Commentary on fiction, fiction as commentary

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Concerning the general evolution of the commentary on fiction during the Renaissance, one essential point seems to be a given—and I adopt this as a point of departure: the gloss which, in the Middle Ages, served to extract the moral sense takes on a more technical and more philological aspect. Instead of imposing an allegorical interpretation, commentary privileges apprehension of the literal sense; it explains the text in its uniqueness and points out the rhetorical and encyclopedic resources of the text. As a result, the nature of commentary changes. It no longer restricts interpretation to one single method but rather seeks to equip readers to undertake their own commentary. Formerly subordinated to the verification of a meaning fixed in advance, reading now becomes more problematic and more productive.¹

This evolution may be illustrated, first, through an inquiry that will focus exclusively on commentary as practiced in editions and translations of Ovid's Metamorphoses. I have used not only annotations but also prefaces

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insofar as prefaces are concerned with methods of interpretation, enunciate a program for reading, or even undertake, at the very outset of the book, a commentary.²

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So this investigation begins with the tradition of the *Ovide moralisé* which, along with the *Bible des poètes*, persists in France until approximately 1530. Whether they are in prose or verse, in Latin or the vernacular, whether they bear the name of Bersuire or the name of the translator Colard Mansion, or even the name of Thomas Walleys, all of them have a prologue which, in spite of some variation, states the same principles. From the very outset, prologues seek to justify the exegetical program that directs the undertaking. Since these liminary pronouncements bespeak a certain conception of commentary and because they bear similarities to each other, I am treating them as a unit, in order to highlight four constants.³

The preamble begins by invoking the authority of the Bible and reminds the reader that the Bible used fables in order to transmit its message indirectly. Now, the poets of antiquity also concealed secrets in their literary fictions—this theory, which remains tacit, is the theory of parallel revelation. Thus the reader is immediately oriented: the *Metamorphoses* are presented as a series of allegories, of “figures obliques,” full of wisdom, whose substance it is important to bring to light.⁴ From this the second point is derived: the objective of commentary is to establish conformity between the pagan myth and the teaching of the Church. The commentary will therefore proceed by deduction; it will seek to recognize in the secular narrative familiar scholarly, moral, or religious facts. The goal is to force a strange, alien substance into the categories of what is already known.

Now the third stage emerges: the preface exposes the method that regulates the functioning of the commentary. From the parallel with the Bible, it naturally follows that the hermeneutical model of fourfold exegesis will be applied.⁵ The text of the *Metamorphoses* will be deciphered according to an ascending scale so that the reader will go from the so-called natural meaning of each narrative to its historical application, then to its moral value, and finally to its spiritual di-
mension. The designations of the four steps can vary, and their order can change from one preface to another, but two principles remain firm: (a) the hidden senses are superior to the obvious story and must therefore, at any cost, be made manifest; and (b) a grid with fixed entrances imposes a clearly indicated itinerary on the commentary.

A fourth constant consequently follows. The protocol of interpretation is so strict in the Ovide moralisé that interpretation is not perceived as a problem. The reader and reading are hardly mentioned. The prefaces are not oriented toward the future of the work—its reception, its transformation—but toward its past; they are not addressed to a second person whose initiative is solicited, but turn retrospectively toward the completed task, the encoding performed by Ovid and the decoding of the person supplying the moral of the fable. These two operations are now in the past; as a consequence, the destiny of the text is sealed; its productive phase is henceforth closed. The commentary has extracted the secrets of the original, and the totalizing method has left nothing remaining. If readers are not called upon, it is because they possess no room to maneuver in. Moreover, it is hard to conceive an interpretive activity in which a reader could participate because Ovid’s text, in the body of the book, is not quoted but merely summarized, fable after fable, and replaced by the commentary.

From the end of the fifteenth century on, the restrictive formula of allegorical commentaries confronts an entirely different, philologically inspired tradition that privileges establishing a correct text and comprehending the literal sense. The moral objective fades in importance relative to historical research and scholarly investigation. Two alternatives to allegorical commentaries are to be distinguished.

