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What the text wants to say. Communicative intention and meaning
in late antique Latin exegesis of literary works and the Bible

From New Criticism onwards, modern literary criticism, and particularly the various schools of thought influenced by structuralism and psychoanalysis, has discarded the Romantic idea of the author, and of an authorial intention. In most instances this has been replaced by the idea of ‘intention of the text’, which is embedded in the text’s structure, and somehow transcends whatever self-avowed intentions and projects an author endeavours to give expression to. Of course, ancient critics and commentators never worked from the interpretative template of an overdetermining social, cultural or subconscious context in which works of art take shape, and they use expressions of intentionality for a broad range of aspects—mostly, however, to applaud a poet’s skills. In what follows, broadly placing my inquiry in the context of the late-antique *schemata isagogica*, where *intentio* occupies a prominent role¹, I compare the practice of critics annotating pagan classical texts (mostly Vergil, Terence and Horace) and the exegesis of biblical books, mostly Augustine’s on the books of the *Heptateuch* (the *Quaestiones* and the *Locutiones in Heptateuchum*)². A comparison of the two traditions of interpretation highlights significant innovations in the Christian Biblical tradition of exegesis, which have an impact on the idea of textuality as a whole in subsequent traditions.

Most of the expressions describing intention in ancient scholia and commentators refers to the macrotextual level. Here intention correlates with maximum awareness and planning³. The *intentio libri* identified in the prefatory matter of some commentaries is the ‘message’ of the work, be it political, educational, panygyric, or, in one famous case, intertextual and emulative (Vergil’s intention to imitate Theocritus), even if these critics never laid bare the analytical reasoning supporting their conclusions⁴. The prior identification of the writer’s purpose is

¹ Cf. Mansfeld 1994, esp. 10-11; 192.

² For a presentation of these important and unjustly neglected works of Augustine’s cf. Rütting, 1916.

³ For ancient criticism, the starting point is now Nünlist 2009, 24.

⁴ Seru. *Praef.* Thilo 4.10-11 *intentio Vergilii haec est, Homerum imitari et Augustum laudare a parentibus*; Don. *Praef. Comm. Verg. Ecl.* Brummer (Lipsiae, 1912), 16, 281-282 ‘*intentio libri quam σκοπόν Graeci uocant, in imitatione Theocriti poetae constituitur, qui*

seen as the basis for correctly understanding the sense, the *διάνοια*, in Adrians' *Introductio* (Εἰσαγωγή εἰς τὰς θείας γραφάς), a handbook of Biblical interpretation, coming out this year in a new annotated edition by Peter Martens (Oxford 2018):

1. Adrianus, *Introductio in sacras scripturas* 75

προσῆκει προηγουμένως ταῖς τῶν ῥήσεων ὑποθέσσει τὴν διάνοιαν ἐφιστᾶν τοὺς μαθητεύοντας, εἶθ' οὕτως αὐτοῖς τὴν κατὰ λέξιν ἐρμηνεῖαν οἰκείως ταύτην προσάγειν, ὡς ἂν διανοίας μὴ προυπαρχούσης ἢ διὰ τῶν λόγων πλάζοιτο σύστασις.

It is fitting that students first fix their attention on the purpose [of a scriptural book] by means of the contents of its individual passages. Then, in this manner, the book's purpose properly furnishes the word-for-word commentary to students, since the link between words would be lost if the purpose is not established in advance.

Of particular interest here is the causal relationship seen to exist between, on the one hand, the 'link between words' and even the 'word-for-word' interpretation, and, on the other, the general purpose. In fact Adrian does not clarify whether he means the 'purpose' of a whole book, or the communicative intention of a phrase in a given context, and the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

Motivation and plot construction (*oeconomia*) are also often dwelt on by commentators and scholiasts⁵. For example, in the *Eunuchus* commentary Donatus wonders «why the poet did not want Thais to be informed of the physical violence suffered by her young care», Chremes's sister, until the very last scenes of the play. He first puts forward two less likely reasons, clearly solely in order to give greater weight to his real explanation, «so that it makes more sense for Thais and her brother, who both think her still a virgin, to want to protect her so vigorously from the soldier when he comes with his motley troop to reclaim her»:

