CHAPTER 6

Innovation Disguised as Tradition

Commentary and the Genesis of Art Forms

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1. TOWARD A DEFINITION: COMMENTARY AS A PROBLEM

For millennia, in a wide variety of different cultures, connected or not, commentary has been an unquestioned and indeed the most respected form of studying a text. We might think of such traditions as Neoplatonism, Confucianism, Mishna and the Talmud, Christian exegesis, Indian, Arabic, and other traditions of commentary. It is only in recent years, however, that commentary has become a problem in and of itself.

The European tradition of commentary has been reliant upon an unspoken consensus about what commentary is; this consensus has been passed down from teacher to student, based in a robust, albeit implicit understanding of how and why it is to be undertaken. It is only recently that this tradition has sought to transform these “unconscious” cultural skills into an object of reflection and public discussion.

This effort took on an institutionalized form in Western countries at the end of the twentieth century and in Russia at the beginning of the twenty-first, when about ten different conferences devoted to commentary were held, and a corresponding number of volumes of conference proceedings were published. Nevertheless, we are still a long way from achieving the objectives laid out by the organizers of those scholarly undertakings. These objectives were: to elaborate the concept of commentary as a cultural-historical phenomenon, based on the comparative study of its various traditions; to propose a taxonomy and
typology of commentary; and to write its history. At best, the existing taxonomies follow the classifications of the traditions to which the commentaries in question belong. Commentary is often classified thematically, according to its object. This may mean classifying it according to whether the subject matter is a religious text, Babylonian, ancient Hebrew, Greek, Christian, Buddhist, Taoist and Muslim, or a scientific, philosophical, or literary one. To this we may add commentaries that deal with paintings and sculptural works.

The dominant paradigm of classification has left much about commentary itself unexplored; lacking a unitary basis, it is undertaken on a purely practical level, and the theoretical aspects are neglected.

The broader the idea pursued by conference organizers, the less happy the picture they revealed. Even if one was to gather together all the specialists on all the traditions of commentary of different cultures, we would still fail to come up with a comparative history of commentary. The academic community is not ready to construct a history and typology of commentary. A comparative history of commentary, which remains a distant dream at the present moment, should juxtapose cultures and epochs, so as to distinguish, for example, between different cultures of commentary (or of commentary-oriented cultures), while at the same time construing commentary as encompassing all forms of intellectual activity—scientific, jurisprudential, philosophical, literary, and so forth. It should also identify periods when commentary predominates over other modes of mastering past culture, as well as periods when commentary moves to the background. This is necessary, in particular, in order to understand the period in which we live, when for the first time in thousands of years, after nearly a hundred generations of commentators have succeeded one another, publishers, professors, and high-ranking academics display a certain skepticism toward commentary as a form of scholarly work, and when commentators themselves discuss with alarm the status of their occupation and its loss of public prestige, debating the significance of book commentary in the age of the Internet.

Postmodernism has already had its say on the subject of commentary, by turning to its predecessors who professed epigonism (i.e., the consciousness of being latecomers) and indeterminacy. The most engaged practitioners of commentary immediately put forward the idea of involving the commentator in a contemporary context, of including parallels with contemporary literature in commentaries on ancient authors, and of examining the commentary’s literary qualities and the
right to subjectivity and open-endedness. The need to maintain the epigonism of any creative act is thus balanced by the demand for the artistic creativity and personal character of commentary. At the same time commentary allows and even demands the juxtaposition of multiple points of view. “Fill up your margins!” is Gumbrecht’s slogan, 7 while Don Fowler’s is: “The task of commentary is the multiplication of problems rather than their solution.” 8 A commentary with a range of perspectives creates the impression of an exercise in interpretation that is oriented toward exceeding the great commentators of the past in terms of the number of hypotheses, interpretations and emendations, rather than being focused on offering the reader a guide to understanding the text. The right to multiple, discrete hypotheses that are not correlated with one another is a promised land of ambiguity, indecision, and eternal inconclusiveness.

Arguably, by adopting this conception of the commentary, even those philologists who do not necessarily see eye to eye with postmodernism seek to defend the idea of disinterested inquiry, within which the right to indecisive and hypothetical assertions is preserved, as opposed to the clear, singular meaning of student commentary. And along with this they seek to defend an entire value system, which lies under threat. Society traditionally recognizes the “objective” commentary of the schoolroom, while scholars defend the right to creative commentary generating something new. I will focus on this contradiction, which deserves a detailed study, in the second part of this chapter.

I think that “commentariography” will occupy as central a place in the future curriculums in philological courses of study as historiography occupies in historical course of study. As of now, however, detailed, professional work occupies itself not with commentary but with commentaries. Such studies exist side by side with popular, superficial surveys of entire traditions, and the one has little to offer the other. In the past ten or fifteen years the necessity of such a discipline has been recognized, but as of today not even a widely recognized definition of commentary exists and therefore there is a widespread tendency to bestow the word “commentary” on all kinds of secondary phenomena, such as interpretation, allusion, paraphrase, borrowing, illustration, drawing, plans, maps, tables and diagrams, and scholarly research in general, as long as it is occupied with clarification and elucidation. Ballet, opera, or any other musical work with a literary basis, painting, dance, and any other artifact that orients itself in relation to a preexisting work have all been interpreted as commentary. 9
Russian Structuralism of the 1960s and 1970s did not neglect the problem of commentary. This certainly holds true for Y. M. Lotman and M. L. Gasparov, two pillars of Russian philology in the second half of the twentieth century. The former was a structuralist *ex professo*, and the latter was, himself, undoubtedly no stranger to Structuralism. There is a kind of riddle, of course, in the fact that theorists, whom one would expect to be interested in general laws and structures, choose to occupy themselves with such a practical endeavor as commentary. The answer to this riddle, it seems to me, can be found in the realm of sociology of science. In the ideologically controlled Soviet Union, commentary—by virtue of its subsidiary, pedagogical character and the lack of prestige associated with it—seemed to be a space where free thought could thrive, under the radar of the ideological authorities. In other words, commentary could provide an alternative way of interpreting a text to that of a monograph or an introduction to an edition, which were more susceptible to ideological control.

Lotman and Gasparov wrote extensive and innovative commentaries, respectively, to *Eugene Onegin* and to Mandelstam’s poems. They also addressed the question of commentary more generally, treating it as a type of text, with Gasparov polemicizing with Lotman. I shall venture to disagree with both of my late senior colleagues, but my objections, I believe, are rooted in the same paradigm as theirs. Indeed, I am interested in two aspects of commentary: the internal structure of the text (which was also a concern for Lotman and Gasparov), and its cultural function. Moreover, I am interested in both these aspects of commentary not in relation to particular, historically specific works or a particular historical period, but with reference to general principles and patterns.

In the introduction to his commentary to *Eugene Onegin*, Lotman draws a distinction between conceptual and textual elucidations of a text. Conceptual elucidations are “interpretations: literary-historical, stylistic, philosophical,” and they are provided in articles and monographs. Textual elucidations are those that relate “to the objects and phenomena of material . . . moral . . . and social life” as well as their artistic function in the text; these appear in line-by-line commentaries. I join Gasparov in disagreeing with Lotman, but in what follows I will also disagree with Gasparov.

In Gasparov’s view, Lotman’s preamble to *Eugene Onegin* was also a commentary, although not of the line-by-line sort and, of course, “conceptual.” “There is no gap separating conceptual and textual elucidations of a text,” Gasparov writes, “but they do occupy opposite
ends of a continuum, and the phases in this continuum correspond to different scales of commentary. Commentary can be multi-scaled: it can address its object on the level of the word, the excerpt, the work as a whole, the author’s oeuvre, or an entire literary epoch.”

I think this is inaccurate. One could delineate commentary into even more classes according to scale, but commentaries on any scale can nevertheless be either reference-oriented or “interpretive.” For example, one may cite the meaning of a rare or foreign word from a dictionary, or one may write an entire essay—absolutely original and “conceptual”—about its semantics and role in a given text: so I believe that scale and conceptuality are essentially not connected.

On the other hand, I do not consider articles and monographs that address a single work or an entire body of literature to be commentaries just because they elucidate something. What Gasparov calls “conceptual” or “summarizing” commentaries are also not commentary in my view, but rather prolegomena, a special type of text that differs from both commentary and problem-driven articles.

This does not forestall the possibility of a commentary (rather than introductory prolegomena) that would address whole corpora, such as, for example, the entire oeuvre of an author, or even “all Elizabethan drama or all Russian Romantic narrative poetry.” Gasparov confesses to have never seen the latter, because they “issue in” monographs and thus “liberate themselves from the obligation to be exhaustively concrete.” I do not agree with this position. Commentary on a corpus represents a particular kind of reference text, with its own, purely formal, usually alphabetical, organizing principle. Various types of indices and concordances to one or to many texts (for example, to all the books of the Bible or to all of Pushkin’s poetry) have long existed and are not under-developed monographs, just as they are not excerpts from an encyclopedia based on a name index. Elucidation in them is oriented not toward a single context, but toward all contexts of the given name/real-world entity within a given corpus.