The first is the purest; it includes neither notes nor glosses of any kind: Ovid’s Latin fills the entire page. The second formula hearkens back to the genre of the scholarly commentary of antiquity and, through its grammatical or encyclopedic explanations, is addressed primarily to the audience constituted by schools. For the Metamorphoses, this type of edition is found throughout the entire sixteenth
century. Sometimes the notes alternate with a sequence of verses, sometimes they occupy the margins. Although their quantity and their content vary, certain topics arise more frequently. On the one hand, Ovid is used for the acquisition of general knowledge about the ancient world: historical and geographical clarifications, annotations of a given myth or a question in natural philosophy. On the other hand, the poem is emphasized as an example of good Latin or of elegant style; here the meaning of a word is explained, there a figure of rhetoric, an interesting grammatical construction or a felicitous transition is pointed out; parallels with other authors are established and obscure allusions elucidated. These editions follow a scientific objective and thus seek less to impose a foregone interpretation than to furnish the reader with the instruments for reading. And this reading, in turn, is oriented toward the future, because the commentary (particularly the remarks on style) leads the reader toward imitation and destines the material to the production of a new text.

The ways prefaces are handled confirm this tendency. Certain editions have no preface at all. Others have one, but it does not address the problem of signification. Marot, for example, adopts this solution in the prologue of his translation of the first book of the Metamorphoses: he draws attention to the literary qualities of the poem but does not touch on the question of meaning.

As if to compensate for the absence of or lacunae in the preface, the rest of the paratext plays an important role in the majority of scholarly editions. Besides a Vie d'Ovide, one often finds an index of the fables, as well as a glossary of words derived from Greek. In the body of the poem, the editor frequently intrudes through subdivisions and summaries. From the doctrinal preface to these technical instruments, a transformation has occurred: the accompanying texts serve less to condition a docile interpretation that brings out the hidden sense than to facilitate access to the literal sense. Thus equipped, the reader himself will be able to gain access to the latent values.

If humanists more or less adopted the rigors of scholarly editing, they did not thereby renounce the search for the moral sense. Certainly they were unanimous in rejecting, from around 1530 onward, the
mechanism of fourfold interpretation; they were wary of anachronisms and refused to mix the Christian and the pagan. But that does not mean that allegory was definitively abandoned; on the contrary, it persisted until the seventeenth century. Frequently mixed with philological editions and translations, the search for edifying values and the hypothesis of hidden meaning was still common in readers’ horizons of expectations.

Here is where prefaces will play their most interesting role. Since the method of the Ovide moralisé had been definitively discredited, the humanists avoid systematically superimposing extraneous values on the original text. This would be a betrayal both of the tasks imposed by history and the current productive potential of the work. Thus they renounce continuous commentary and avoid rendering explicit all the possibilities of interpretation, but they nevertheless suggest elaborations, indicate hidden resources in the poem, and invite the reader to seek a “higher” meaning. The moral exegesis of fables therefore exists as a project inscribed in the preface and left to the initiative of the addressee. Such is the procedure of, for example, Jean Martin at the beginning of his translation of the Songe de Poliphile:

Vous pouvez croire Messieurs que dessoubz ceste fiction il y a beaucoup de bonnes choses cachees, qu’il n’est licite reveler, et aussi n’auriez vous point de plaisir si l’on vous les specioit particulierement . . . parquoy ne vous en diray autre chose, ains remettray le tout a l’exercice de vos estudes.

(You may well believe, Gentlemen, that under this fiction there are many good things concealed which it is forbidden to reveal, and besides you would have no pleasure if they were specified for you in their particulars . . . for which reason I will say no more to you, but will rather leave everything to the practice of your studies.)

Several prefaces to the Metamorphoses function as a call to create one’s own commentary. The arguments and tactics used in Latin editions as well as in French translations are interesting. At the beginning of the century, for example, although he adopts the ascending scale of multilevel meanings and the allegorical method in his commentary of book I, the Italian Lavinius is careful, in his preface, to
leave to the reader a margin for interacting with the text. If he reminds the reader of the principle of *prisca theologia* and thus assigns to interpretation a finality defined a priori, nevertheless he leaves several questions open; Ovid is presented as the spokesman for a divinely inspired truth, but the precise lessons he gives and the methods by which one learns them remain to be discovered.

At the end of the fifteenth century, Raphael Regius published a scholarly and learned commentary whose notes touch on almost every chapter of the encyclopedia, from astrology to geography, from rhetoric to natural philosophy. Morality receives no privileged treatment, and Christian allegorization is definitively banished. There remains, however, a preface which, by its dynamic and heuristic quality, invites the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. Scholarly annotation, says the editor, does not terminate the inquiry; it brings to light a number of useful pieces of knowledge, but pedagogical finality does not prevent one from seeking, in the poem, other lessons.

