

THE RHETORIC OF COMMENTARY

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Since Antiquity, and through history, commentary and rhetoric seem to have had a complicated relationship. They are both discursive practices, but appear to have been thought of as based on very different approaches to the textual and rhetorical situations in which they take place. Commentary, taken as an exegetic and strictly logical activity, forms its statements on the basis of analytic arguments and rhetoric develops its arguments in the form of enthymemes. Consequently, the art of making commentaries is perceived as being based on a scientific method using deductive reasoning and functioning on the epistemic basis of formal logic. Rhetoric (which Aristotle calls “the antistrophe of dialectic”) seems to function primarily on the basis of informal logic and to deal with probability rather than scientific certainty. Nevertheless, in various historic formations of knowledge and language, commentary and rhetoric have deeply influenced one another, but often in such a discrete or implicit manner that it has been difficult to appreciate the relationship between the two. Particularly in the Middle Ages, the ancient distribution of commentary and rhetoric seems to have shifted in this direction towards two different epistemological grounds in a definitive way that still exerts an influence on the contemporary understanding of these discursive practices. As a result, it has been increasingly difficult to assess the relation between the two practices. Whereas commentary and rhetoric in Antiquity were assigned very precise functions in the ancient complex of textual, pedagogical, juridical, and political practices, these same functions undergo fundamental and somewhat obscure changes when systematized within the medieval *trivium*.

In the formation of *trivium* one can measure the extent to which these changes in the distribution of knowledge, skills, and competences within the realm of the verbal and logical arts took place between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In the *trivium*, Aristotle’s differentiated understanding of analytical, dialectical, and rhetorical argumentation is placed within a more constrained frame which does not

allow for the same degree of differentiation. What we have thought of as “Aristotelian logic” since medieval times, Aristotle himself terms “analytics,” whereas he reserves the term “logic” for “dialectics.” Moreover, later references to the medieval *trivium* often substitute the word “logic” for “dialectic.” But our concern here is more directed towards the difficulties of placing commentary, which in Antiquity was a well-defined verbal and logical art in its own right, within the *trivium*. Curiously, it is the Late Antique Latin commentator’s extensive references to and appropriation of certain texts from Antiquity that facilitates the formation of *trivium*, but does the practice of commentary itself function under the auspice of grammar, dialectic, or rhetoric? And furthermore, how can we re-inscribe the ancient relationship between commentary and rhetoric in contemporary society for the benefit of today’s textual and rhetorical practices?

In broad terms, I propose to describe commentary as a particular discursive form *within* the practice of rhetoric, a place to which it has never been formally ascribed. And more specifically, it is my contention that the future commentary should be construed in such a way that it would function within the rhetorical tradition that holds rhetoric to be epistemic in nature. This tradition goes back to what is known as the “Sophistic movement” of rhetoric, and in modern times it has been renewed in a seminal article from 1968 by Robert L. Scott called “On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic.” What I am suggesting here opens a new area of investigation and therefore it is put forward in a more argumentative than demonstrative manner. Firstly, I will argue that there is a fundamental rhetoricity to commentary, not because of the linguistic nature of commentaries, though this certainly is an element of this topic worth discussion, but because of the very gesture of commentary on a prior text that has traditionally been presented by commentary as primary in relation to itself, so that commentary inscribes itself in the margin of the text, deemed to be of a secondary order. Secondly, I will suggest a historical and textual explanation as to why and how the genre of exegetical commentary has come to have a firm grasp on our understanding of commentary in general, an understanding that we are only beginning to break away from. And finally, we will briefly turn our attention to a few observations concerning the epistemological status of the rhetoric of commentary before and now.

First we have to establish an important principle concerning commentary. This practice is not only a question of annotating or glossing a text with explicatory commentaries; it does not only take

place as a textual exegesis, although historically this seems to have been the most common model for understanding the practice of commentary. Ultimately, I am thinking of the full scope of the art of making commentaries, be it on texts, discourses, ideas, events, policies, conversations, people, things, or other commentaries. For practical reasons, however, I shall only refer to this relation as one between commentary and text. Of course, when referring to the genre of commentary today, the general public is probably prone to associating its discursive form with the sort of political criticism that we also call “political commentaries” or “political discussion,” but I am aiming at commentary in its generality. In the rich historical archive of commentaries I will argue that it is possible to uncover a fundamental rhetoricity of commentary. Over the course of time such a trans-historical rhetoricity of commentary appears to have become increasingly clear. But what does this mean, “a fundamental rhetoricity of commentary”?