2. Don. *Comm. In Ter. Eun.* 721

uideamus, cur nolit poeta de uitio uirginis continuo scire Thaidem: utrum ne improuiso malo uehementius commoueatur ac doleat? an ut ex eiusdem uirginis habitu uultu que ista cognoscat, quod est actuosius? an quod proximum

Siculus ac Syracusanus fuit; Scholia vetera in Hesiodi *opera* Pertusi 1955 *Prol. f/a* Ὁ σκοπὸς τοῦ βιβλίου παιδευτικὸς ἐστίν, ὅπως τὸν ἴδιον βίον κοσμήσαντες οὕτω καὶ τῆς περὶ τὸ θεῖον γνώσεως μέτοχοι γενώμεθα. On these *praefationes* generally cf. Monno 2006.

⁵ The topic is extensively discussed in Nünlist 2009, 23-68; for the Latin evidence something in Jakobi 1996, 154-155.

uero est, ut illam et Thais et frater ignorantes uitiatam animosius aduersum militem defendant repetitum eam uenientem cum tanto strepitu ac minis?

Using vocabulary and critical concepts taken from grammatical literature⁶, Biblical scholars are very attentive to the form of the Bible's narratives; for example they carefully observe the relationship between story and plot. Augustine and other exegetes often remark on all types of narrative anachronies (in Latin *recapitulationes*), which are correctly seen as intentional decisions by the biblical narrators. They also comment on the selection and omission of unnecessary incidents in relating a story, as in discussion of the following passage from Augustine's *Questions on Genesis* in which he analyzes Jacob's first encounter with his future bride and cousin, Rachel, whom he had never seen before. On arriving at a well near the city of Haran, Jacob first meets some shepherds watering their flocks and then, on seeing a girl approaching the well, he runs and embraces her, introducing himself as her cousin. Augustine explains that the shepherds, with whom Jacob inquired about his uncle Laban's family, must have pointed to the approaching girl as Laban's daughter, and the authors (in fact: Scripture, *Scriptura*) wanted us to imagine a quick exchange between Jacob and the others, so the gap in the narrative is easy to supplement:

3. Aug. *Quaest. Gen.* 85 (29, 10)

quod uenit Rachel cum ouibus patris sui et dicit scriptura quod, cum uidisset Iacob Rachel filiam Laban fratris matris suae, accessit et reuoluit lapidem ab ore putei, magis notandum est aliquid scripturam praetermittere quod intellegere debemus quam ulla quaestio commouenda. intellegitur enim quod illi, cum quibus primo loquebatur Iacob, interrogati, quae esset quae ueniebat cum ouibus, ipsi dixerunt filiam esse Laban, quam utique Iacob non nouerat; sed illius interrogationem respensionemque illorum scriptura praetermittens intellegi uoluit.

As to the passage that says Rachel came with her father's sheep, and the scripture says that when Jacob saw Rachel daughter of his uncle Laban, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well, we must observe that the scrip-

⁶On the topic of the indebtedness of Christian textual interpretation to pagan scholarship in the Alexandrian tradition cf. at least Schäublin 1992, 148-173, which is however limited to Greek sources. On narrative anachronies and the omission of unnecessary materials in Homer cf. Nünlist 2009, 87-91. Both aspects are also very common features of comparable Latin sources, cf. for example Tib. Cl. Donatus, *Interpretationes* I p. 16 Georgii *ipse poeta sic posuit, ut ostenderet multa praecessisse, quae non praetermittentis animo siluit, sed ratione ordinati carminis*. Some useful observations, though only marginally touching on the narratological aspects, in Daghini 2013.

ture omits something we must nevertheless understand before we raise a quaestio. From the passage we can understand that the shepherds with whom Jakob spoke first, when they were asked who it was that was coming with the sheep, answered that it was Laban's daughter, whom Jakob had certainly never met before. But the writer chose to omit this exchange of question and answer leaving out this detail.