This strategy becomes more definite as the commentaries, now more technical, touch less on interpretation. We find it at work again in a 1568 edition from Bâle that opens with a series of promises. Poetry in general, and Ovid in particular, the author of the preface explains, offer so many leads for research that no reading will exhaust them. The encyclopedic or rhetorical notes that mark this edition of the poem only serve to outfit readers so that they themselves may receive the messages inserted in the text and so that they may extract, for their own use, stylistic models: "Ubi habeant studiosi...in quo se exerceant." One tactic is significant. Like the majority of humanists, the editor attributes to myths a moral value, but, because he does not claim to elucidate it systematically, he settles, in the preface, for giving some examples of this mode of interpretation: "Sic Arachne docet non contemptendum cum potentior...Tantalus, non esse cumulandam opes per injuriam." *Docere* followed by a gerundive: the formula is repeated several times, as if to indicate to readers the route to pursue. They will be provided with several models, their appetite will be whetted, thence they are invited to apply the method themselves. As long as it is read, the work will continue to generate meaning; the commentary is never definitively achieved but is rather an activity in constant evolution.
Two French translations achieve a balance of the same sort between, on the one hand, respect for the letter represented through the restoration of the original text and, on the other hand, an invitation to interpretation in the prefaces. *Le Grand Olympe des histoires poétiques* is an anonymous prose version of the *Metamorphoses*, without notes or exegesis. The text is still allowed many liberties: it is a paraphrase based on the one in Bersuire’s *Ovide moralisé* from which the interpretations have simply been deleted. Each of the three volumes opens with a brief introduction of which the first two are of special interest to us. With a vehemence so much the greater since the vogue for extracting the moral of the fable is still recent, the editor underscores the fact that he is giving the text of the *Metamorphoses* “selon le naturel du livre sans allegories” (according to the nature of the book without allegories). For allegories, he refers the reader to the commentary of Fulgentius, “et par ainsi a chacun auteur sa louenge sera gardée” (and thus to each author shall be preserved his due praise). But if it is important to distinguish the original text from its later developments, the productive potential of the poem is not thereby arrested. Adopting as his own the topos of poetry as “philosophie latente” and as a treasure trove of “doctrine morale et humaine,” the editor presents interpretation as a task to be accomplished by future readers who receive the work: “Si l'entendement du liseur n'est du tout effacé par l'ignorance, il en tirera honnestes enseignemens et maniere de bien vivre” (If the understanding of the reader is not totally obscured by ignorance, he will extract upright teachings and a manner for conducting life well). In other words: it is insofar as the text is left free of allegorical commentary that it generates meaning. The best reading is the one which, each time, comes back to the point of departure and takes up the task anew.

In this perspective, the best-articulated theory is the theory of Barthelemy Aneau. In 1556, he published a French verse translation of the first three books of the *Metamorphoses*—the first two books having been translated by Clément Marot, the third by Aneau. At the head of the volume, he inserted a thirty-eight page text which, more than a simple preface, becomes a veritable treatise on the interpretation of the fables of antiquity and furnishes proof that reading is from this point on perceived as a problem requiring some explanation.
The act of reading, as Aneau explains, proceeds from will and intelligence. Now, these two faculties, because they partake, like the soul, of the infinite, cannot be satisfied by evidence alone. They spontaneously seek mystery, for there is always something more to will or to understand, there is always a surplus of meaning. Reading is an infinite process, a desire whose object is never attained; the spiritual dynamic that animates reading is a sign, in man, of the divine origin of the soul. To justify this theory, Aneau invokes an explanation ordinarily applied to biblical exegesis. The truth, he says, must remain secret in order to escape the “lourdz, et prophanes entendemans” (those of clumsy and profane understanding) and conversely, in order to stimulate the curiosity of “bons et divins espritz” (good and divine minds), for “les choses difficiles sont les plus belles” (difficult things are the most beautiful). From which it stems that the commentary that would claim to resolve all problems is condemned in advance. In Aneau’s editorial practice, the text of the translation is accompanied by a few very brief marginal notes either on language or figures, or to explain a particular scholarly reference.