If we carefully examine the basic situation of making expiatory commentaries or annotations to a text—but indeed the use of any form of commentary—it seems reasonable to argue that there is something fundamentally rhetorical taking place. With his or her annotating gesture, the commentator is trying to sway the reader, or to be more precise, to *persuade* the reader to read an allegedly correct meaning into the text or a hidden truth out of the text. With this hermeneutic gesture the commentator is practicing an art very similar to that of a rhetorician: both are making use of *persuasio* in order to influence or appeal to an audience and to steer it towards the true meaning of the text or event in question. In both cases persuasion is used as a sort of demonstration; we are most fully persuaded about the correct meaning of a text, or the just and right course of action, or the appropriate sentiment in a situation when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated. But whereas the rhetorician has three modes of persuasion to appeal to his or her audience, it seems fair to say that the commentator traditionally has only made use of one or two. The rhetorician, as described in Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*, can appeal to the audience by using ethos, pathos, and logos.

[There is persuasion] through character [*ethos*] whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence. . . . [There is persuasion] through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion [*pathos*] by the speech. . . . Persuasion occurs through the arguments [*logoi*]

when we show the truth or the apparent truth from whatever is persuasive in each case. (Aristotle, pp. 38-39).

However, all these three modes of appeal are also at work in the art of commentary. We only believe a commentator's exegesis of a text when we find him or her credible. If we discover that we cannot trust a commentator, which is often the case—e.g., if something is added to or removed from the primary text—then we have a hermeneutic and interpretative problem, but we also have a rhetorical situation on our hands, since we are not convinced or persuaded by the commentator. Of course, the commentary may also stir the reader's feelings in many ways, so the persuasion about the true meaning of the text comes through the reader, but this mode of appeal is completely secondary to the commentary's appeal to logos. Through inferences, the commentator reasons what must be the correct exegesis of a text, and the reader is more likely persuaded to concur with an established truth of the text when the commentator is making argumentative claims about the full meaning of it based on logic.

So the situation of making commentaries on a text can easily, and more fully, be described as a rhetorical situation which gives us an elaborate conceptual framework for understanding what is going on in this discursive practice. The rhetoric of commentary and its fundamental rhetoricity become even more understandable within the principles used in contemporary rhetorical criticism. Very similar to rhetorical criticism, commentary defines, classifies, analyzes, interprets and evaluates a text, but in this context we shall limit ourselves to considering classical rhetoric.

Now, this general approach to the practice of commentary may seem speculative, were it not based on some empirical observations, so we will turn our attention to the historical development of commentary and rhetoric in the transition of the rhetorical education and pedagogical practices from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. In most schools of the Hellenistic and Roman period and all the way up towards the end of Antiquity, the scholarly tradition is focused on exegetical and scholastic practices. From the beginning, these different practices, most notably perhaps that of philosophy in Greece, are intimately linked to life and work in private and public schools. One of the most important activities in philosophical schools was directed towards the explication of the texts of the school's founder. In his article, "What was Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentators," Philippe Hoffman explains:

The practice of exegesis of written texts supplanted the ancient practice of dialogue. It was sustained through its application to canonical texts, and was put to everyday use in the framework of courses in the explication of texts. The social reality of the school as an institution—with its hierarchy, its successor to the school's founder, its buildings for religious assembly and worship in which communal life was practiced, its library, its regulation of time, and its programs organized around the reading of canonical texts—constitutes a concrete context into which we should reinsert the practice of commentary, the exegesis, which is the heart of philosophical pedagogy and the matrix of doctrinal and dogmatic works. (Hoffman, p. 597)