I think that the general, unifying content of all aspects of commentary is heteroglossia. The commentator speaks in the language of his or her own real or imagined audience. Even if the commentator addresses himself, he then functions as his own audience. A text subject to commentary is alien, foreign, strange, either in the most direct meaning of the word or figuratively, which is to say that it differs from the language of the commentator because it is ancient, complex, imagistic, or metrical, or because it uses nonverbal signs. I am thus prepared to expand the
object of commentary so as to include the text in the semiotic sense: it is possible to provide commentary for a soccer game, any kind of work of art, any kind of cultural act, artifacts, and even natural phenomena, when and if they are presented as if (als ob) cultural. The commentary itself, on the other hand, is necessarily a verbal text, either written or oral. Structurally, commentary is subordinate to and follows what is being commented on, and all the deviations from this principle are highly significant as a disruption of the norm and a testing of the boundaries of the “genre,” which can, of course, be changed.16 Thus I disagree with Gasparov’s view that a “history of literature” is a commentary on this literature. The life of literature as a phenomenon is not an artifact; it can be studied and interpreted, but one cannot provide commentary for it.

Here I propose a new definition for commentary: commentary is a coherent (but plotless) verbal text that elucidates another verbal or non-verbal text in a heteroglossic fashion17 (i.e., the elucidation occurs in a different language, in the broad semiotic sense of the term) and is lemmatized directly or indirectly (i.e., with or without the inclusion of elucidated elements). I provide commentary on this definition of commentary in the postscript.

2. COMMENTARY AS A MECHANISM FOR INNOVATION

I am going to present a tentative theory that encompasses various subjects and fields already well known and thoroughly explored within their separate specific historical and cultural contexts. My topic is commentary in general, rather than any individual commentary or any historical or cultural tradition. I place my conclusion in the beginning: in traditional culture, commentary on an authoritative and sometimes poorly understood text can turn out to be a mechanism that is not conservative but innovative. This is also the case with oral and improvised commentary. It generates new cultural forms, new verbal genres or even new art forms, in spite of the form’s secondary nature and the author’s sincere wish to stay loyal to tradition.

After my own cultural-genetic conception of the problem of commentary had already formed, I came across an approach that is to some extent similar to the one presented here in the work of Sinologist John Henderson.18 Heeding Hans-Georg Gadamer’s call to construct a critical history of hermeneutics, Henderson compared the formation of authorial canons under the influence of commentators and studied how
cultures of commentary reach their acme. Devoting one chapter of his book to the unconscious aims and assumptions of commentators and another to their deliberate strategies, he concludes with a description of the death and transfiguration of commentary as a worldview. According to Henderson, Christian biblical commentary, Homeric commentary beginning in antiquity, and to a lesser degree commentary on the Confucian canon, gradually led to a general intellectual shift in the Early Modern era, which radically changed these traditions of commentary. But the ancient traditions (as well as those now extant) associated with the Quran and the Vedānta changed over time without ever evolving beyond their limits. Henderson connects the unique fate of commentary in Hinduism and Islam with the fact that scribes in India and the Middle East rejected printed books up until the nineteenth century.

The canon is created by commentary, and canonical texts are studied more deeply by each succeeding generation. Under this system, whereas canonical books from one canon, let alone from different ones, may lack resemblance to one another, commentaries on books even from different canons tend to display ever greater similarities, particularly as they move further in time from the commented text and accumulate more and more "layers."

All traditions of commentary eventually collide with the very canonicity that is their starting point. The essence of a canon lies in the fact that the books placed in it are presented as comprehensive, interconnected, sequential, containing nothing that is superfluous and all that is essential. In any event, questions concerning their coherence and wholeness, the presence of a deep meaning, authenticity or lack thereof, are suppressed or are put aside. Over time, given the great number of commentaries, a sense of competition arises, and in many cases commentary begins to undermine canonicity. Through intellectual revolutions in commentary, through the undermining of the canon, a general view of canonical texts emerges which can allow for mistakes, opacity, and contradictions (such as in biblical criticism, for example).

I will venture to take a bird's-eye view of commentary and offer my hypothesis concerning one of its functions. This function tends to be ignored by commentators and is touched upon only occasionally, and in part, in works about commentary. There is an intrinsic innovative function of commentary, which goes against the genre's status as secondary, mechanical, less individual, less authoritative, and less creative in comparison to the text being commented on.
In traditional culture, with its goal of reproduction, commentary can emerge as a mechanism for innovation, precisely because it appears and is received as a text that serves as a traditional or sacred text, object, or action. As mentioned earlier, and as research on commentary in performance shows, oral commentaries are as important in this regard as written ones. The sayings of wise men are preserved in the oral tradition so that they eventually enter the Talmud; an oral conversation with a sage becomes the basis for several genres in Buddhism and Hinduism; Plutarch of Athens, Syrianus, and Ammonius all welcomed the publication of their lectures by their students, which consisted of discussions of Plato’s dialogues, and they sometimes added to the resulting text.  

Proceeding from this general line of reasoning, let us examine how this mechanism for innovation operates in various spheres of culture— theater, literature, and philosophy.

Commentary and Theater

Alexander Veselovsky offers a twofold definition of the genesis of drama. On the one hand, it resulted from a meeting of Greek ritual choruses with the semantic and imagistic program intrinsic to the cult of Dionysus. On the other hand, Veselovsky connects the emergence of this form of verbal art with a conflict within the personality. Appealing to the contemporary discourse of individual psychology, which sounds somewhat archaic to the modern taste (precisely because this discourse is modernizing), he, in fact, anticipates Victor Turner’s and Clifford Geertz’s ideas on the social functions of ritual and drama and their difference:

This conflict can become manifest in external forms that objectify psychic powers and beliefs in living mythological personages or in divinities that determine a fate hostile to the person’s self-determination. This conflict can also, however, be represented as taking place inside the person, at a time when the belief in external ruling powers slackens or is transformed. That is the essence of Greek drama from Aeschylus to Euripides.  

In what follows, I would like to point to those conditions of the emergence of theater and literary drama that are revealed through cross-cultural comparison: they reveal the necessary conditions of an
encounter between the low and the high, the codified and the improvisational, between elements that pertain to different phases or levels of civilization. Such divergence in an element’s potential arises due to differentiation within a society or as a result of cultural contacts, conquests, or migrations. These conditions are:

1. The institution of public recitation of narratives that have a general importance for the given tradition;

2. A tradition of cult performance that, in addition to a cult function, has assumed the function of an entertaining spectacle.

For the emergence of drama in ancient India and Greece and of the medieval miracles and morality plays, such conditions were: (1) the custom of solemn recitation of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana; the institution of the rhapsodes who performed the Iliad and the Odyssey; Christian liturgy and holiday mysteries; (2) the performance tradition of the Malabar Coast and the Dravidian South; cult performances in the ancient Peloponnese and Sicily; the tradition of popular ludi (histriones, acrobats, puppeteers, jesters) of medieval Europe. To use M. L. Andreev’s formula, “the encounter of the scenario with the text” must take place, or—taking this idea further—the encounter of the verbal with the nonverbal or (so to speak) with the “less-verbal” must be enacted.

Such an encounter happens when a performer tells or sings a story while gesturing to a series of images, vertical or horizontal, on scrolls, or banners, or pictures made of all possible materials and known by many names around the world. There is evidence dating back to as early as the sixth century, concerning traveling storytellers in India who told stories about gods (Saubhikas) or about the afterlife (Yamapapaka). In Tibet this was called ma-ni-pa; in Japan etoki (or emaki), the hanging scrolls, were divided into separate panels, foreshadowing the popular Japanese comics (manga). The practice of storytelling based on pictures exists to this day under different names, in popular culture in India, Pakistan, Iran (par, pat pata, parda, parda-dari—all these terms denote “[pictures] on a cloth”), as well as in Malaysia.

The folk genre of picture storytelling is widespread in Europe, and in Sicily, living tradition of cantastorie persists. Victor Mair has collected samples of the Oriental and Occidental performances of picture storytelling, placing at the center of his excellent study the idea of the Indian genesis of all these forms. In my view, influences and autoch-
thonous developments converge in this domain of popular culture, forming an amalgam that in exceptional cases permits us to assert that a borrowing from one center to another took place. Mair does not take into account the fact that such performances are also attested in antiquity, which does not fit his schema of diffusion from India. In particular, the “stationary automata” (στατὰ αὐτόματα) described by Heron of Alexandria are very similar to wayang beber, although they are rarely mentioned in ancient texts since they belong to “vulgar” culture. The engineer Heron of Alexandria attests: on a low column stands a pinax (lit. a board) with small doors that open by themselves. Behind the doors painted figures are visible which are positioned in such a way as to illustrate a well-known mythical episode. Doors close and reopen, displaying figures in new configurations and continuing the mythical narrative. In this way, pictures serve to “bring to an end the underlying myth.” Parts of the painted figures are mobile; they can use hammers and axes, each time producing noise as if they were “real.” Other “movements” can occur “on a pinax”: a fire is lighted, figures appear and disappear. In sum, all kinds of tricks can be performed without anyone approaching the figures (Autom. 1, 3). Heron gives two examples of performances: one is “ancient” and simple, the kind that was common in the deep past. The doors of the pinax open and a painted “face,” i.e., “mask” (πρόσωπον), appears, which has mobile eyes that it often opens and closes. This is the prologue. Then several pictures are shown in sequence, illustrating a myth episode by episode. “In our times,” Heron continues, “refined (ἀντείον ὁμ. lit. urban) plots are enacted on the pinax, which use most diverse and dissimilar kinds of movement” (Autom. 22.1–2). As an example, he describes a performance based on the story of Nauplius from the Trojan cycle, with sound accompaniment and lighting effects; at its basis, however, is a moving reel and doors that close and reopen (Autom. 22, 3–6).

