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What was Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentators

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Neoplatonic thought at the end of antiquity – like that of most of the schools of the Hellenistic and Roman period – has an essentially exegetical and scholastic dimension. Beginning with the classical and Hellenistic period, philosophy in Greece is inseparable from the existence of schools (private or public), often organized as places of communal life (*sunousia*), in which the explication of the texts of the school's founders came to be one of the main activities.[1] 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 *diadochos* (i.e., the successor to the school's founder), its structure as a conventicle 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 exegesis, which is the heart of philosophical pedagogy and the matrix of doctrinal and dogmatic works.

A Network of Schools

From the third to the sixth century CE, from Plotinus, who taught in Rome, to the professors of the school of Alexandria (Ammonius, Olympiodorus, David, Elias) and to those of the school of Athens (Plutarch of Athens, Syrianus, Proclus, Damascius), we observe, from the West (Rome, Sicily) to the East (Apamea, Alexandria, Athens), a network of schools between which teachers and students often traveled, and a tight connection between Neoplatonic philosophy and the school organization, with the decisive works of Porphyry – a student of Plotinus who was active in Rome and in Sicily – and of Iamblichus, a native of Syria – to which we owe exegetical findings as fundamental as the rule of the *skopos* and the idea of a canonical double cycle of Plato's dialogues.

1. See Bénatouïl, PHILOSOPHIC SCHOOLS IN HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN TIMES, in this volume.

Certain cities are prestigious: Apamea, where Numenius and Iamblichus taught; Alexandria, where the Neoplatonic school pursued its activities after 529, thanks to the policy of the Christian John Philoponus; and above all Athens, truly the "holy city." After sojourns in Apamea and Rome, the Platonic tradition in fact reestablished itself, after Iamblichus, in Athens with Plutarch of Athens, whose abode could have been the official residence of the succession until Proclus: thus the Platonic "Golden Chain," as Damascius called it, was preserved at the foot of the Acropolis, the foot of the temple of Athena. The biographical evidence we have allows us also to make out multiple links with social elites, and the formation of "university" families and matrimonial links sometimes weaving a Neoplatonic web around the Mediterranean periphery.

From a doctrinal viewpoint, the research of Ilsetraut Hadot (1978) has convincingly shown that there were no appreciable doctrinal differences between the schools of Athens and Alexandria, even if there perhaps remained a difference of emphasis between Athens, where the explication of Plato was a major activity, and Alexandria, from which came very numerous commentaries on Aristotle.

The Religious Climate

Some brief general considerations are needed to understand the particular character of Neoplatonic exegesis, that is, the intellectual, spiritual, and *pagan* religious "climate" in which texts were read (see, e.g., Festugière, 1966, and Saffrey, 1984b). First of all, a Neoplatonic academic community, in Athens or Alexandria in the fifth or sixth century, probably had some of the traits of a religious community. For example, in the case of the school of Athens, it was a "private" school, receiving bequests, living off the returns from real estate in Attica. And we know that Proclus did not disdain participation in municipal life in Athens.

As the life and work of the emperor Julian (fourth century) particularly shows, as also does a reading of Damascius's *Life of Isidorus*, Neoplatonism was for several centuries the philosophical backbone of the multiform movement – intellectual, cultural, religious, but also political – that was the "pagan reaction" to the establishment of a Christian empire. When the emperor Justinian, in 529, issued the edict forbidding the teaching of philosophy and law at Athens, it was not a *coup de grâce* delivered to a dying man, but rather a brutal measure taken against a Neoplatonic school doubtless in its full vigor after the policy of restoration carried out by the last successor of Plato, Damascius (Hoffmann, 1994), as attested by the immense commentaries on Epictetus and Aristotle (*Categories*, *Physics*, *De Caelo*) later composed – after the Persian exile, but where it is hard to say precisely – by Damascius's student, Simplicius. Philosophy and pagan religion were then tightly linked, and Neoplatonism became the refuge of the gods of the classical pantheon – reinterpreted in the framework of a system that, after the One-Good and at the summit of multiple levels of the intelligible, preserves a place for the "henads." At the moment when the cults were gradually prohibited, the temples closed, when visible official ceremonies disappeared, Athena appeared to Proclus in a dream, informing him of her intention to take refuge with him after the closing of the Parthenon, and of the probable removal to Constantinople of the statue of the

goddess (Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, ch. 30). These philosophers of diverse origins (especially Easterners, from Egypt to Asia Minor by way of that Neoplatonic land, Syria) were "Hellenes," seemingly more by virtue of *paideia* than by their ethnic origin. For them, Greek was the *natural* language of philosophy – and the "terms" of propositions, the ten categories, were the most universal forms of human understanding, beyond the diversity of languages (of which Ammonius also took account, but in a secondary way).