Now, it is difficult to pinpoint when classical civilization ends and the Middle Ages begin, and perhaps even more difficult to say when the history of classical rhetoric ends. But there is not much doubt that the scholarly tradition at the end of Antiquity came to serve as the model for medieval rhetoric and for the practice of making exegetical commentaries on canonical rhetorical texts in order to rebuild the intellectual life of the Middle Ages. To a large extent, the exegetical commentaries on mostly Ciceronian rhetoric can be taken as key texts in the formation of medieval rhetoric and, indeed, the formation of the medieval scholarly tradition and medieval theology. The survival of Ciceronian rhetoric into the Middle Ages is mainly due to the Late Antique Latin commentators, but during this transformation, when the *trivium* is being formed, the focus of rhetoric shifts as the doctrine of classical rhetoric becomes more closely associated with dialectic and less with the practical art of oratory. In this process, rhetoric becomes intellectualized and develops into a more textually oriented and pedagogical practice than was the case at Cicero's time. Oratory, which in the Roman Empire owes so much to Cicero's practice and definition, had declined steadily under political conditions that in the long run could not uphold the strong oratorical traditions of earlier periods, most significantly those of forensic and deliberative oratory. The *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* stresses how this transformation is due to a growing attention to intellectual and logical aspects of rhetoric that could serve ecclesiastical interests: "rhetorical teaching survived through late Antiquity and into the Middle Ages because of its intellectual and cultural prestige. And in the course of this appropriation it came to take on new forms and find new purposes among

which, of course, the ecclesiastical forms and purposes came to dominate” (Copeland and Ziokowski, p. 487, 837).

Here we have a very complicated historical development. In the Middle Ages rhetoric is revived, that is, mainly Ciceronian rhetoric, whereas the majority of Greek rhetoric had to wait till the Renaissance to be rediscovered. But in order to recapture and transform the art of rhetoric, both medieval rhetoric and Renaissance rhetoric had to rely heavily on exegetical commentaries. In the process of glossing, annotating, translating, and in other textual ways appropriating early Ciceronian rhetoric, certain parts of the rhetoric were preferred over others—namely, those very parts that would affirm the textual practices of the ecclesiastical discursive forms and of the exegetical commentary itself. These parts all had a close relation to the art of dialectic, which can be taken as an indication of a dominating preference for appeals to *logos* and to inferential logic. So what is being constructed in medieval rhetoric and in the practice of exegetical commentary is a complex connection uniting dialectic logic, theology, exegesis, commentary, and the “revelation” of a fixed truth already contained in canonical texts, needing only to be made explicit.

The historical evidence for this preference is overwhelming, but we cannot go into great detail on this matter. It is significant, however, that it is mainly Cicero’s early treatise *De inventione* that came to be the authority on rhetoric by the fourth century, whereas neither Cicero’s far more fully developed work, *De Oratore*, nor Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* came to play any major role, even though these works were still easily available at the time. In *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, in a chapter on “The Survival of Classical Rhetoric from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages,” George Kennedy explains:

The reason is not difficult to grasp. *On Invention* combined Ciceronian authority with the kind of succinct, dry exposition of theory that could be reduced to lists and be memorized. Students, and most teachers as well, were not interested in, and probably often not capable of understanding, longer and more complex discussions of rhetoric. (Kennedy, p. 276)

Still, it is remarkable that it was Cicero’s early, more schematic and even incomplete treatise that came to be the shaping influence on medieval rhetorical teaching. This in itself tells us much about the interests and institutional character of medieval rhetoric and commentary.

However, seen from a strictly rhetorical perspective, the particular use of exegetical commentaries in the Middle Ages, with its strong appeal to *logos*, in fact marks the beginning of a long historical decline of rhetoric that even the rich Renaissance rhetoric could not prevent. Rhetoric was studied continuously as an essential element of the *trivium*, one of the *artes sermocinales* or arts of language, along with grammar and dialectic, but in medieval rhetoric and commentary, it appears that grammar and dialectic have been the main structuring factors. If we consider a few elements of the appropriation of rhetoric in the Middle Ages, it becomes quite clear how the parts of the ancient rhetorical tradition that are most easily associated with dialectics are favored. Copeland and Ziolkowski carefully mark out some of the important events in this history:

Isidore, Bishop of Seville (seventh century) devotes a book of his encyclopedia of knowledge, the *Etymologiae*, to rhetoric (basing his treatment on Cicero and Late Antique summaries of Ciceronian texts); Alcuin (eighth century) records his efforts to teach the art of rhetoric to Charlemagne; and from the early Middle Ages onward, a clearly Ciceronian rhetorical theory is routinely featured in the curricula of monasteries in northern and southern Europe. The monasteries also contributed a great deal to the conservation and transmission of rhetorical texts. There is an unbroken tradition of academic commentary on the *On Invention* (called the ‘old rhetoric,’ *rhetorica vetus*), culminating in the work of the twelfth-century cathedral schools in France and Germany, where rhetoric was studied as a close partner of dialectic, and where *On Invention* was read alongside Cicero’s *Topics* and other related texts on dialectical topics. Commentaries on the *Ad Herennium (rhetorica nova)* also begin to appear in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in these northern European schools, with new attention directed to the stylistic teaching in Book 4. (Copeland and Ziolkowski, p. 488, 837)

Also, in the arts faculties in Paris and Oxford, logic was the dominant subject, and rhetoric seems to have assumed the role that it had taken in the earlier cathedral schools, as another dimension of dialectical study. For convenience, I take the liberty of citing further

from Copeland and Ziolkowski's excellent survey of this history in *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*:

Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* was translated into Latin from Greek by William Moerbeke about 1270 (a translation and commentary based on an Arabic version of Aristotle's text had circulated earlier). The new Latin translation of the *On Rhetoric* seems to have had an immediate impact at Paris, where it was commented on by several masters between the late thirteenth and the mid-fourteenth centuries, and where copies of the text itself were distributed by the university stationers. But Aristotle's text found no official place in a university curriculum until the 1431 Oxford statutes, where it is mentioned along with Boethius's *De topicis differentiis* Book 4 and the *Ad Herennium*: these statutes may reflect teaching practices that were ongoing and long established by the fifteenth century. If indeed Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* was being taught at Oxford and Paris, it would likely have been read in relation to the texts of Aristotle's *Organon* (the logic texts of the Aristotelian canon), which, by the late thirteenth century, formed the backbone of the curriculum in the arts faculties. Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as the 'antistrophe' of dialectic, an art of discourse that draws its techniques from the same pool as dialectic, offered a newfound theoretical justification for what had been the actual institutional place of rhetoric as a counterpart of dialectical study in the urban schools of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries . . . Augustine's treatise *De doctrina christiana* deserves to be considered the first Christian rhetoric. This text sets into motion a theological tradition of rhetoric which takes the form not only of preaching, but of scriptural interpretation, semiotics (theory of signs and symbols within and beyond language), and spiritual disciplines of reading and meditation. Before his conversion, Augustine had been a professional rhetorician, both as teacher and orator. But in *De doctrina christiana* (written between 396 and 427 ce), Augustine explicitly reacts against the classical (Ciceronian) rhetorical inheritance. . . . Augustine treats discovery (invention) in terms of techniques of scriptural exegesis: these include philology and grammar; a knowledge of the difference between literal and figurative language;

and most importantly, a semiotic theory (grounded in philosophical and theological principles) that distinguishes between signs (words and other symbols) and things (truths and realities, especially spiritual realities) to which signs must refer. It is in laying down this semiotic theory, the distinction between linguistic signs and truths, that Augustine reintroduces, now in Christian theological terms, the old Platonic distrust of rhetoric as manipulation of language detached from truth. In the Augustinian model of rhetoric, invention is a process of interpreting a text, the Bible, in which all truths have already been revealed. The notion that truth is fixed, that the subject matter (the truth of salvation) has already been revealed, and that this subject matter will always be the same in any Christian discourse, underwrites Augustine's theory of delivery, the 'means of setting forth that which has been understood. . . . Augustine had captured the textual and textually interpretive character of Late Antique Jewish and Christian culture, and had articulated this exegetical imperative in rhetorical terms: invention, the key intellectual process of rhetoric, was converted to the discovery and hermeneutical penetration of truths contained in writing. One could argue that if the master genre of Roman antiquity was the forensic oration, the master genre of medieval culture was exegesis. (*ibid.*, 489-91, 837)