Heron’s account of performances consisting of stationary and moving pictures is not the only indication that ancient civilization knew the “theater of representations.” There exist testimonies concerning a peculiar aretology of savior divinities: those who survived shipwrecks, attacks by wild animals, or other dangers thanks to what they interpret as the goodwill or aid of a god, tell the story while showing its representation on a picture. Such storytelling may be due to a votive promise, or it may be linked to the collection of alms. Beggars who have survived a shipwreck (or a pirate attack) and carry around a picture that represents their misfortune are common in Roman poetic satire.
Seneca has difficulty concentrating because of shouts coming from the street, particularly from those who, having settled in a crowded place next to a fountain, would shout instead of singing and play the flute while using a board (picture). Just like on the streets of European cities, when a picture was shown, it would be accompanied by a barrel organ, a violin, or singing. In his book, Victor Mair has gathered an extensive collection of illustrations of such performances dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.

Verbal commentary on image sequences, whether Chinese “transformation stories” (bianwen or pien), Javanese wayang beber, or the presentations of the Savoyards or Russian performers of raek, or commentary on scenes from an epic, puppet shows, dances or pantomimed scenes, entrances and presentations of mystery masks—all of these forms of proto-theater can, under the circumstances described earlier, give rise to either an actual theatrical form, shadow or puppet show, or else to various forms of comic books or Chinese genres of texts with pictures, such as tiba.

In the course of the millennia-long history of Chinese culture, there emerged, alongside popular stories based on pictures, numerous refined genres of inscriptions on images. Those inscriptions could be in verse or prose, panegyrical or meditative; they could have been quotations from the Classics or improvisations by a particular author (outi). Each of those diverse genres had its own name. Of particular interest is the genre that combines a frame in prose with a middle section in verse, thus reproducing on the level of form the heteroglossic paradigm of the commentator and the actor-singer. This genre is the so-called inscription-theme (tihua huati). In its basic form, it is a variety of inscription called the “introduction” (yinshou), an opening inscription that uses large characters and is placed on the first strip of the horizontal roll, the strip that introduces the picture. An expanded “inscription-theme,” however, can include verses (tishi, tishihua) as its core section, and prose (tiji, ji, tihuaji) in its “preface” (xui), “closure” (ba), and “signature” (tihuan u tijikuan kuanshi). Moreover, the preface and the closure take up the most space and, most important, have the greatest significance in the imagistic structure of the inscription and of the work as a whole.

I enumerated such an extensive repertoire of cultural forms, both folkloric and proto-theatrical, from various cultures and various time periods, in order to point out a common trait among them: the presence of a commentator. In my view, performances accompanied by ver-
bal commentary lie at the origin of theatrical art, that which I would like to call the universal archaic stage of theater. I am not suggesting that this is the only way in which theater can develop. Nevertheless, there are many indications that ritual amoebaian song does not by itself transform itself into theater, nor does theater necessarily arise from ritual song. Choral songs do not contain with them a principle of development and can remain unchanged for millennia. Similarly, folkloric genres of laughter, such as invectives, chastushkas, wrangles, may serve as the basis of theatrical performances (comedy), or become incorporated in them as interludes (the Japanese kyougen) or additions (satyr plays), but they are not “bound” to evolve. Modern anthropological and sociological theories have altered our notion of theater and linked its emergence to the rise of complex societies or with historical moments of collision, conflict, encounter or otherness, and the need for mediation or reconciliation through the manifestation and elucidation of this difference or conflict. At an early stage in the development of theater we often observe the opposition of a “less-verbal” principle, such as a dance, a song, a picture, a material object, and a “more-verbal” one; we have the poetic, the mysterious, the ancient on the one side, and speech, reasoning, the prosaic, the accessible, the modern, on the other. The latter serves as a commentary on the former.

Indeed, the majority of oriental theatrical systems that involve a live, human actor, are characterized by the preservation of the leading figure of the explicator, reciter, and presenter and the full or partial “dumbness” of the actor. This presenter is often the head of a troupe: a host, author, director, accompanist, teacher, or a narrator. He may even be called the head actor, but he also serves the function of addressing the audience, introducing the actors, and providing a didactic interpretation, sometimes a religious-didactic one, of all that happens in the show. He is an interpreter; that is, his past is that of the priest and his future is that of the critic or reviewer, if we imagine the critic as a participant in the spectacle. Veselovsky has already remarked that the more deeply we delve into the history of theater, the more prominent the role of the leader, the bearer of the text, turns out to be.31

The spectacle and the verbal commentary are distributed among different performers. Written drama as we know it is a later phenomenon. For many theatrical systems in India, it is characteristic to stage epic texts that cannot be mechanically divided into statements made by characters. The lead in such a case is essential—he is the functional descendant of the epic bard or rhapsode. The simplest and most archaic
method of verbal accompaniment to a spectacle involves the lead hav-
ing the only speaking role. Sometimes he even recites a fragment from
an adapted epic, which the actors illustrate through dance and gestures.
In kolam theater, practiced in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the entire verbal por-
tion of the spectacle belonged to the lead, but in contemporary pro-
ductions the lead retains the role of explicator: he introduces the actors
and says the opening prayers. If the Homeric poems were to be acted
out according to the roles, then the commentator would be left with
relatively few words. For this reason, Homeric epic contains within it
the potential of performance, of role acting; this is what prompted the
rage of Plato, who, in The Republic, equated the performance of epic
with dramatic (mimetic) performance.

When working on a comparative study of exotic and ancient the-
ater, I was quite surprised to discover that no one has noticed the ubi-
quity of heteroglossia. In endeavoring to learn about all specific instances
of it, I had no starting point other than the works of theatrical histori-
ans, ethnographic descriptions, travel narratives, and reference books
about the theater of the Orient. Specialists write of the phenomenon
that I call heteroglossia in relation to the material they study, but
though these facts have long been explored in isolation, scholars
have not examined them in relation to one another. Researchers limit
themselves to making local generalizations for the theatrical system of
one region or another, without venturing beyond the material that lies
within their own professional jurisdiction.

In the theatrical systems of the Philippines and Malaysia the archaic
poetic languages of monologues, sometimes consisting only of partially
intelligible epic texts that have already lost their connection with the
subject matter of the spectacle, are combined with the everyday, col-
doquial dialects of the dialogues. Sources from the fourteenth and fif-
teenth centuries that describe Javanese performances of wayang beber
tell us that the performer speaks “in his own foreign language.”32 In
many cases the distinction between singing and narrating, melos and
iambos, is superimposed onto the distinction of “languages”—high, an-
cient, poetic, “foreign” and everyday, colloquial, local. The juxtaposi-
tion of fixed with improvised text is also common. Declamation
accompanied by music can alternate with short, colloquial passages, a
kind of “compìring” or commentary in the intervals between scenes
that explains the scenes themselves and the portions of text that are
difficult to comprehend. Of course, the explanatory function of a text
that is spoken in everyday language can fade, resulting in comical, of-
ten farcical interludes in common language, such as the Japanese kyo-
gen that occur between the acts of a play in Noh theater.\textsuperscript{33}

The gradation of language and style are dichotomous only in the
simplest cases. The seventeenth chapter of the Nātyaśāstra theoretically
discusses which dialect is most appropriate for which character. San-
skrit is reserved for a smaller group of character types, predominately
those of high status: gods, kings, hermits, scholars, military leaders,
Buddhist monks, court poets, and so forth. Women are expected to
speak Prakrit; their attempts to speak Sanskrit invoke ridicule, unless
the lady in question has proven herself highly learned or a severe asc-
cetic. A courtesan, however, can use Sanskrit if she is the main charac-
ter and a learned woman. And transitions from Prakrit to Sanskrit
also occur, but they must be especially well motivated. In The Little
Clay Cart (Mrchakatika), theoretical principles are embodied by the
play’s numerous characters, through their use of seven different local
dialects that characterize them similarly to how makeup and costumes
do.\textsuperscript{34} In Javanese Wayang Purwa theater, the dialogues also contain
seven degrees of “civility,” from the language of the gods to the lan-
guage of servants. In Bali, the dhalang accompanies all the noble char-
acters’ speeches, which occur in an archaic literary language, while
clowns paraphrase their statements in Balinese. From this perspective,
the well-known linguistic differentiation of Greek drama, with its chro-
rus in ancient, obscure poetic koine and the recitative in the colloquial
Attic dialect, appears in a wholly new light.