This surplus of meaning continues Aneau, cannot be systematized. It can apply to revelations concerning nature, or history, or morality, “et quelquefois à deux, et quelquefois à toutes trois” (and sometimes to two of these and sometimes to all three). Lacking a method, one gives examples of interpretation at one level or another in the hope that, in encountering the text, readers will be able to actualize latent values through means of their own. And yet they can still prepare themselves by cultivating two essential qualities. The first is a habit of mind, a spiritual aptitude, for it is important that the reader be “embeu d’esprit semblable à celluy des Poètes c’est à savoir noble, bon, libre, et . . . tenant au Divin” (imbued with a spirit similar to that of the Poets, that is, noble, good, free, and . . . tending toward the Divine). The second quality is the acquisition of a vast body of knowledge by the study of disciplines and works of which Aneau establishes an index. Anything that would resemble a restrictive commentary imposed from the outside is thus repudiated and replaced by the reader’s own personal qualities: a great willingness, an ample body of learning, a rigorous ethos, an inspiration that corresponds to that of the author, in short, all of the personal resources that turn reading into a continually renewed creative activity.
During the sixteenth century, the reading of fables underwent an important evolution. When the *Ovide moralisé* credit fiction with several meanings, they do so by analogy with the model of biblical exegesis; allegorical interpretation thus disposes of little room in which to maneuver because its sole objective is to establish conformity of the secular narrative with a body of truths dictated by faith and known in advance. The prologue is directed in such a way as to ensure that this strict program be imposed on reading. On the other hand, the prefaces that subsequently argue for the prestigious lineage of the *Metamorphoses* and invite the reader to discover their hidden depths conceive multiplicity of meanings in an entirely different spirit. The proper use of the fable of antiquity does not necessarily operate through theology or through any system whose nature is to direct the flow of interpretation. Neither the means nor the ends of reading are certain. While the commentary is restricted to furnishing occasional explanations, the preface, for its part, acts to motivate and furnish the reader with examples of interpretation, but does not seek to provide specific instructions; the preface leaves the responsibility for the enterprise to the reader.

In the framework of the corpus analyzed here, the change in methods is situated around 1530, at the moment when *Le Grand Olympe* succeeds the *Bible des poètes*. This period is also the period of the first works of Rabelais, a fact that is perhaps not immaterial to the ongoing debate concerning the prologue of *Gargantua* and the functioning of meaning—"substantifique moelle" (substantial marrow) or empty words?—in the narratives themselves. The dismantling of the allegorical method by the burlesque, the obfuscation of instructions on how to read, the demystification of the authorial instance—all these ruses of Rabelais, which still bother many commentators today, appear to us from this perspective as a phenomenon of the period. In spite of what positivists may think, the refusal of reductive interpretive frameworks, the problematization of interpretation, the liberation of the reader are not anachronisms or even less innocent games. These are the logical and serious consequences of the dismantling of restrictive hermeneutical systems by the humanists.

In addition to Rabelais, other comic authors play a revelatory role
insofar as they exacerbate the tendencies I have delineated. The prologue of the *Nouvelles recreations* by Bonaventure des Periers, the preface, and the body of intercalated commentaries in the *Heptameron*, confirm Rabelais's strategy: they also confound overly simple hermeneutical models and amuse themselves by cheerfully misleading the reader who is in search of definitive truths. It will suffice to recall here one of their techniques, which says much about their refusal to heed those authorities who wield power abusively. Instead of adopting the metadiscursive posture of such authorities and using their liminary position to control interpretation, comic prologues already participate in the fiction that they introduce; they inscribe themselves in the same world of fantasy and play. Traditionally relegated to a function of control and to the establishment of distance, prologues are now seized by laughter and contaminated by the imaginary. But while the realm of commentary is invaded by fiction, fiction takes on an aspect of commentary.

II

The itinerary followed by commentaries on Ovid in the sixteenth century partakes of a profound mutation in the reading of fiction. If the men of the Middle Ages thought that all beliefs of necessity culminate in Christian revelation, and thus perfected an exegesis that reabsorbed pagan texts to the truths of faith, the scholars of the Renaissance labored to reestablish the uniqueness of cultures. In the name of historical relativism, they rejected the Christianization of antiquity's legacy; they condemned the rigidity of allegory and denounced the assimilationist practices of the search for the moral of the fable. But they did not thereby renounce the search for deeper meanings: we saw this with Aneau. Their novelty is that they no longer believe in the possibility of an exhaustive and conclusive interpretation. If they strove, in their scholarly editions, to refine the instruments of literal reading and to provide the reader, through notes, with solid technical assistance, they left the knowledge of the ethical or aesthetic contents of the text to the intuitions of the reader. The dismantlement of allegory thus liberated interpretation; it freed fiction from its subordination to revelation and would bring about, during the sixteenth century, an active, visible, and problematic reflection on reading.
Simply put, the activity of commentary from this point forth takes one of two paths. On the one hand, scholars specialize in philological research—establishment of the text, historical notes, etc. Metadiscourse herein reinforces its separateness; two texts superimposed on each other—the text of knowledge and the text of art—are clearly distinguished and arranged in a hierarchy. The methods of modern criticism make their appearance. On the other hand, writers will benefit from the crisis of interpretation by making it the theme or driving force of their fictions. They explore and exploit the difficulties and resources of the commentary on fiction in and through fiction. Here, metadiegesis tends to be confounded with diegesis. This telescoping of levels leads to a new avatar of commentary.