Characters too sometimes take a life of their own, and have a will. In spite of Aristotle's warning (*Poetics* 1450a) that characters are functions of the plot, and that they should not be seen as human beings with their own agendas⁷, ancient critics tended to regard them as individual human beings with their thoughts and unexpressed desires or doubts.

A neat example of this can be found in Augustine, *Quaestionum in Heptateuchum* 2.7, discussing *Ex.* 4.10, the episode of the burning bush when Moses receives God's call to lead his people and try to persuade the Pharaoh to release the Jews. Quoting Moses's objection that he is not a ready speaker, and has never been, Augustine says: «we realize from these words that Moses thought that he would become an eloquent man as a result of God's choice of him», a hope which God will in fact frustrate giving Moses instead his brother Aaron as a helper. There is in fact absolutely no textual clue in support of this reading, and Augustine's picture of a hopeful and disappointed Moses seems even to contain a touch of malice:

4. Aug. *Quaest. Hept. Ex.* 2.7 (= *Ex.* 4.10)

Quod ait Moyses ad Dominum: Precor, Domine, non sum eloquens ante hesternum, neque ante nudiustertianum diem, neque ex quo coepisti loqui famulo tuo, intellegitur, credere posse se fieri Dei voluntate subito eloquentem, cum dicit, neque ex quo coepisti loqui famulo tuo; tamquam ostendens fieri potuisse ut ante hesternum et nudiustertianum diem qui eloquens non fuisset, repente fieret, ex quo cum illo Dominus loqui coepit.

In some phrases describing meaning or in requests for the explanation of meaning the verb *uere* is used, especially *quid sibi uult?* and *quid uult dicere?* Most Romance languages express the question *what does X mean?* with a conjugated form of to want (cf. It. 'che vuol dire?', Fr. *Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire?*, Sp. *¿qué quiere decir?* Port. *O que quer dizer?*). In fact, these modern idioms can be both

- a) a request to explain a dictionary-based, lexical and literal meaning of an expression (= *what does X mean?*)⁸;

⁷ «It is not in order to provide mimesis of character that the agents act; rather, their characters are included for the sake of their actions» (transl. Halliwell, Loeb).

⁸ The question has partly been dealt with in a recent series of contributions by A.Zanker,

- b) a request about the inferential meaning of an individualized utterance, context-determined and context-specific, where in fact the speaker may be intending to say something more than the lexical meaning of the words or phrase they are using (= *what does X intend?*).

The default expression for ‘to mean’ in Latin is *significat*, which establishes an equivalence between two words in two languages, or in two different stages of what is perceived as the same language, such as archaic and ‘Classical’ Latin, as in e.g. lexicographical and juristic sources dealing with the Twelve Tables and similar early Latin documents:

5. Festus, *De uerborum significatione* 232, 3 Lindsay

«Pedem struit» in XII significat fugit, ut ait Ser. Sulpicius.

6. 476, 20 Lindsay

«Bene sponsis beneque uolueris» in precatione augurali Messalla augur ait significare sponderis, uolueris.

7. 266, 9 Lindsay

Protelare... ex Graeca uoce quae est τῆλε et significat longe.

8. Pompeius, *Commentum artis Donati* 204, 9 Keil

puta ‘totus homo comestus est ab urso’: ecce modo quid significat? totum simul hominem, ut nihil remaneret.

9. 111, 19 Keil

ista dictio (sc. syllaba) quid significat? uinculum litterarum.

10. *Explanationes in artem Donati* 509, 33 Keil

quando dico non, quid significat? ne dicatur: ergo non aduerbium negantis est.

As the examples show, *significat* can refer to a literal (ex. 5-9) or an inferential

especially Zanker 2013 and Zanker 2016, to which extensive reference will be made.

meaning, as in (10), where *non* contains the prescription ‘not to speak’. *Significare* can also indicate metaphorical phrases, irony, and secondary or rarer lexical meanings of a word, as in the following examples:

11. Suet. *Aug.* 87

cum aliquos numquam soluturos significare uult, ad Kalendas Graecas soluturos ait.