I think that Greek drama presents us with a more ancient stage in
the development of heteroglossia, a stage before linguistic diversity had
become a stylistic device, when the initial dichotomy between song and
the commentator’s narrative still existed. After all, the archaic dialect
and melos relate to the Attic dialect and recitative iambic verses and
prose to prose.\textsuperscript{35} Although it is often assumed that the chorus is commenting
on actions on stage, it is in fact reacting emotionally, using a language
that is imagistic, unwieldy, and alien to conceptual thought.

With respect to the heteroglossia of commentary, there is no funda-
mental difference between the initial stages of Greek tragedy and
Russian puppet theater (Petrushka), where the intentionally incom-
prehensible speech of the main character (a spirit, a corpse with a pipe)
is, in one way or another, repeated and explained by a normal voice.
Having developed some familiarity with the theatrical systems we lump
under the name of “Oriental,” we can now look differently at what is
referred to as “Classical.”
The word *hypokritēs*, which in Attica designated an actor, signified either a “respondent,” in which case, in accord with the *Lexicon* of Pol-lux, the actor got his name because he “responded” to the chorus (Poll. IV, 123), or an “interpreter,” as Plato asserts (Plat. *Tim.* 72b).\(^{36}\) Leaving aside the unclear meaning of the word, *hypokritēs* may be likened to the lead in oriental theater, the explicator to the choral ode. Indeed, in theater with only one actor it is left to the *hypokritēs* to fulfill the role that would be played by the herald in dramas with two or three actors. The debate over whether the first and only actor in tragedy was the “interpreter” or the “respondent,” who led the dialogue with the chorus, spanned approximately one hundred years, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the 1960s.\(^{37}\) Like all protracted debates, this one left behind proponents of both arguments, although they no longer dispute one another. It seems to me that the debate can be decided on the basis of a typological consideration: the presence of the lead-interpreter in oriental theater. Thespis was called the *hypokritēs*, whose role, like that of the lead in oriental theater, consisted of providing commentary in the local Attic dialect on the chorus’s hymnic and epic song and narration. This is evidently true for drama antedating Aeschylus that involved only one actor who speaks in iambics, and a singing chorus. As soon as the second actor was introduced, the function of explicator, reciter, and presenter was no longer the exclusive privilege of the actor. From that moment on, messenger, coryphæus, and even chorus began commenting, and the oppositions *melos* vs. *iambos*: archaic (and enigmatic) vs. everyday, clear and colloquial ceased to be isomorphic.

As we know, the protagonist could not only be “deprived” of the role of commentator, but even acquire a nonverbal role, as in Roman pantomime. At this juncture I will explore the extraordinary case of the Roman pantomime in more detail, because it is necessary to distinguish in it the archaic type of theater that arises from commentary on a spectacle from a different, quite peculiar phenomenon that was widespread throughout the expanses of the Roman Empire.

Livy describes the first Roman theatrical productions as dumb shows. They were produced in Rome in 364 B.C.E. by *histriones* invited from Etruria (7.2.4). The shows were mimetic dances accompanied by flute. Livy notes in particular that Roman youth later began to exchange comical remarks while imitating the Etrurian dances. Neglecting the evidence of oriental and world theater, students of ancient theater interpret this eloquent legend on the origins of Roman
theatrical productions quite naively, never straying very far from the Roman historian’s understanding of historical processes. Titus Livius himself commented on the origin of the distinction between the functions of “showing” and “speaking” as follows: Livius Andronicus (a manumitted Greek slave who has contributed much to the development of culture among the Romans), who used to perform his cantica himself, just like everyone else at that time, as Livy adds, was asked to sing one encore after another. He grew hoarse and requested permission for a young slave to sing with his flutist instead. Thanks to the presence of a surrogate singer, he moved even more animatedly and expressively than before, as he no longer needed to worry about his voice. From then on, the custom of “singing by hand” (inde ad manum cantari histrionibus coeptum) is said to have begun among the histriones (actors): some sing, others make movements that correspond with the text of the song, and the actors’ own voices are used only to carry out dialogues. Later writers repeated this legend, sometimes in a generalized form, such as Lucian, who wrote that in antiquity the same actors would both declaim and gesture, but gesticulating made breathing laborious and interfered with pronunciation and singing (De salt. 30). Therefore, actors who staged such movements were supposedly granted helpers who read or sang the text.

It stands to reason that these versions of the story are completely ahistorical, otherwise the formation of such a system in all the traditions of oriental theater would have to be ascribed to stories of someone’s hoarse voice. The differentiation between the functions of speaking and playing continued through to the last centuries of ancient Rome. But by then “singing by hand” was no longer the same archaic phenomenon: now the chorus performed the song, often a famous literary work while a soloist illustrated it through movements. In the nineteenth and for the most part of the twentieth century, historians of theater saw this as a sign of decline: if it takes two performers to depict one dramatic personage, the decomposition of the “verbal and plastic unity of the image” is disrupted. Even Adrian Piotrovsky, an expert in ancient Greek theater, where the norm was the chorus speaking in the first person singular, remained faithful to the idea of a decline in discussing the chorus that speaks for the pantomime dancer: “Such a distinction between audio and visual expressions, which was becoming one of the basic stylistic traits of theater of the empire, cannot be deduced from any principles of official theater of the previous epoch.” In my view, no insurmountable boundary exists between a situation in which many
speak from the persona of a collective “I” and a situation in which this “I” is immediately represented by a single person, as it happens in the Roman pantomime. The coryphaeus may serve precisely as a solitary replacement for the chorus. Piotrovsky, however, sees the roots of this phenomenon in the art of virtuosos “in the time when the unified, integrated perception of theatrical action was lost.”

Indeed, the appearance of “the Roman pantomime” in 22 B.C.E. is linked with the names of two famous dancers who traveled from Greece: the tragedian Pylades and the comic Bathyllos. However, pantomime was not invented by these actors who became famous in the period of the late republic. In Classical Greece Xenophon’s Symposium concluded with “Dionysus and Ariadne,” a production involving actors with no speaking roles. The lead (the “Syracusan”) provides a prologue, and the show itself is accompanied by female flutists. Xenophon mentions an ὀρχηστοδιδάσκαλος, “the teacher of dances,” and a producer; it is possible that actors pronounced separate lines and we can say with certainty that they used conventional poses and figures.

Pantomime with elements of text, known under the Greek name ὀρχησταὶ and the Roman name saltatio, was widely dispersed, beginning very early on. Discourse enters spectacle both directly, through the lead, and surreptitiously, cloaked as a conventional gesture, which is sometimes called χειρονομία, and resembles both the mudra (conventional gestures) of the contemporary Indian dance performances and the sign language of the deaf.

Note, however, that ancient commentary on a performance is here adapted to a literary context, reversing the original distribution of roles: if the ancient soloist-hypokrites commented on what was happening and what was being depicted, then in Roman pantomime and Greek Hellenistic ὀρχησταὶ the text is codified and well known, and a change of emphasis takes place: dance without text is still incomprehensible, but now, paradoxically, the movements follow the text, rather than the text explaining the spectacle. When the virtuoso Telestes once danced Aeschylus’s Seven Against Thebes (Athen. I 21 f), he evidently drew the interest of the audience away from the tragedy’s poetic and dramatic qualities—the work had already come to be regarded as a school classic—and monopolized attention with his own virtuosic mastery. The dancer, who, according to Lucian, should know every “story that Homer and Hesiod told as well as the best stories of other poets, in particular the tragedians” (De salt. 61), finds gestural and dance images that correspond with the contents of the choral song. To read body
movements as "commentary" would be a deviation from the definition given earlier, and I do not intend to flout my own definition. Transplanted to a different literary culture, the principle of archaic theater generates a new form—the art of orchestics, or "Roman pantomime," which is formally identical to archaic spectacle, but is, in fact, quite different. Sophistication is the main feature of the productions Lucian so enthusiastically describes. He identifies the repertoire of orchestics, that is, pantomime dance, as inclusive of the entire corpus of Greek myth and legend. Mimetic dance can depict anything, from the creation of the world from chaos and the origins of the first principles of the universe to events from the times of Cleopatra the Egyptian (De salt. 36–37).

The ability to translate significant poetic texts or philosophical teachings into the language of gestures is the essence of the pantomime-soloist's art. Lucian (De salt. 35) suggests that orchestics should give precedence to philosophy over all other sciences, as it is most in need of it. Athenaeus tells of a dancer-philosopher by the nickname of "Memphis," who "depicted" the philosophy of the Pythagoreans, "presenting everything in silence more clearly than others who posed as teachers of verbal art" (Athen. 1. 20c-e). It is possible that this is the same person as Agrippa, who was a slave of the emperor Lucius Verus, and in his dances could depict the reincarnation of the souls and even Pythagorean number theory (Jul. Capit. Vita Veri Imp. 8. 10). Plutarch tells us that even Plato's dialogues were performed by pantomimes (Qu. Conv. 7, 71c).

