environment. The condition for understanding is not so much to assimilate as to put the object at a distance and admit to its difference. For the first time, a sense of alterity and loss – an acknowledgement that the past was gone and that cultures were transient – was shifting the process of reading into the field of historical enquiry.

Were then allegory and philology incompatible? Not necessarily. Historical rigour did not need to deprive the work of all relevance or productivity for present readers. Though it might be distant, a text was not dead and might well continue to provide valid models, moral or aesthetic. Thus critical analysis and personal involvement were frequently encountered in close proximity until the end of the sixteenth century.⁶ In the same way, we, as readers, often combine historical and timeless criteria.

In another sense, however, the two methods are contradictory and tend to diverge. What current value an old text may have is left more and more implicit, for modern readers to discover by themselves. Scholarly editions serve this purpose: rather than impose a foregone interpretation, they furnish readers with the tools for building up their own commentary. The notes allow them first to grasp the historical meaning and then, on a more tentative basis, to gain access to its latent values. Encyclopaedic and anonymous erudition distrust allegory in order to open another, more personal route to a work's hidden substance.

The dismantling of allegory is taken one step further by the hermeneutics performed among 'Evangelical' theologians – the predecessors of the Reformers. Let us look briefly at Erasmus's and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples's method applied to biblical exegesis.⁷

Quadruple interpretation is endorsed in so far as it acknowledges the Scriptures' polysemy, but it is also rejected as too mechanical; divine Truth is so plentiful, so beyond human reason, that it resists systematization. Similarly, philology is considered both good and insufficient: good, because God's Word is the very pillar of religious experience and has to be restored in all its purity and integrity; insufficient, because science and its external tools cannot but be subordinated to the power of faith. It is more important to believe than to understand, and to establish direct contact with the Truth than to rely on mediators. Whatever intervenes between God and the faithful, either the erudition of scholars or ready-made and formalized grids, is bound to alter the radiance of divine revelation.

⁶ See Anthony Grafton, 'Renaissance readers and ancient texts: comments on some commentaries', *Renaissance quarterly* 38, 4 (1985), 615–49.

⁷ See Guy Bédouelle, *Lefèvre d'Étaples et l'intelligence des Écritures* (Geneva: Droz, 1976); de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, vol. IV; Terence Cave, *The cornucopian text: problems of writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

The meaning of the Bible can be neither exhausted nor totalized, and requires a constant quest for the spiritual riches that lie beneath the surface. Paul's saying, 'the letter kills but the Spirit gives life' (II Corinthians 3: 6), is central to Erasmian exegesis. The Ancient Alliance and Judaic rituals as such are dead wood; they will only reveal their depth if read as prophecies of Christ's message of love. The New Testament may be more readily accessible, but it too contains an endless and permanently adaptable wealth of lessons and promises. It might be more fruitful, Erasmus says, to read pagan fables allegorically than to read the Scriptures literally.

Reading is a state of mind. It requires humility and a complete availability to the Spirit's guidance. The aim is to achieve, as it were, spiritual symbiosis with the Sacred Word, to understand and absorb it more through intuition, faith, and love than through intelligence and knowledge. For the Christian to be infused and transformed by the reading process, he will meditate the Scriptures and intimately unfold their secrets. In the same way as Christ interiorized and regenerated Hebraic Law, the faithful instil a new life and relevance in the Bible, that in turn revives them. Here, interpretation, meditation, and prayer are one and the same.

About 1530–50, French intellectuals participate in this Evangelical mood. As readers or as writers, either religious or profane, they readily adopt the principle of deep-searching but unsystematic interpretation. Rabelais's position is typical. His invitation to the reader to look for the 'substantific marrow' of his narrative (Prologue to *Gargantua*, c. 1534) is not a joke: there is undoubtedly a treasure of religious, ethical, and political thought and certainly a profound wisdom to be drawn from his books. But no certainty is ever given to the interpreter. The mixture of serious and burlesque, the demystification of the authorial persona, the ambiguities of his signals, all these ruses, which continue to preoccupy present-day commentators, are as many challenges to the reader: there is much to be deciphered between the lines, but how and what? It is as though Rabelais were appropriating the freedom and endlessness of biblical exegesis.

Yet Rabelais's stance as regards meaning is equivocal. Is the truth difficult to grasp because it is complex and demands effort, or because it is out of reach and, perhaps, even absent? One wonders if the Evangelical model has not been appropriated by scepticism, and if interpretation, in human matters at least, does not lead to doubt and epistemological resignation. This uncertainty is revealed in the recurrent patterns of his narratives. Episodes, particularly in the *Third* and *Fourth books*, are divided into two phases: first an event or a discourse with enigmatic signs, then a pause in which the characters discuss and try to explain what they have just seen or heard. But these hermeneutical debates regularly erupt into disagreements: opinions clash as if there were as many solutions as interpreters. Methods seem incompatible, individual peculiarities disperse the

unity of the message, the quest for an ideological community succumbs to the opacity of signs. Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (published posthumously 1558/59) uses a similar alternating structure – a series of short stories, each followed by the hearers' commentaries – to illustrate the same difficulties. Whereas the unitary *logos* of the Scripture, however mysterious, leads to ever deeper convictions, secular interpretation no longer controls the circulation and dissemination of meaning. All this points to a crisis, or at least a problematization of hermeneutics. Narratives like Rabelais's or Marguerite's treat interpretation as one of their themes; they set up characters who are in the position of readers and are faced with the challenge of trying to understand. Meaning appears to drift in suspension, dependent on the addressees' initiative.