12. Ps.-Probus, *De nomine* 210, 23 Keil

stirpem Vergilius et masculino et feminino genere dixit: masculino, cum radices arborum significare uult.

A less frequent alternative, perhaps originally more colloquial in register, is provided by the phrases *quid sibi uult* and *quid uult dicere*. First of all we need to see if these phrases imply literal or inferential meanings, and if *uelle* describes a request for a clarification of the specific communicative intention, instead of being a simple request for the lexical meaning of a given word or phrase. It is also important to see who or what is the subject in each given case.

13. Seru. *In Verg. Georg.* I 370

AT BOREAE DE PARTE TRVCIS CVM FVLMINAT ET CVM EVRIQVE
ZEPHYRIQVE TONAT DOMVS hoc uult dicere: ubique ingentes efficit
pluuias ab istis uentis mota tempestas⁹.

As observed in Zanker 2013, 838-842, the interpretation of the Servian note is «[the poet] wants to say that, when these winds blow a storm, then mighty rains occur». There is however no word-for-word parsing, nor is there an exact equivalence between the Vergilian lines and the note: Servius illustrates the content of the two lines by dint of a paraphrasis, a prose rewriting in plainer words. It is also important that the subject of *uult dicere* is the poet, Vergil, not the text, or ‘this expression in this language’. Here therefore the phrase *uult dicere* describes an inferential meaning, a meaning deduced from Vergil’s lines, but not entirely identical with them, nor is it an exact translation into a different register, or linguistic code.

The question also overlaps with that of the language of literary works for an-

⁹ Other examples of *uult dicere* in Servius are discussed in Zanker 2013, 838-842, with whose conclusions I agree.

cient critics. Was the language of literature the same or was it different from what they regarded as ‘normal’, comprehensible Latin in their day? Posed in these terms, the question for most critics would have elicited an emphatic answer: the same, with the only qualification that Vergil is often included by Servius in the *ueteres*, who used some expressions differently. Yet, in papyri, word-for-word translations of Homer into more current Greek are very numerous; there are no comparable materials for Latin, but we know of similar glossaries for Plautus are known to have been in existence.

Vergil is rarely obscure, for Servius, and *obscuritas*, when he is forced to mention it, is mostly the consequence of an unusual word-order; it is sufficient to rewrite the line without the offending hyperbata (as e.g. on *Aen.* I 109, *SAXA VOCANT ITALI MEDIIS QVAE IN FLVCTIBVS ARAS ordo est, quae saxa in mediis fluctibus Itali aras uocant*)¹⁰. In the *Sermones* Horace too occasionally requires a plain Latin paraphrasis, for his commentators, because the word order is too artificial. But that is the extent to which the commentators seem prepared to stretch their acknowledgement of the difficulties an inexperienced reader, even a native Latin speaker, not to mention a second language learner, will encounter.

When the Bible becomes an object of study and linguistic interpretation in the hands of scholars using the conceptual tools of the Alexandrian grammatical tradition (that is, at least from the 1st century for Hellenized Jews, but not much later even for Christian scholars), the picture becomes more complicated and nuanced¹¹.

Greek and Latin Bibles circulating in the Christian world were the result of multiple translations in which the principle of literality had been adhered to very scrupulously, with the outcome that the linguistic medium, replete with unidiomatic constructions and phrases taken from the Hebrew texts¹², was a real hurdle to

¹⁰For Servius there are 13 notoriously obscure passages in the Aeneid (*in Verg. Aen.* XII 74), but from the examples he gives (there is no complete list) they seem mostly to have been considered ‘insoluble’ mostly on account of uncertainties in the exact interpretation of the word order, or ambiguities of the syntactical government. Vergil, however, uses words with older meanings, because his Latin is that of the *ueteres*.

¹¹On the Alexandrian background of Biblical scholarship from its origins see Niehoff 2011, and Martens 2012.