Tacitus writes with indignation about the collapse of the orator's art into the theatrical, because the orators boasted that mimes could "dance out and sing their works" (laudis et gloriae et ingenii loco plerique iactant cantari saltari commentarios suos: De orat. 26; cf. Cic. Brut. 61, 225). At the Dionysian festivals, dancers performed the "theology" and "epic" of Orpheus: one thing was performed by the Horai, another by the Nymphs, and a third represented in the person of the Bacchantes (Phil. V. Ap. 4.21). Nero intended to dance Turnus, not the legendary one, but the one that appears in Virgil (Suet. Nero 54). Often the libretto for a pantomime would be based on the story of Dido and Aeneas (Macr. Sat. 5.17.5; Luc. De salt. 46); in his Tristia, Ovid says that his poems were danced (5.7.25–26: carmina nostra saltari). Competition between verbal art and pantomime was not considered shameful or disgraceful. According to one legend, Cicero and the renowned actor Roscius competed to see which could convey the same
idea in the greatest number of ways: the actor made various gestures, and Cicero used various words, drawing on the inexhaustible resources of his eloquence (Macr. Sat. 3.14.12). Thus, out of the coexistence of archaic commentary on the visual with literature came ballet with a literary libretto, the language of gestures, and pantomime in the modern meaning of the word.

Having surveyed the archaic theatrical systems of the Occident and the Orient, and noted that at a particular stage of development, they are characterized by the figure of the explicator/reciter/lead, and even by the full or partial muteness of the actor, I came to the conclusion that commentary on an image is essentially a universal proto-theatrical form. But theater is not a universal phenomenon. The conditions under which it emerges are not easy to identify. One must speak of a level of social complexity that exceeds that of a tribe. We know that ritual serves to resolve the problems within a tribal society (Victor Turner), while theater resolves the contradictions between “little and great traditions” (Robert Redfield) in that it requires the presence of both the authoritative or even sacral text (presumably epic) and ritual games (often comic and admitting improvisation). If we briefly consider medieval European drama, we see how the recitation of Scripture together with popular, “histrionic,” culture produces mystery and miracle dramas with their mixture of Latin and the vernacular.

This is not to say that commentary on an image automatically gives rise to theater. An excursion through a museum need not result in spectacle, and a commentary on pictures can produce a new but nontheatrical genre. For example, Philostratus the Elder’s commentary for the students and before the students on the images of the entire gallery created the genre of the ekphrastic book, or collection, or anthology, which continued with various modifications until the final years of Byzantium (the Icons of Ioannes Eugenicus), and lives on in Hans Christian Andersen’s picture books, which in turn served as a model for twentieth-century authors.

Commentary and Narrative

Fictional narrative could also be considered the offspring of commentary. Fictional storytelling conscious of its own fictionality is a cultural phenomenon possible only within the framework of particular conventions. And one of the most important conventions in ancient and traditional cultures is the justification of fictionality: it is not that it is
absent, but rather that it is accorded a status different from the one it has in modern culture. Fiction should have a means of asserting its credibility. To show the difference between ancient fictionality and the fictionality that has long been established and familiar to us, it is enough to recall that Plato’s dialogues have the appearance of conversations among real historical figures. It goes without saying that no one in antiquity considered them to be stenographic transcripts of real conversations. But the contemporaries of Plato or Xenophon would sooner listen to speeches that were never actually delivered by historical characters than agree with the idea that these very characters never existed or had no “referred.” The conventions of modern culture are, in a sense, the opposite of this: distorting the expressions or actions of real people is condemned and may even be considered a crime. Utilizing actual facts, the modern author incants the disclaimer that all events and characters are fictional and any resemblance to real people or circumstances is coincidental.

In traditional culture, narrative and fictional narrative very often arise as byproducts of the exegesis of a sacred text. In the Indian tradition the utterance of a wise man results in the story of his life, which serves as an explanation of the origins of the utterance. Is it not surprising to find fictional histories about people from the Bible in the genres of the Aggadic midrashim? After all, this is sacred Scripture, in which it is forbidden to change even a single letter, yet it is permissible to compose—we might say “off the top of one’s head”—multitudes of detail and entire, elaborate stories. The Bible also contains novelistic stories, created according to the same model, to explicate a more ancient and authoritative text.

The canonical vs. apocryphal status of such books is a separate issue. In any event, the fictionality of a midrash or a parable does not enter into any kind of conflict with sacredness or “truth” and does not presuppose any kind of sanction. Daniel Boyarin discusses narrative midrash as commentary “in a world without logos,” comparing it with rational, “Greek” commentary that distinguishes the “body” of words from the spirit of meaning, as well as—for no apparent reason—with barter economics lacking in a common equivalent. The comparison with barter is a striking move, yet the time of the midrashim that Boyarin has in mind, the second to fifth centuries C.E., was the Roman period, and so it is odd to speak of the epoch of barter, even in the heads of the midrash authors. It is true, however, that parable makes a “hermeneutic leap” when
it "explains" one story or biblical verse with another story. For the extraneous observer, this resembles an exchange of goats for boots.

The apocryphal *Joseph and Aseneth* is constructed like the *midrash*. This Hellenistic work was created long before the appearance of the classical *midrash*, but it similarly expands the reference of a Jewish patriarch's marriage to the daughter of an Egyptian priest (Gen 41: 45, 50) into an extensive narrative, correlating this reference with the various needs of the current historical situation. Every step of the narrative corresponds to: (1) the biblical text of Genesis, (2) the "text" of lived reality, and (3) the text of Isaiah's prophecy on the worship of the Hebrew God in Egypt. This *apocryphos* conforms to the scheme of the Agadic *midrash*, in that a question is addressed to a biblical text, and a certain narrative serves as the answer to this question. Thus commentary gives rise to storytelling. In order to give an answer to the question regarding the circumstances under which it was permissible to marry a foreign pagan woman, different narratives were composed, depending on the views of the author.

One of the more famous of the Jewish *midrashim* casts Aseneth as the daughter of Dinah, raised by a Heliopolitan priest. Dinah is thus a granddaughter of Jacob, and Jewish by birth. The story tells of how an eagle brought the exposed child as an offering to the childless Heliopolitan priest. The *apocryphos* discussed earlier, written in Greek in the Diaspora, proposes an alternative solution: Aseneth is a pagan and an Egyptian, but having fallen in love with Joseph, she suddenly sees in him the Son of God and renounces her pagan beliefs. As a solution to the halachic problem, the first version affirms that one may only marry a Jewish woman, while the second proposes proselytism. The content of the *apocryphos*, however, is not limited to this idea. Those for whom the halachic problem is unimportant read it "simply" as an entertaining story. Having been written in Greek at the end of the second century B.C.E., when there appear to have been no written *midrashim* in circulation and the very idea of *midrash* had not yet been formulated, the *apocryphos* turns out to be a proto-novel, the first romance written in Greek. On Greek soil, stories of lovers who overcome obstacles to marriage lose any connection with the solution to problems of interpreting sacred books, and their own plot structure begins to live an independent life as artistic prose.46 One may thus assert that commentary can also give rise to fictional prose narrative, the core of what we call *belles-lettres*, literary prose storytelling.
Commentary and Philosophical Prose

The very word "philosophy" implies an adherence to its predecessor, *sophia*—wisdom, encompassing the oral wisdom of the first lawmakers and poets. A "philosopher," as Pythagoras called himself, is not a wise man, but merely one who loves wisdom. So who is a wise man? Orpheus, Musaeus, Homer, the Seven Sages? The Greeks didn't have a religious canon; their common property was the divine wisdom contained in the Homeric poems about the legendary past and in poems ascribed to the religious teachers Orpheus and Musaeus. Although the traditional account begins the history of philosophy with the Milesians, the philosophical prose of Greece begins simultaneously in another part of the Greek world with Theagoras of Rhegium and his prose commentaries to Homer, which carried the authority of ancient tradition. The interpretation of authoritative texts gives rise not only to philosophy, but also to a series of scholarly traditions—grammatical, stylistic, rhetorical, and literary-critical.

Commentary's connection with the study of language, style, rhetorical devices, and literary criticism lies so close to the surface that it seems unnecessary to say much about it. It is important, however, to take into account the fact that neither philology nor rhetoric concerned themselves with commentary of this kind, that there was a time when neither had existed, and that they inherited their craft from the rhapsodes and philosophers. In fact, Plato's *Ion* demonstrates the rivalry between the philosopher or the sophist and the individual whose traditional responsibility was to elucidate the rhapsode's performance of ancient songs for the viewer-listener. Ion calls himself an "interpreter" (ἐρμηνεύς) and claims that he interprets Homer better than the philosophers and sophists. We know very little about how a rhapsode might have interpreted Homer, and we can only hypothesize that he did so in a way we may observe in other cultures: elucidations of ancient poetic works were performed in a colloquial dialect that the audience could easily understand. The oral interpretations of rhapsodes like Ion have not, of course, come down to us, but when in *Against Timarchus* Aeschines profusely cites Homer and interprets him (141–153), he systematically replaces the Homeric words of the citation with words of the Attic dialect, and this allows us to think that similar interpretation was part of the activity of rhapsodes. As for the first written commentaries on Homer, they were naturally dedicated to glosses, such as Democritus's work, known to us only through its title, *On Homer,* or
on the Correctness of Words and Glosses (Περὶ Ὄμηρου ἡ Ὄρθοεπείης καὶ γλωσσεῶν—DK A 33). According to Plato (Phaedr. 267c4–7 = 80A 26 DK), either the teachings of ὀρθοεπεία or a work with the same name belonged to Protagoras. In light of what has been said, from among the multiple interpretations of Protagoras’s ὀρθοεπεία, we consider as the most probable the one that assumes that his linguistic observations derive from analysis and interpretation of particular contexts, first and foremost Homeric. One could take the episode where Protagoras and Socrates analyze a fragment of Simonides (Plat. Protag. 339a7–347a5) as an example of “orthoepic” interpretation, and then ἐπος within ὀρθοεπεία should be tied not to “words” in general, but to poetry and, above all, epic poetry, which is in keeping with classical usage.