One structure reappears many times in Rabelais's narratives. It has two phases: first, an episode with an action, then a pause in which the characters speak with each other to discuss and explain the event. The *Tiers livre* is built around this alternating pattern: an authority is consulted concerning the question of marriage, then Panurge and his friends deliberate in order to try to understand the piece of advice given. In the *Quart livre*, each episode of the sea voyage opens with an adventure accompanied by strange signs and continues by the attempt of those aboard ship to interpret the phenomena. The facts to be commented on and the activity of commentary thus find themselves placed at the same level, the one and the other absorbed into the literary fiction.

The celebrated prologue to *Gargantua* also shifts imperceptibly from one plane to another. The prologue treats the question of interpretation: Is a deep meaning to be sought in the narrative or not? There is nothing surprising about this second-degree reflection at the outset of the story itself. Yet at this very juncture, Rabelais fails to respect the separateness of the levels: first metadiegesis, which takes precedence in the preamble, then diegesis, which would hold sway over the remaining portion of the book. To solve the theoretical problem posed by interpretation, he straightaway adopts the narrative mode; he expresses himself in the norm-defying language of figures, through paradox, metaphors, and in an imaginary scene. Certainly, one can see here a means of avoiding the problem by putting it in the
reader's lap. But this is not all: the writer constructs a theoretical fiction in order to open up the question by lifting it from the realm of rational categories. He suggests, in a playful vein, other reading methods, proposes a different logic from that of the philosophers, and thus infuses into commentary, by dislodging it from its normal role, a new energy.

At the same time, Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* employs the properties and ruses of literary language to meditate on the problems of commentary and explore potential solutions through different means. The structure is the same as the one in the *Tiers livre* and the *Quart livre*: the story is told, then commented on to such an extent that the distinction between the narrative and the metanarrative tends to become blurred. After having heard a narrative, the characters discuss it among themselves, but they disagree in their interpretations. Speculation turns in circles, the ideology that seeks to control the production of meaning is overrun by the proliferation of possible meanings. In order to proceed, someone will always propose a new story, which will confirm or redirect the preceding story and which will perhaps dissipate the uncertainty of the commentary. The idea is therefore to resolve a hermeneutical difficulty by adding one narrative to another, as if the best commentary on fiction was fiction. Conceptual analysis bows out and surrenders the field to another epistemological method based on the hypothetical truth of the fable. The canonical distinction between the degrees of discourse—the story and its explication, the primary datum and its conceptualization—appears less obvious than it had seemed.

To comprehend the scope of this experiment, it is important to situate it in the context of the anticlerical campaign led by the humanists against the excesses of theory and the abuses of systematic exegesis. Subordinated to the constraints of the search for a moral, limited by a strictly Christian typology, interpretation seems to have reached an impasse. To recuperate the spiritual dynamic of interpretation, the Renaissance will therefore attempt to construct new hermeneutical models—and at this juncture, with scenarios like those of Rabelais and Marguerite de Navarre, fiction takes up the baton. What concepts, discursive operations, and artificial preexisting methods cannot resolve will be explored through the mediations
and symbolic strategies of fiction. New interpretative procedures are imagined, debates that escape the discipline of rules are staged, in short, the heuristic power of narrative is called upon to open other means of access to truth.

But fiction, obviously, cannot produce certainties. Rather, it emphasizes the fluidity of meaning and the multiplicity of possible interpretations. In the Tiers livre and the Quat livre, hermeneutical debate erupts in disagreements. Methods seem incompatible, individual particularities disperse the unity of the message, the ideal of an ideological community succumbs to the opacity of signs. In the world of contingency, enigma inspires in exegetes only dubious conjectures, contradictory interpretations. Mystery, moreover, was perhaps no more than a mystification and signs, uncertain data. The two-phase movement of interpretation is clearly stated—a problem and its resolution—but this movement produces only doubt.