There is a further indication of the crisis: fiction, here, is established as an appropriate medium to reflect on hermeneutics. To explore the theoretical problems posed by interpretation, Rabelais and Marguerite adopt a narrative and playful mode, with its paradoxes and imaginary scenarios.⁸ In one sense, this may be seen as a means to escape the issue by placing it in the reader's lap or as another aspect of the antischolastic campaign against the excesses of method. In another sense, however, the writer appears to construct fictional models in order to lift the question from the realm of rational categories; the heuristic power of narrative is called upon to imagine new interpretative procedures and investigate other approaches to truth.

The proximity or even assimilation of fiction and commentary is a natural consequence of literary imitation – a practice that dominates all writing activities at the time. To imitate a work of the past is to rewrite it by actualizing its latent resources and exploiting its present values; the imitator both submits to an old model and adapts it to a new culture, making it accessible and relevant. It is therefore to be expected that imitation include a measure of commentary and that commentary be instilled in the text of the previous work, to such a degree that the primary discourse and its explication become indistinguishable. For Erasmus, the best exegesis of the Bible is by way of paraphrase, that is understanding through rewriting, amplifying, and re-creating.

Among the different possible procedures of transformation and re-activation through interpretation, translation plays an unexpected but significant role. (*Interpretatio*, in Latin, means both interpretation and translation.) For obvious reasons, humanists were keen on translating, but many were hostile to a word-for-word rendering.⁹ Theoreticians often

⁸ See Michel Jeanneret, 'Commentary on fiction, fiction as commentary', *The south Atlantic quarterly* 91, 4 (1992), 909–28.

⁹ See Glyn P. Norton, *The ideology and language of translation in Renaissance France and their humanist antecedents* (Geneva: Droz, 1984).

claimed that to reproduce mechanically a text without seizing its deep meaning is to betray it. To avoid this, one has first to assimilate it and to extract its essence from the inside. Like imitation, translation has to rethink the text and necessarily comprises a degree of interpretation in order to make it understood. On examination, it appears that many translators actually weave explanations into the fabric of the foreign text: a brief commentary, or a more expansive interpolation, can clarify an allusion or make a difficult passage intelligible. Between commentary and translation – two pillars of the humanist syllabus – the boundary is often blurred.

Interpretation, in such situations, is hardly distinguishable from the object interpreted. Michel de Montaigne provides us with another example. His *Essais* originate in reading notes, in remarks scribbled in the margins of the classics, in comparisons between diverse authors. In keeping with a habit familiar among the literate, Montaigne annotates, discusses, and glosses the books of his library. Henceforth, the emergence of his own individual voice is only a question of degree. An increased amount of reflection and a refusal to submit himself to any authority shape what could have been a mere commentary into an independent work. But the structure of commentary remains omnipresent in the *Essais* and serves to propel the writing forward.¹⁰ Whether Montaigne explains a quotation or recontextualizes it in order to appropriate it, whether he approves of it or rejects it, his discourse unfolds parallel to another's discourse. He may also suspend this exchange and gloss himself instead of other authors: the *Essais* repeatedly turn back on to themselves, in order to explain, criticize, or complete what has just been said. Either transitive or reflexive, commentary is at the core of Montaigne's book – a condition that does not prevent it from also being one of the most personal works of the Renaissance.

Commentary, then, takes on diverse forms and statuses. On the one hand, it reinforces its distinctness. Relegated to the margins, the end of a passage, or the bottom of a page, it is unambiguously presented as a metadiscourse and puts the resources of philology to work for a text that it explicates without altering it. A radical distinction between primary and secondary is observed. While the gloss and criticism keep a low profile, the text commented on acquires prestige and progressively rises to the rank of classic: it enters into the canon of literary works. The separation of scholarship from 'creation' is a long process which, from the sixteenth century onward, will produce a favourable environment for the birth of the concept of 'literature'. We thus arrive at the complete dichotomy of the

¹⁰ See André Tournon, *Montaigne, la glose et l'essai* (Lyons: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1983).

nineteenth century with, on one side, the literary masterpiece venerated as an irrational, inimitable, unchanging, and almost sacred object and, on the other side, academic knowledge claiming the opposite properties of objectivity, rigour, and dependency.

But such a divorce in the sixteenth century is far from having been finalized. As we have seen, the borders between discourse and metadiscourse are often fluctuating or non-existent, so that traces of commentary appear in unexpected contexts and even in fiction. Interpretation will not be confined to an inferior role, but imposes itself as one of the avenues of creation. A work is always another work's commentary; there is no ontological difference between understanding the other and realizing the self. The Renaissance thus affirms what deconstruction has recently established through other means: the opposition of the 'original' and the 'derivative', of the primary substance and the supplement, is based on a metaphysics that separates forces which are, on the contrary, in constant interaction.