In the sixth century B.C.E., the aforementioned Theagenes of Rhegium, who was close to the Pythagoreans, discovered the allegorical method of interpreting Homer. Apparently, in the sixth century there also arose an Orphic-Pythagorean tradition of interpreting the epic pseudepigrapha of Orpheus and Musaeus. The so-called Derveni papyrus is a philosophical commentary on an Orphic theogony. Once epic texts become subject to commentary, the creation of a philosophical epic amounts to a kind of pretext for the appearance of commentary, and that implies a dispute within a circle of scholars, and thus a dialogue.

Of course, the Platonic dialogues are not commentary. They imitate discussions with Socrates, and that, it stands to reason, is a completely different genre, the novelty of which is immediately obvious. This originality both of content and of form was due to Plato’s genius, and could not be attributed to a previous genre model such as, for example, Sophron’s mimes. Plato’s work can be considered pure innovation anchored down only by the image of Socrates. By this I mean to say that commentary is not the only mechanism for innovation, and it is not my intention to place all inventions and novelties into this category. Here we can place new traditions that arise, unwittingly, in a society averse to novelty and dedicated to tradition. Plato, by contrast, spoke a word so new and original that no one was ready to repeat it. Instead, Plato himself became the canon which is subject to commentary.

For centuries philosophical commentaries on Plato and Aristotle were considered boring, secondary, and incapable of communicating anything other than quotations from lost texts. Richard Sorabji, editor of the 60-volume Ancient Commentators on Aristotle, compiled an anthology entitled The Philosophy of Commentators. Sorabji de-
composed and reassembled the commentators' texts in such a way that taken together they resembled a "systematic philosophy." Nothing of this kind had been suspected in their texts before. Commentators themselves may not have wanted to express something new. In a famous passage (Simpl. Cat. 7.23–32), Simplicius demands that one writes so as not to contradict the teacher, as if one were enrolled in his school. Furthermore he insists that the differences between Plato and Aristotle must not be emphasized but, on the contrary, they should be placed in harmony with one another by any means possible. It is difficult to notice anything except a desire to maintain reverence for the teacher and not to question authorities in this passage. But how is this harmony to be achieved, if the authorities we read clearly disagree with one another? Iamblichus sharply disagrees with Porphyry and Plotinus, Damascius with Proclus, Simplicius reprimands Philoponus. It becomes necessary to think up something new so that these controversies disappear, that is, to find the spirit behind the letter. The demand for "harmony," which may appear so limiting as to eliminate any kind of novelty, on the contrary, stimulates the philosophical imagination. Underscoring the independence of philosophical thought among the commentators, Sorabjì calls them the inventors of many of the ideas that were much later (in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries) attributed to philosophers of the medieval Latin West, such as the idea of the initial impetus that Thomas Kuhn proclaimed as the revolutionary invention of the fourteenth century and without which there would not have been a scientific revolution. Finally, I would like to point out a widely known fact that the Neoplatonists, who occupied themselves with commentary and harmonization within Platonism as well as between Platonism and Aristotelianism, created something new and unexpectedly congenial to the Christian theologians who were hostile to them.

Turning to India, we find the commentaries to Rig Veda verses that were the part of ritual sacrifice: the hymns were sung and acted. Brahmanic literature comments on both hymns and sacrifices in prose, detailing the proper performance of rituals. Next comes Upaniṣad prosaic literature that was attached to the domestic, rather than sacrificial, rituals of "teacher and disciple." This literature thus acquires a dramatic dialogic structure and concentrates not on explaining how to perform the ritual and sacrifice, but on the abstract meaning of the actions described. The process takes hundreds of years and has its own sociocultural reasons, which I cannot discuss here, but it is very similar to what happened in Jewish culture after the emperor Titus destroyed the
Temple. The rabbinic commentary on the Bible and on the prescriptions on how to sacrifice and perform temple service replaced both sacrifice and service. The Bible, the Rig Veda, and the Shatapatha Brahmana have little in common, but the history of commenting on them has many common features. To conclude: the origin of prose philosophical genres in Ancient India goes back to commentaries on the sacrificial practices. So the Upaniṣads directly continue the Brāhmaṇas.\(^\text{56}\)

As I have argued, in traditional culture, commentary, including oral and improvised commentary, on an authoritative and sometimes poorly understood inherited text can turn out to be a mechanism that is not conservative but rather innovative, even radical. It gives birth to new cultural forms, which are by no means merely auxiliary, such as new verbal genres or even art forms. Some argue for the beginning of the biographical novel in Dante’s *La vita nuova*, which is the author’s commentary on his own poetry! Commentary on a traditional genre creates a genre that is not traditional. Commentary on a traditional genre is a means of unconsciously circumventing tradition: constructed on the basis of respect for authority, it turns out to be a practice field for innovation.

**POST SCRIPTUM: COMMENTARY ON THE DEFINITION OF COMMENTARY**

Why is commentary a “coherent” text? Lemmatized commentary is usually understood as a series of unconnected *scholia* whose syntagmatic structure is subordinate to the text being commented and devoid of any autonomy. I think that there exist laws governing the structure of commentary as a whole, although they are not as “strong” as the laws governing the structure of a novella. For example, in a commentary on a sufficiently large work, the number of elements subject to commentary diminishes from the beginning to the end. If the text is fragmentary, or is not a unified whole, then the rule does not apply or does not apply to the same extent. For collections of poetry by one author, this tendency will be expressed more strongly than in an anthology containing numerous poets.

However, if the text of the commentary in question arises in the practice of oral, homiletic commentary among a circle of scholars with a definite level of knowledge, such as Augustine’s Exposition on the Psalms, then commentary reflects the students’ growing knowledge, becoming more detailed as the students progress.\(^\text{57}\)
The interconnectedness of commentary can be demonstrated by certain empirical manipulations. If it is necessary to publish part of a text on which a commentary has already been written, it turns out that it is not possible to simply extract the corresponding portion of commentary; the commentary must change.

Furthermore, the commentator can, albeit in discrete moves rather than sequentially, defend and/or counter his author or enter into a discussion with him or other commentators or interpreters. This vision of the whole is not at all counter to the principle of following the text sequentially and rather calls for a system of cross-references, which may reach dizzying proportions, especially in commentaries on sacred texts such as the Bible, or intellectually saturated texts displaying a high degree of coherence, such as philosophical texts. Commentary is sewn together by these references, and in the case of the Talmudic tradition, for example, it is also sewn together by polemics, because the interpretation of one biblical verse involves wise men of various epochs arguing with one another across the centuries. Such polyphony in commentary is historically a trait of commentary on texts that are regarded as inexhaustible in their depth of meaning. The fact that commentary on the first volume of the collected works of Bakhtin, published in Moscow,\textsuperscript{58} preserves all the polyglossia of several Russian and American authors, who interpret one and the same passage differently, shows us that Bakhtin’s works are approaching the status of sacred texts.

The old and widespread practice of copying information from dictionaries, encyclopedias, and earlier commentaries accounts for commentary’s reputation as a genre that lacks a coherence of its own. In such cases the authorial presence of the commentator is subdued or even muffled, and what would be plagiarism in other situation is not considered to be plagiarism, but the accumulation of the knowledge of many generations. Accordingly, “notes” are perceived as normative texts, free from mistakes, referential and not fully authorial: they explain things already well known to scholars for those who are unfamiliar with them—the years of the life of historical personae, geographic names, measurements of weight and monetary units,\textsuperscript{59} the names of mythological figures, and so on.

But the notes, too, have interconnectedness. It is easier to see this in hindsight, from the perspective of a hundred years or more. Then the “orientation” (\textit{Einstellung}) of the commentator becomes more clearly visible, and the commentator himself emerges distinctly against the background of the lemma he has drawn up both as a person of his own time and as an individual. Commentary completely changes its func-
tion; it begins to tell us more about the author of the commentary than the author subject to commentary.