In this historical process of appropriating the ancient art of rhetoric by way of glossing, annotating, translating, and so forth, medieval rhetoric develops as a series of commentaries on the early Cicero, commentaries that function in their own right, but by no means form an actual continuation of the rhetorical tradition from Antiquity. Interestingly, it is this historical transformation that delineates two very different approaches to rhetoric and commentary, two approaches that belong to two epistemological realms that differ in nature and do not share the same fundamental understanding concerning language and thinking—for example, of what it means to speak and listen, to write and read, and to think and understand. What is the reason for this transformation of the two verbal arts that appear to have been functioning on more equal terms in Antiquity? In answering this question we have to appreciate the striking difference between the ways that Antiquity was inherited in the Middle Ages and

during the beginning of modernity. Condemning *originality* and showing a faithful respect for the ancients was an intellectual virtue in the Middle Ages, and the scholarly tradition openly regarded itself as a mere unfolding of doctrines contained in the ancient texts from which emanated *authority*. The commentator presented himself as merely an exegete of old doctrines, despite the fact, in this case, that he drastically altered the whole teaching of rhetoric. So even though medieval commentators thought of themselves as faithful to the rhetoric and the tradition of commentary from Antiquity, they did in fact construe the relationship between these two verbal arts very differently by making use of commentary as the logical conveyance and appropriation of rhetoric. Philippe Hoffmann comments on this way of appropriating ancient doctrines:

A foundational study by P. Hadot (1968) has revealed the philosophical fecundity of misunderstandings or incomprehensions of the meaning of texts: they are the ancient and medieval way of producing ‘doctrines.’ Since philosophizing consisted essentially in conducting the exegesis of ‘Authorities,’ the search for truth was most frequently confounded with the search for the meaning of texts held to be authoritative on essential philosophical and theological questions, the truth already contained in these texts needing only to be made explicit. Hence, as the majority of philosophical and theological problems were posed in exegetical terms, theoretical developments proceeded according to a method we may describe as: (1) arbitrarily systematizing disparate formulations extracted from completely unrelated contexts; (2) amalgamating likewise disparate philosophical notions or concepts originating in different or even contradictory doctrines; and (3) explicating notions not to be found at all in the original. (Hoffmann, p. 602)

During the beginning of modernity, a new image of the commentator arises; the truth is no longer to be found in the ancient texts but rather in the commentary itself. Now the commentator himself becomes the *authority* on the textual tradition on which he makes his commentaries. The exegete still restores and comments upon the ancient texts according to strictly logical principles such as those of philology, but he also makes this textual tradition available to original interpretations. A prime example is Nietzsche, who ultimately turns against phi-

lology in order to reinvent Antiquity on contemporary terms. In Nietzsche's view, the classical scholar, the medieval exegete, is a hindrance to the development of the potentialities of ancient culture, and in *We Philologists* he goes on to say: "The classicist of the future as skeptic of our entire culture, and thereby destroyer of professional philology. . . . *Task for philology: disappearance*" (Nietzsche 1988, p. 56 and p. 77).

So what can we conclude from the medieval appropriation of the ancient scholarly tradition under these textual conditions with its strong emphasis on analytic logic? I have suggested how the epistemological foundation of the medieval exegetical commentary came to dominate the art of commentary, as well as that of rhetoric, for a very long time, with a few exceptions—such as Nietzsche. Furthermore, it is my contention that we are only beginning to glimpse the possibility of a new rhetoric of commentary that breaks away from the firm grasp that analytic logic has had on it since the Middle Ages. The task at hand today is to find a new epistemological foundation for commentary that takes into consideration the fundamental rhetoricity of commentary we initially touched upon. One possibility is to adapt Robert L. Scott's view in his article "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," in which he backs away from the Aristotelian notion of truth and analytic arguments as a starting point for rhetoric. "The attractiveness," he says, "of the analytic ideal, ordinarily only dimly grasped but nonetheless powerfully active in the rhetoric of those who deem truth as prior and enabling, lies in the smuggling of the sense of certainty into human affairs" (Scott, p. 312). Instead he turns towards the sophists, who were ignored in the Middle Ages: "The sophists facing their experiences found consistently not *logos* . . . but *dissoci logoi*, that is contradictory claims" (*ibid.*, p. 315). But this is also the case when we think about commentary, also the medieval exegetical commentary. Commentaries make *claims* about how to read a text, they argue a truth, but the truth is not prior to commentary or hidden in the text. Quite the contrary, there is always the possibility of other commentaries making contradictory claims which the commentators have to take into account when arguing their cases. But, as we can conclude, commentary is not secondary to a primary text, commentary *creates* the truth, and in this sense commentary is epistemic, it creates knowledge.

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