The Heptameron inscribes in its structure the same problem and the same general result. The seventy-two short stories are offered as examples each of which, as regards love, should contain a lesson valid for all addressees. But in the discussions that ensue, exegesis raises irreconcilable differences of opinion. The scheme according to which a moral can be supplied is clearly inscribed and no less clearly deconstructed. As with Rabelais, the hypothesis of a universal truth and the subordination of the fable to a demonstration of that truth go awry. It seems that there are as many partial truths as unique events and as many readings as readers. In the secular community in which the stories of the Heptameron are related, the unitary logos of theology no longer controls the circulation and the dissemination of meaning.

As a result, the narrative machinery pushes to the extreme the situation created by the crisis of allegory. Instead of stabilizing meaning, commentary opens the debate anew, inspires other hypotheses, invokes other proofs. Metadiscourse was expected to gloss and put an end to discussion, but instead it raises more problems than it solves and inspires a new exemplary story which, of course, will be no more convincing than the preceding story, and so on and so forth ad infinitum: commentary is commented on, incertitude generates incertitude. The mechanism of supplements found throughout the Heptamé-
ron thus permits us to illustrate, by a model borrowed from fiction, the aporia of commentary: ignotum ad ignotius. The same skeptical logic governs the famous interview with Trouillogan in chapter 36 of the Tiers livre: questions generate an admission of incertitude, doubt alternates with ignorance. Montaigne will soon denounce this circularity of interpretation: "Nous ne faisons que nous entreloucher. . . . Nos opinions s'entendent les unes sur les autres. La premiere sert de tige à la seconde, la seconde à la tierce. Nous eschellons ainsi de degré en degré" (We do nothing but gloss each other. Our opinions are grafted one onto the other. The first opinion serves as stock for the second, the second as stock for the third. We thus move forward step by step). 21

The construction of fictive scenarios fails by a long shot to resolve the difficulties of exegesis. There is, however, one step forward. Through the indecisive interpreters and the uncertain commentaries created by Rabelais and Marguerite de Navarre, readers discover the complexity of reading and thus, perhaps, are called upon to assume their own liberty. The novelistic portrayal of interpretation shows that the object to be explained always conceals surplus meaning and that it requires of its addressees an active engagement in which they bring knowledge to bear on the object and exercise imagination. Removed from the authority of philosophers, the search for truth becomes more stimulating and more fertile. This search presupposes a reader who knows how to take risks, and incites an exchange from which the thing interpreted and the interpreting mind both emerge transformed.

The humanists’ tendency to absorb commentary into fiction and to disrupt discursive levels ensues as a natural consequence of the practice of literary imitation. To imitate a work of the past by rewriting it is equivalent to actualizing the latent values therein. *Imitatio* appropriates the first text by exploiting its resources and amplifying it, illuminating the hidden truths it contains; *imitatio* infuses new meaning into the old and adapts it to a new culture and milieu. It is therefore to be expected that this operation of reactivation includes a measure of commentary and that commentary is woven into the fabric
of the previous work, to such a point that the primary discourse and its explication sometimes become indistinguishable. The logical mode of functioning of imitation is to take control of the "original" text by a virtually infinite series of supplements that deploy its resources, comment on it, and send it on its way again.

Among the different possible forms of transformation and appropriation, translation plays a special role. Whether through its theoretical principles or through the activity itself as performed by translators, translation maintains with commentary a significant relation.

Among the humanists, numerous voices are raised in condemning literal translation, whose shortcoming is to mechanically reproduce a text without seizing its deep meaning. "Nec verbo verbum curabis reddere fidus / interpres," Horace had said. An (incorrect) reading of this advice authorized the refusal of word-for-word translation in the name of a recuperation of the spirit of the text, beyond the narrowness or the misleading appearances of the letter. He who wants to understand and make understood the original text must first assimilate it, absorb it, in order to extract its essence from the inside. Any translation, say the theoreticians adhering to this creed, is necessarily a betrayal; translation must deconstruct the text to reconstruct it; translation rethinks the text, reexperiences it in order to breathe new relevance into it. Transposed into another language and another culture, the original cannot remain fundamentally the same unless its surface appearance is made different. It is therefore to be expected of the translator that he intervene and infuse into the text of the past a measure of novelty, a measure of interpretation. Treatises on poetics often have recourse to the metaphor of digestion to express this process of appropriation and transformation: one gives life to another by making him one's own. Erasmus and his followers were particularly sensitive to the importance of this personal engagement of a subject invested in reading who, out of the affinity thus established with an author of the past, generates the new text.