Philosophy, Revelation, and Faith

A complex connection unites philosophy, theology, exegesis, and "revelation" – which is recorded in genuine "holy scriptures" (P. Hadot, 1987). At the same time as theology sets itself up as a "science" (Saffrey, 1996), a *style of life* develops, characterized by Pythagoreanism and wholly bent upon turning, beyond the divine classes and beyond being, in the direction of the One-Good. The reading and interpretation of canonical texts must be understood as part of a climate of *religio mentis*, which makes a growing place for supra-rational elements (Saffrey, 1981, 1984a): the *Chaldaean Oracles* are at once the ultimate revelations that the gods have made about themselves and the World, the touchstone of certain interpretations of texts of Plato and Aristotle, but also the "sacred book" on which are founded the practices of theurgy (Brisson, 2000; Lewy, 1956; van Liefferinge, 1999). Defense of traditional gods and curiosity about all kinds of divine manifestation, among both the Greeks and the barbarians; pilgrimages to holy sites or, as Michel Tardieu says, to "paysages reliques" (Tardieu, 1990); piety upheld toward the divinity of the Cosmos, sempiternal and uncreated; the conception of philosophy as "revelation": in such a context, interpreting such "authorities" as Plato and Aristotle amounts to unveiling – with no innovation – a meaning and a truth of which the gods and "divine men" are the source. And the authority of the philosophers who were at the base of the doctrinal synthesis of Neoplatonism – Plato and Aristotle – is itself completed by that of a Pythagoras, or of the poet Orpheus. The interpreter explicates what is *already there*: he is merely the vector of Truth. As the grandiose prologue of Proclus's *Platonic Theology* expresses it, there is furthermore no history of Truth, but only a history of its manifestation and of its unveiling – and Syrianus definitively established in Neoplatonism the presupposition of the "concord," *sumphōnia*, of philosophies (Saffrey, 1992). Against the Christianity adopted by the uncultivated masses, a minority of *pepaideumenoi* are in possession of theological science: it is in the (Platonic) order of things that the adherents of *doxa*, walled up by their appetites and passions, momentarily prevail over the philosophers (Saffrey, 1975). Against the Christians, the pagan philosophers have their "bible," their "sacred book" – the *Chaldaean Oracles*, bearers of revelation – and they gradually forge a properly Neoplatonic concept of Faith. The example of Simplicius's *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* is emblematic of the connection between learned exegesis and religion: the "usefulness" of physics, Simplicius explains, is to provoke the awakening in souls of the anagogical triad of Love, Truth, and Faith (to which is added a fourth term, Hope); and the successive reading of the *Physics* and *De Caelo* leads the soul of the philosopher-exegete and those of his audience (or of his readers) to a "union" (*henōsis*), through

Faith and the "vital sympathy" correlative with it, with the divine Heaven and with the demiurgic intellect that produces the World (Hoffmann, 2000a).

The Course in Philosophy: A Day in Proclus's Life

Texts like the *Discourses* of Epictetus (e.g., 1.26.1 and 13; cf. 1.10.8), Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, or Marinus's *Life of Proclus* allow us to enter very vividly into the atmosphere of a philosophical school in antiquity, and, in the last example, of a Neoplatonic school. A lesson in philosophy, in principle, and in a schematic fashion, consisted of two distinct parts: first a disciple read, in the teacher's presence, a "magistral" text – by Plato, Aristotle, Chrysippus, or Zeno – as well as the earlier commentaries relating to the studied text, and this reading (*anagnōsis*) was accompanied by the teacher's own commentary: thus, Plotinus's course began with the reading of the exegetes of Plato and Aristotle (for example, Severus, Cronius, Numenius, Gaius, Atticus, Aspasius, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Adrastus), after which Plotinus set forth his own exegesis of the studied text (see Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 14.10–18). Then a kind of free discussion took place, the *diatribē*, in the course of which various questions were raised and discussed under the guidance of the professor.