Thus the humanists' numerous commentaries promulgate a general attitude toward authors of antiquity as, first and foremost, useful sources of data about the Latin language. The structure of lemma and the principle of following the author's verses are preserved, but the author himself doesn't fall into the field of vision, and what becomes important is the various and extensive lexicographical material, which achieves an encyclopedic scope. It is not Cicero who is important, but good Latin. Student commentaries in foreign language books, supplied with a small dictionary, are similar in their attitude toward the author: above all he is exemplary of the language he uses. On the whole, Renaissance commentary forgets the work for the sake of the copious amount of information which it is possible to extract from the text, and adds information from other sources in passing.

Between series of referential footnotes and commentaries that retain a holistic perspective and even have a defined research goal, there are also many gradations in the degree of interconnectedness. Schematically, one could place service to the reader at one pole and service to the author at the other. In the former case, commentary is a means of teaching; in the latter, it is a result of study. In the first case, explanations will be given for realia and glosses; in the second, the commentator tries to understand the author's intended meaning. The assumed ignorance, which the commentary serves to rectify, is in this case the commentator's own: it is a "pioneering" commentary in which there is no framework, no given audience, and only enigmas in the text and provocations to embark on a quest, which emanate from the text.60

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to call the interconnectedness or coherence of commentary a tendency, and sometimes even an index of its tendentiousness.61 For instance, in the moralizing, pastoral commentaries to the Holy Scripture, in which, obviously, there is no indifference to the text, its meaning is conceived of as clear; it is necessary simply to convey it to the reader. And in this aspect pastoral commentary does not differ from commentary in books for reading in a foreign language, but it differs from scholarly or theological commentary, which to some extent will speak of the enigmas or difficult passages.62

Even in the case of the most ordinary—formalistic and "boring"—commentary, the testimonia, the sources of quotations or parallels or references to scholarly literature, will communicate the orientation of the text (what does it quote?), of the commentator (whom does he
cite?), of both one and the other (which parallels are deemed relevant?). A cursory glance at notes and/or a bibliography allows us in mere seconds to define the character of the entire publication, the level of the editor, and the value of the commentary. Thus commentary, whether scholarly, popular (educational) or self-referential (scholarly apparatus), presents itself as a complete and coherent but plotless text.

NOTES

This authorized translation, originally by Ivan S. Eubanks, was revised by Boris Maslov and Kate Holland.


2. In the tradition of antiquity, scholia, hypomnemata, and hypotheses are delineated, and in Christianity—patristic and homiletic (i.e., present in a sermon) commentary, and so forth. Dionysius Thrax’s theory includes six elements, or phases: (1) ἀνάγνωσις—faithful comprehension and articulation of a text; (2) ἐξήγησις—elucidation of poetic figures; (3) explanation of words and historical facts (γλωσσῶν τε καὶ ἱστοριῶν πρόχειρος ἀπόδοσις); (4) “etymological explanation” (ἐγρήγορις); (5) explanation of grammatical rules (ἀναλογίας ἐκλογισμός); (6) evaluation or assessment of the literary work—κρίσις ποιημάτων. In the tradition of the Latin grammarians the elucidation of the text is broken down into lectio, emendatio, explicatio, judicium. Despite these rich distinctions, the majority of the ancient commentators have focused on the third element, and the sixth element is practically never found in extant papyrus hypomnemata.
3. Perhaps because of their narrower scope and the fact of their foundation in previous scholarship, collections of studies on Classical and Renaissance commentaries appear to have been more successful. The first conference on Humanist commentary was held in 1988: Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani et Michel Plaisance, eds., *Les commentaires et la naissance de la critique littéraire: France/Italie (XIVe—XVIe siècles): actes du Colloque international sur le commentaire, Paris, mai 1988* (Paris: Aux amateurs de livres, 1990). The authors of the volume published in 2005 (Marianne Pade, ed., *On Renaissance Commentaries*, Noctes Neolatinae 4 [Hildesheim: Olms, 2005]) take the next step: they understand commentary as reception, making the phenomenon itself and its cultural characteristics the subject of attention and focusing on questions such as what exactly Renaissance commentary is and how it differs from its medieval counterpart, and in which respects it continues, or departs from, the older tradition.


6. As a matter of fact, Andrew Laird provides us with an exemplary model of such an approach in the figure of Juan Louis de la Cerda, a Jesuit who lived in the early seventeenth century. In his commentary to the *Aeneid*, de la Cerda responded to contemporary events, permitted himself hints and allusions, and introduced Virgil’s heroes in the context of his own time (Andrew Laird, “Juan Louis de la Cerda and the Predicament of Commentary,” in *The Classical Commentary*, pp. 205–34).


9. The vagueness of the term “commentary” sometimes seems like a heuristically useful provocation. It is also possible, however, that this vagueness responds to a prolonged absence of reflection on this matter in the modern European tradition, which is in marked contrast to the Judaic tradition which delineated and named various forms of commentary, as did the medieval European tradition (*commentaria, commenta, enarrationes, expositiones, quaestiones, apparatus, postilla*, etc.). In antiquity, there were also more than a few words that correlated with the act of producing commentary, but these words (σχόλια, ὑπομνήματα, σύγγραμμα, ὑπόθεσις) did not represent well-defined terms.


13. Ibid., p. 70.

14. The genre of introduction, εἰσαγωγή, existed in late antiquity: commentary on and interpretation of philosophical or medical texts was anticipated by the author’s introduction to his work and its general subject matter. These prolegomena were constructed according to their task of introducing, that is, according to an “eisagogic scheme.” See Marian Plezia, *De commentariis isagogicis* (Krakow: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1949) and Jaap Mansfeld, *Prolegomena. Questions to Be Settled Before the Study of an Author, or a Text*, Philosophia Antiqua 61 (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

15. See, for example, Iakov Golosovker’s general annotated index to his anthology of classical lyric poetry in Russian translation: *Lirika Ellady* I-II (Moscow: Vodolei, 2004–2006) and *Lirika Rima* (Moscow: Vodolei, 2006). Within the framework of corpus linguistics, the Russian structuralist Sergei Isosifovich Gindin utilizes the concepts of “philological equipage” (osnashchenie) vs. “philological convoy” (soprovozhdenie) to distinguish commentary that directly addresses an entire corpus from commentary that only addresses a single context. Taken together with the corpus, they comprise “the system of philological support.” See a description of these categories in: S. I. Gindin et al., “Sistemy filologicheskogo obespecheniya kak osobaia raznovidnost’ obogashchennykh tekstovykh korpusov: priroda, zadachi, obschee stroenie,” *Moskovskii linguisticheskii zhurnal. Vestnik RGGU* 6 (2008): 171–78.

16. B. M. Eikhenbaum’s commentary on Lermontov’s lyric poetry can be placed in this category: *Lermontov: Opyt istoriko-literaturnoi otsenki* (Leningrad: Gosizdat RSFSR, 1924). Gasparov claims that this commentary had no followers although, obviously, he himself was such a follower. Moreover, whereas Eikhenbaum’s commentary turned into an article on all the poems discussed in the book, arranged in a certain logical sequence, Gasparov’s last commentary on Mandelstam’s poetry is constructed in such a way as to invert the relationship between text and commentary: one must first read the commentary while glancing at the text of the poems, and not the other way around. It is impossible to find the commentary to a particular locus but, in compensation, the reader is referred to various different poems. Thus, the secondariness or “parasitic nature” of commentary has disappeared and the vector of readerly movement, in defiance of tradition, is turned into the opposite direction. Meanwhile, should we wish to deprive
this commentary of its eccentricity, it shall suffice to present it in electronic form, transforming references to Mandelstam’s poems into hyperlinks.

17. The term heteroglossia is generally used as a translation of Bakhtin’s term raznorechie (prozaicheskoe raznorechie), by which he means the inner battle of the discourses of the author and character(s) within one utterance. My use of heteroglossia is different, because when Bakhtin introduces raznorechie in his book on Dostoevsky (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]) he is dealing with discourses rather than dialects.


19. For an initial formulation of this idea, see: N. V. Braginskaya, “Kommentarii kak mekhanizm innovatsii,” in Tekst i kommentarii, pp. 133–43.


21. Alexander Veselovsky, “From the Introduction to Historical Poetics,” see Chapter 1 in this volume, p. 52. Turner and Geertz argued that the main function of ritual in traditional societies is the symbolic confirmation of the existing social order (which is also the cosmic order) that is sanctioned by myth. The distinction between the sacred and the secular is in this regard only marginally relevant. Rituals of transition and rituals of solidarity represent the social structure to the members of society and endow social institutions with legitimacy by placing them in a general cosmic order. In societies that haven’t reached a certain level of complexity, with widely shared beliefs and an oral culture, ritual suffices to perform the function of social control. Continuing ritual, theater allows for interclass communication and questions the existing order of things, which it then confirms. See Victor Turner, Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974); From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982); The Anthropology of Performance (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986). In the state of Bali, which did not use violence, theater operated as a regulating mechanism in the purest form. The meaning of the existence of the state consisted in the production of magnificent mass ceremonials. The kings served as impresarios, the priests as stage directors, and populace as the supportive audience. The objective of these theatrical performances was not to buttress those in power; rather, they provided a pattern of behavior which in turn was constructed on the model of the supernatural world; see Clifford Geertz, Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 11–17 and passim.