¹²For a general presentation of the unidiomatic character of the Greek and the translation practices of the *Septuagint* see at least Léonas 2007 and Hiebert 2010. For Augustine’s presentation of the problem of obscurity resulting from over-literality cf. *De doctrina Christiana* II 13,19, *quoniam... plerumque a sensu auctoris deuius aberrat interpres... Nam non solum uerba singula sed etiam locutiones saepe transferuntur quae omnino in latinae linguae usum... transire non possint* (‘because a translator, unless very expert, often strays away from the author’s meaning... Translators often meet not only individual words, but

understanding. Ancient Christian scholars were well aware of the extreme literalism of existing translations. Augustine, who gave the topic of Biblical hermeneutics a great deal of thought in *De doctrina Christiana*, saw in the obscurities of the Bible an intentional design to prevent the sin of arrogance in Christian readers, who would be able to cull the truth from the text only at the price of a great study and effort.

Therefore, in Christian exegeses of the Bible, the emphasis on the personal element is much less prominent: it is the text that speaks through its human writers, so their motives and intentions are after all of secondary importance; so much so that «sometimes not just one meaning but two or more meanings are perceived in the same words of scripture», and perhaps the original writer did not even recognize those meanings: what matters is that the spirit of God foresaw that the two interpretations would present themselves to the reader (Aug. *De doctrina Christiana* III 27, trans. R.P.H.Green 1996). On these premises, it is understandable why in Biblical exegesis examples begin to emerge of *quid uult dicere* and *quid sibi uult*, which are similar to the Romance phrases listed above, with the written text as the subject, and with reference to the literal meaning of a phrase, which had been made obscure by the reproduction of a Hebrew idiom or metaphor lacking a corresponding term in Greek or Latin:

14. Hier. *Tractatus in Ps.* 96

quid uult dicere ‘correctio sedis eius?’ debuit dicere, stabilitas sedis eius. quando ergo dicitur, ‘correctio sedis eius,’ ostenditur quodcumque corrigitur prauum fuisse antequam corrigeretur.

what is the meaning of ‘[his judgement and his justice are] the correction of his seat?’ he should have said ‘the support of your seat.’ If we read the phrase ‘the correction of his seat’ the impression is that what is corrected was defective before.

15. *Quid sibi uult:* Aug. *Quaest. Gen.* 105 (33, 10)

quid sibi uult quod Iacob ait fratri suo: ‘propter hoc uidi faciem tuam, quemadmodum cum uidet aliquis faciem Dei?’

what is the meaning of what Jacob says to his brother: «for this reason, I saw your face as when someone sees the face of God?».

also whole phrases which simply cannot be expressed in the idioms of the Latin language, transl. R.P.H.Green, 1996).

16. *Quid est quod*: Aug. *Quaest. Gen.* 156 (47, 9)

quid est quod dixit Iacob Pharaoni: 'dies annorum uitae meae, quos incolo?' (...) non enim hic aliud uoluit intellegi quam id quod Latini codices habent 'uixerunt'; ac per hoc significauit hanc uitam incolatum esse super terram.

what is the meaning of the phrase Joseph said to the Pharaoh: «the days of the years of my life, in which I sojourn» (...) in this passage [the author] had in mind the same meaning as the Latin translations, where we read «they lived», and with this expression he expressed a sense that this life is only a temporary dwelling.

17. *Quid est quod*: Aug. *Quaest. Iud.* 55 (15, 12)

quid est quod ait Samson uiris Iuda: (...) 'tradite me eis, ne forte occurratis in me uos?'

what is the meaning of the phrase Samson said to the men of Judas: (...) «give me to them, so that it will not be you who come towards me».

The Latin phrases in (14)-(17) are sometimes unidiomatic in Latin (the metaphor *dies annorum... quos incolo* in unprecedented and the connection between the relative pronoun and its antecedent is obscure: does Jacob 'inhabit' the days? or the years of his life?), and at any rate practically incomprehensible, at least in contextual and pragmatic terms. Sometimes this is due to a the semantic property of a Hebrew expression, as in (17), as explained by Augustine *l. cit.*: 'encounter' 'go towards someone', in Hebrew, means 'kill him', which is correct (the verb פָּגַע, *paga* can indeed mean 'encounter' and 'attack, kill': Samson is afraid of having to kill other Hebrew people if they attack him).