Under these conditions, it is easy to understand that translation inevitably comports a measure of commentary and that, between the two, the limits are blurred. The examination of actual translations attests to this symbiosis. Whatever his respect for fidelity to historical detail, the humanist translator wants to bring a foreign and, in all
probability, ancient work within reach of a new audience. To reduce
the difficulties, he can introduce notes—the use of marginal notes was
common at the time—and thus give his intrusions a distinct status.
But he can also choose to weave explanations into the fabric of the
translation itself: a brief commentary can render a difficult passage
intelligible or clarify an allusion. Whatever the size and importance
of these interpolations, which vary from the minuscule to the ex-
pansive, from the anonymous to the highly personal, a commentary
filters into the original text. The voices of the translated author and
of his translator are mixed together, as if it were natural that the base
text, in its evolution, be amplified as it integrates its gloss. To bring
the original text to realize its semantic potential is not to betray it
but on the contrary to enhance its productivity, in the very spirit
of imitatio according to which a work is progressively enlarged and
enriched in and through its successive developments.

From this perspective, it is easier to grasp the insufficiency of philo-
logical commentary. Of course, it is a useful instrument, but it re-
mains on the outside, without any hold on the substance of the work.
True commentary, for many humanists, should be in conformity with
its etymology: cum-mens, to think with, establish a community of
thought. When Erasmus meditates on a biblical passage and realizes
its spiritual resonance, is this not commentary on his part? When
Ronsard revitalizes an episode from the Metamorphoses, revealing, by
transposing it, its hidden meaning and concealed beauty, is this not a
manner of explicating it? For many humanists, paraphrase, which re-
veals hidden treasures latent in the text and regenerates the work by
giving it a new aspect inspired by sympathy for the author, renders
the meaning of the text of the past much more effectively than the
scholarly gloss.

Where is the object commented on and where is the commentator
in all this? This question was essentially foreign to Renaissance think-
ers (as, no doubt, to the Middle Ages), since, for them, the boundary
between the primary and secondary was imprecise to the point of
being imperceptible. Montaigne provides us with a last example.

The 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 anno-
tates and discusses, comments on and compares the books of his library. Henceforth, the emergence of his own individual work is only a question of degree. An increased amount of reflection and a refusal to submit oneself to any authority shape what could have been a mere commentary as it evolves into an independent work. But the structure of commentary remains omnipresent in the *Essais* and serves to propel the writing forward. Whether Montaigne is content to explain a quotation or recontextualize it in order to appropriate it for himself, whether he approves of or rejects the quotation, he unfolds his discourse parallel to another's discourse unless, by an imperceptible reversal, he uses the other's discourse to serve as a commentary on his own discourse. The main point here is that one of the supposedly most personal works of the Renaissance functions according to mechanisms that are fundamentally those of commentary.

Montaigne's relationship to commentary does not cease here. Even as he enters into dialogue with other authors whom he glosses or who gloss him, he also has occasion to gloss himself. One of the best recent studies on the *Essais* shows that their discontinuity of discourse—a discourse that turns in on itself even as it is spoken, that halts at each moment in order to inspect itself, explicate itself, critique itself—follows a model that is specifically that of commentary: scholarly commentary and in particular the legal gloss. The logic and procedures of commentary are so familiar to Montaigne that he places them at the center of his work. When he rereads himself, or when he composes the first draft, he constantly experiences the reflex to gloss himself. He develops or interprets something said in a previous redaction or something he has just written, or goes back to explain his thought in more detail. If his book "parle de soy" (speaks of itself) and "se renverse en soy" (flows back into itself), this is because the book does not cease to propagate itself by commenting on itself.

In the sixteenth century, commentary appears in diverse forms and statuses. On the one hand, it reinforces its distinctness. Relegated to the margins, the head of a passage, or the bottom of a page, commentary is unambiguously presented as a metadiscourse and puts the
resources of philology to work for a text that it explicates without alteration. This disassociation stems from an important distinction between commentary and what will soon be called criticism; they adopt specific methods and are organized as independent disciplines. Simultaneously, the text commented on acquires prestige, rises to the rank of classic, and is henceforth treated as an immutable object: it enters into the canon of literary works. The separation of scholarship, on the one hand, from “creation” on the other hand, is a long process which, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, will create a favorable environment for the birth of the concept of “literature.” As philology is narrowed into a scholarly but subordinate technique, art is credited with an ontologically superior status. We thus arrive at the complete dichotomy of the nineteenth century with, on one side, the literary masterpiece venerated as an irrational, inimitable, unchanging, and almost sacred product and, on the other side, academic knowledge claiming the opposite properties of objectivity, rigor, and dependency. Many signs lead one to think that this historically generated division increasingly tends to disappear today as literature renounces its status as an exception in order to reestablish with metanarrative an interrupted dialogue.