23. By “more-verbal” and “less-verbal” I mean greater or lesser presence of a verbal component or its lesser role, as in song, opera, or cinema. These terms can also refer to a stronger or weaker level of articulation. For example, a song can contain few words and interjectional refrains, which are less strongly articulated (less verbal). Finally, what is “less-verbal” admits less of retelling: a painting on a historical subject is more narratable than a non-programmatic musical piece.


25. The map provided by Victor Mair (in which arrows indicate the spread of the Indic type of performance to Persia, and then through the Arabs to Egypt and Spain, as well as to Turkey, hence to Greece and central and western Europe, then to America, as well as the corresponding set of arrows pointing to central Asia, Indonesia, and China) proves the wide diffusion of the phenomenon, but not the paths of dispersal. Terms denoting these performances are unique to each culture, even in cases when the genre spread with the wandering Buddhist monks who used to carry with them several such didactic scrolls. The scheme of unidirectional diffusion is enriched by secondary influences; for example, Germany influenced not only Russia (*lubochnye kartinki* says the map), but also exerted a second-order influence on the Persians and the Arabs, and Indonesia similarly influenced Cambodia. In the same way, a Buddhist monk with his scrolls in his peregrinations may have come upon analogous autochthonous traditions.


29. *Tiba* (or *ti ba*, or *ti-ba*), lit. “title-epilogue” 题跋. This combination of characters was used to denote contiguous, yet different phenomena: a bibliographic description, the title of the book or the prologue, colophons, as well as—and this is what is most important for us—impressions gathered
from a picture, something akin to ekphrasis, or appreciative criticism, ideas or evaluations of a work of art added by the viewer at the end of a book or scrolls of calligraphy or painting. In China there existed collections of works in this genre by particular authors, for example, by Su Shi (Su Dongpo). In Japan, this genre was referred to as daibatsu 题跋 (a general term that refers to the title or preface, dai 題, daiji 題辞 and the postscript or colophon *okugaki 奥書, bastubun 資文, atogaki 後書, written on books *sashibon 冊子本 or scrolls *kansubon 巻子本 of calligraphy or painting). A similar kind of art was quite widespread, under the name of shigajiku “poem-painting scroll”; see E. S. Shteiner, “Stikhohzivopis’: vvedenie v formal’nyi analiz i opyt opisaniiia chanka sigadziku,” in Voprosy vostochnogo literaturovedeniia (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), pp. 252–78; Dzen’-zhizn’: Ikkiu i vokrug (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie, 2006), pp. 164–82. While a few examples exist from China from the seventh to the tenth century, the practice rose in importance in Japan during the tenth to the thirteenth centuries along with the development of scholar-painting (*bunjinga 文人画 or *nanga 南画), which imitated calligraphy and painting practice of Chinese scholars (wenrenhua). See also: E. V. Zavadskaja, Esteticheskie problemy zhivopisi starogo Kataia (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975), pp. 230–34; P. Miklosha, “Dvoinoe soobshchenie v odnoi kartine,” in Semiotika i khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), pp. 293–307.

30. I thank Ilya Smirnov for consultation on the Chinese genres of inscribed pictures.

31. Veselovsky also noted the phenomenon of commentary within the epic tradition: a singer “from the impoverished castes of India,” when singing at festivities for his own relatives, “at one time imitates the Brahman swâng, at another lengthily retells a legend in a language that is understandable to his audience, borrowing it from a professional singer or selecting one that is appropriate to the subject of festivity or of the local cult”; see “Three Chapters from Historical Poetics,” in Istoriccheskaia poetika, ed. V. Zhirmunskii (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura; reprint: Moscow: URSS, 2004), p. 326.


33. Prior to the sixteenth century kyoogens were not written down; farcical plots were standardized, whereas originally they allowed for improvisation.

35. Note, however, that Shi Jing (Shih Ching), The Chinese Book of Songs, is a verse commentary to the prose fortune-telling book, the "I Ching" (this example was suggested to me by A. I. Shmaina-Velikanova). The ancient fortune-telling book is so cryptic in its contents that the normal relationship of verse and prose is disrupted. There may also be other examples of this kind.

36. See, for example, Plat. Tim. 72a-b: "Wherefore also it is customary to set the tribe of prophets to pass judgment upon these inspired divinations; and they, indeed, themselves are named 'diviners' by certain who are wholly ignorant of the truth that they are not diviners but interpreters [hypokritai] of the mysterious voice and apparition, for whom the most fitting name would be 'prophets of things divined'." Translation by W. R. M. Lamb in Plato in Twelve Volumes, vol. 9 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925).


39. Piotrovskii and Gvozdev, Istoriia, p. 284. It is nevertheless necessary to give Adrian Piotrovsky credit for noticing the similarity of Roman pantomimes and Oriental theatrical systems, although he attributes it to professional differentiation of craftsmen-virtuosos.

40. In ancient sources we find mostly rather late references to the dancer's speaking hands: "fingers that are tongues" ('linguosi digitii') and "the hand of meanings" ('illa sensuum manus') that, without writing, performs

41. Cf. Luc. De salt. 62: “the mime characteristically uses movements to depict that which is sung”; and Athen. i.21 f.: “Telesis, or Telestés, the teacher of dancing (ὁ ὁρκηστοδιδάσκαλος), invented numerous gestures, skillfully depicting that which was read (i.e., declaimed).”

42. The Governor of Pontus requested that Nero bestow on him a pantomime, who could serve as an interpreter (Luc. De salt. 64).


44. Storytelling is not a natural human faculty, but a cultural phenomenon, which evolves in time and has a historical origin. The cultural (rather than natural) character of narrative is confirmed by the existence of a large, although not unlimited, thesaurus of plot formulae that were used in ancient times and, in the opinion of many scholars (including Alexander Veselovskiy and Umberto Eco), in modern literature as well.


47. Plut. Solon 3: “Some say that Solon even tried to set out the laws in verse, and that led to the beginning of his narrative poem: ‘First let us offer prayers to Zeus, son of Cronos, / That he may give these laws of ours success and fame.’” Translation by B. Perrin in Plutarch’s Lives (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914). Plutarch mentions a special collegium of (a)mnomones in the Spartan colony of Knidos, whose duty was to preserve in their memory the corpus of unwritten laws (Qu. Gr. 292b).


49. The early Eleatics and Pythagoreans, if they wrote anything down, did so in verse. See Yu. A. Shichalin, “Vozniknovienie evropeiskoi kommer-


51. Nikolai Grintser is one of those who regard Protagoras as an interpreter of the Homeric language; see “Platonovskaya etimologiya i sofisticheskaya teoriiu iazyka,” in Platonovskii sbornik, t. 2. (St. Petersburg: RGGU-RKhGA, 2013), pp. 64–66.


57. The rule is not without exceptions: philosophical commentary does not necessarily follow pedagogical or informational trajectories.


59. The explanation of monetary units often presents superb specimens of absurdist literature. In a Russian commentary on Josephus Flavius’ Jewish Antiquities, monetary units are translated into francs, francs into silver rubles and bank notes. Henkel’s original translation came out in 1900. One may suppose that he borrowed a statement on the buying power of the drachma and shekel from some older French sourcebook, where he found the francs as equivalent of shekels. By means unknown to us, Henkel then equated these francs with the silver rubles and Russian bank notes of his time, and the current publisher has without any trepidation reprinted these observations for the twenty-first century reader.

60. The quest, toward which the text provokes the commentator, can be quite unexpected. This sometimes baffles the reader of ancient scholia, but similarly confusing trajectories traverse modern commentaries. The
notorious commentarial imperatives "confer [cf.]" and "see" adhere to the principle of an associative series, often hidden behind suggestions that the readers "compare," in particular that they compare another locus (in a different book) and for reasons that are not clarified. In two hundred years from now, someone will rejoice upon having figured out the "comparative" intention of the twentieth-century commentator. In a similar way the incomprehensible associations of the ancient scholiasts turn out to be, at the very least, curious for us.

61. Richard Hunter traces how commentary to poetry is written depending on whether the commentator considers the work to be by Theocritus or an anonymous work attributed to Theocritus: Richard Hunter, "The Sense of an Author: Theocritus and [Theocritus]," in *The Classical Commentary*, pp. 89–108. The high quality of the work usually serves as the main argument for ascribing it to a famous poet, and low quality leads to its exclusion from the creations attributed to him and its classification as anonymous. Comparing commentaries on the same work, which are written from different positions, Hunter points out which unspoken assumptions drive the authors of commentary, their condescension or negligence in their treatment of anonymous texts and their thoroughness and acknowledgment of perfection when it comes to a poet with "a name."

62. Tendentiousness, or one-sidedness, can be wholly non-ideological. Thus, commentary in a book for studying a foreign language will be one-sided. The author of the text being commented did not plan to communicate to his readers just the meanings of the words or grammatical constructions that are new for the language students.
Persistent Forms

EXPLORATIONS IN
HISTORICAL POETICS

Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov
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