Some background information is perhaps useful at this point. Among ancient Roman thinkers, Augustine was perhaps the one who meditated the most on language¹³. According to Augustine, a sign, to be part of a language or a communicative act, needs an intention to signify. Sentences are signs of a particular class, and we speak because we want to send forth a sign of our will by means of articulate sound¹⁴. Reflections on communicative intention and meaning were therefore already part of the intellectual discourse, at least by the time of Augustine.

¹³ Connaghan 2004; Kirwan 1994, 188-211.

¹⁴ Aug. *De magistro* 1 *qui enim loquitur, suae uoluntatis signum foras dat per articulatam sonum*; *De doctrina Christiana* II 3,4 *Verba enim prorsus inter homines obtinuerunt principatum significandi quaecumque animo concipiuntur, si ea quisque prodere uelit.*

However, a native Roman tradition which was probably fundamental in this hermeneutic development was that of jurisprudence, in which the discussion over the exact meaning of a written document, for example laws used as precedents, wills and inheritance deeds, written statements read out in court trials. Jurists were daily confronted with the problem of conflicts between the lexical and the inferential meanings of a written text, and tried to reconstruct the communicative intentions of a written text¹⁵. Expressions such as *uoluntas scriptoris* as well as *uoluntas/mens legis* are common. The topic deserves a fuller study, which I hope to be able to carry out in due course¹⁶. Here I limit myself to give by way of example to providing the following extract from the *Digesta*, in which the jurist Pomponius (2nd cent. CE) reflects of meaning ambiguities in a will concerning items of clothing.

18. *Dig.* 34.2.33

Inter uestem uirilem et uestimenta uirilia nihil interest: sed difficultatem facit mens legantis, si et ipse solitus fuerit uti quadam ueste, quae etiam mulieribus conueniens est. Itaque ante omnia dicendum est eam legatam esse, de qua senserit testator, non quae re uera aut muliebris aut uirilil sit. Nam et Quintus Titius ait scire se quendam senatorem muliebribus cenatoriis uti solitum, qui si legaret muliebrem uestem, non uideretur de ea sensisse, qua ipse quasi uirili utebatur.

There is no difference between men's clothing and men's garments; but the intention the testator makes for difficulty if he himself had been in the habit of using certain clothing which is also suitable for women. And so, in the first place, it must be held that that clothing constitutes the legacy which the testator intended, not what is in fact female or male. For Quintus Titius also says that he knows that a certain senator was accustomed to use women's dinner dress, and if he were to leave women's clothing would not be regarded as having expressed an intention in respect of what he himself used as if it were men's clothing.

¹⁵ Apuleius (*Apol.* 80-83) based part of his own defence speech against the charge of sorcery on one of Pudentilla's letters: his accusers read out only the words Ἀπολείος μάγος, καὶ ἐγὼ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ μεμάγευμαι καὶ ἐρῶ. ἐλθὲ τοίνυν πρὸς ἐμέ, ἕως ἔτι σωφρονῶ, which were however, in the context of the entire document, only the way in which Pudentilla reported his son's belief that Apuleius had charmed her with magic, which she denied.

¹⁶ For an engaging presentation of some Roman legal documents and ancient discussions over their best use as evidence see Meyer 2004, esp. 267-276 on wills, where a presentation of Roman jurists' debates over *intentio* and *uoluntas* can be found.

In this short extract, Pomponius reports a case in which the testator left a bequest of women's clothing; however, he was wont to wear some of them, or other similar items, in his daily routine. Assuming therefore that for him these garments were suitable for both sexes, a question arises concerning which which exact items of clothing he was thinking-of as a bequest. As can be seen, the text problematizes the writer's intention (*mens legantis... de qua senserit*), and the context in which his words were conceived. It is only one of numerous pieces of evidence showing the attention Roman jurists devoted to matters of language and linguistic analysis.

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