But the divorce in the sixteenth century is far from having been finalized. The borders between the primary and secondary, the separation between commentary’s object and commentary itself, are often fluctuating or nonexistent, so that many traces of commentary appear in unexpected contexts and even in fiction. The gloss will not be confined to an inferior role, but imposes itself as one of the avenues of creation. In commentarius, etymology indicates the presence of comminisci, to feign, invent, imagine, as if to announce the absolute solidarity of reading and writing, of understanding the other and realizing the self.

The division and the hierarchy with which we work thus appear dubious in two respects. From a historical point of view, we must take care to note that philology, as it reaches its culmination in the nineteenth century, has transmitted to us a scale of values and a distribution of labor which betray the epistémé and the writing practices of the era of imitation. Within a theoretical perspective, the example of the Renaissance affirms what deconstruction recently
established through other means: the opposition of the “original” and the “derivative,” of the primary substance and of the meta- or the para-, is based on a metaphysics that classifies and separates forces which, to the contrary, are in constant interaction.

—Translated by Benjamin Semple

Notes


2 On the treatment of the Metamorphoses in the sixteenth century, see especially Ann Moss, Ovid in Renaissance France: A Survey of the Latin Editions of Ovid and Commentaries Printed in France before 1600 (London, 1982) and Poetry and Fable (Cambridge, 1984). The bibliography of editions used in this essay will be found in these studies.

3 In addition to the Ovide moralisé, prefaces to editions of the Roman de la rose illustrate the same tendency. See Jean Molinet’s prologue (1500) and the explicit, methodologically interesting “preamble” attributed to Marot (1526) in Bernard Weinberg, Critical Prefaces of the French Renaissance (Evanston, 1950).

4 “Officium poetac est, quae gesta sunt in alias species obliquis figurationibus cum decore aliquo convertere” (Metamorphosis Ovidiana moraliter a Magistro Thoma Walley . . . explanata [Paris, 1509]).


6 This formula was inaugurated by Alde (1502) and adopted in France by Simon de Colines (1539), then by Sébastien Gryphe (1534).

7 The scholarly edition by Regius, an Italian, appears in France for the first time in 1496. At the other end of the century, see, for example, the edition published by Marnef and Cavellat.

8 See Weinberg, Critical Prefaces, 70–71.

9 At the end of the sixteenth century, the moral commentaries of the Germans Sprengius and Sabinus are published in France. See also Renouard’s French version (1606), which is accompanied by a moral explication.

10 Jean Martin, “Aux lecteurs,” in Le songe de Poliphile (Paris, 1546). The same indirect invitation is found in Hugues Salel’s dedicatory epistle to his translation of the Iliad (1545); see Weinberg, Critical Prefaces, 117–29.

11 For Lavinius and Regius, I have used Metamorphoseos libri moralizati (Lyon, 1519).
12 Opera Ovidii, with the commentaries of Ioan Freigius et al. (Bâle, 1568).
13 I have consulted the Paris 1539 edition. In addition to the works of Ann Moss, see Terence Cave, The Cornucopian Text (Oxford, 1979), 96–99.
14 The last edition of the Bible des poètes dates from 1531.
15 See Trois premiers livres de la Metamorphose d'Ovide (Lyon, 1556). The opening treatise is titled “Preparation de voie à la lecture, et intelligence de la Metamorphose d'Ovide, et de tous Poètes fabuleux” (“A Preparation of the Way for a Reading and Comprehension of Ovid's Metamorphoses and of All Poet-Fabulists”).
16 At the head of his verse translation of the whole of the Metamorphoses (Paris, 1557), François Herbert, too, although he does not express himself on the question of interpretation, gives examples of episodes with an allegorical meaning.
17 A bibliography concerning this question is to be found in Terence Cave, Michel Jeanneret, and François Rigolot, “Sur la prétendue transparence de Rabelais,” Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France 86 (1986): 709–16.
22 See Glyn P. Norton, The Ideology and Language of Translation in Renaissance France and Their Humanist Antecedents (Geneva, 1984); and Horace, Ars Poëtica, lines 133–54.
24 See André Tournon, Montaigne: La glose et l’essai (Lyon, 1983).