It is even possible to sketch fairly concretely the course of a Neoplatonic philosopher's day, thanks to chapter 22 of the eulogy wrongly called the "Life of Proclus," by Marinus, Proclus's disciple (see Saffrey, 1987, pp. xx–xxi = 1990, pp. 149–51). Thus we may understand the existential framework in which, all through his life, Proclus's exegetical activity took place, consisting in continuous commentaries on canonical works (commentaries on the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, the *Parmenides*) that we must carefully distinguish from his other writings, which constituted personal research and sometimes issued in magisterial syntheses (including works as different in their literary form as the *Elements of Theology* and the *Platonic Theology*). At dawn, Proclus paid homage, by prostrating himself, to the Sun, which is the "offspring" of the Good (Plato, *Republic* VI, 507a3), or its visible analogue (509b2–10, d2–3). A genuine vicar of the First Principle among men, at the head of the Platonic school, he began, with this act of philosophical piety toward the Sun (the subject of one of the Hymns: Saffrey, 1984c), a studious day that made him a professor "*in the highest degree similar to the Good.*" The first hours of the morning were dedicated to explicating authors making up the syllabus of the Neoplatonic philosophical *cursus*, organized around the "small mysteries" of philosophy (Aristotle) and the "great mysteries" (Plato). According to Marinus, he would give five – sometimes more than five – lessons explicating texts in a single day. The practice of textual exegesis, in the framework of instruction, preceded the personal work of writing and composition, and we know that Proclus wrote some seven hundred "lines" per day. A second prayer to the Sun marked midday, while the afternoon was given over to philosophical conversation with colleagues and the evening to "unwritten" lessons and to what we would call seminars. The day ended as it began, by a prayer to the Sun: thus, all philosophical activity took place in the light of the "offspring" of the Good, and one could say that an axis linked the First Principle, the Sun, and the Master, the exegetical and dogmatic authority at the heart of the Neoplatonic community. Table 31.1 (based on Saffrey, 1987, p. xx) allows us to see clearly how,

Table 31.1 A Neoplatonic professor's day

Hours of the day	Activities
Sunrise	Prayer to the Sun
First hours of the morning	Classes explicating authors on the school program
Late morning	Personal composition
Noon	Prayer to the Sun
Afternoon	Philosophical conversation with colleagues
Evening	Unwritten lessons and seminars
Sunset	Prayer to the Sun

concretely, exegetical activities fit into the daily life of a Neoplatonic professor, and how activities of *writing* were distinguished from purely *oral* communication – each being marked off by *silent* prayers to the Sun, beyond which the *ascensio mentis* initiated in the practice of exegesis was to be pursued.

But Proclus also wrote at night. He devoted his nights to meditation, prayer, and the composition of hymns in honor of the gods (Marinus, *Procl.* 24). Seven of these hymns have been preserved: they are dedicated to the Sun; to Aphrodite, mother of Love; to the Muses; to the gods of the *Chaldaean Oracles*; to Lycian Aphrodite; to Hecate and Janus; and to Athena of Good Counsel (Saffrey, 1994; van den Berg, 2001). Proclus himself may have gathered the collection of Orphic Hymns transmitted with his philosophical hymns.

Neoplatonic Pedagogical Thought

Neoplatonic instruction gives a central place to the notion of "authority": the authority of revealed texts, the authority of great philosophers (mainly Plato and Aristotle) who have "seen" the Truth, the personal and social authority of the Master and the Professor, who holds the correct doctrine and knows the meaning of the texts. Proclus, we have just seen, is described as the "vicar" of the One-Good and there is no doubt that the authority of the *diadochos* or *successor* – in every sense of the word – was immense. To be a professor was also to practice "assimilation to god," and this was, in the tradition of the *Theaetetus*, one of the six definitions of philosophy taught in the introduction to the philosophical *cursus*: the "assimilation" was practiced with regard to the "cognitive" faculties (imitation of divine omniscience) and with regard to the "vital" or "practical" faculties (providential solicitude for the imperfect souls of the students).[2] Deification by instruction, like deification by politics, corresponds to the exercise of "political" virtues – the virtues of a soul that uses its body in the manner of an instrument, and that lives in society – according to the Neoplatonic doctrine of the virtues; and it must therefore be realized that the very act of *teaching* – which consisted

2. On the earlier history of this notion, see Betegh, GREEK PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION, in this volume.

mainly of *commentary* on texts – was conceived as a *deification* of the professor, who guides his audience or his students on the path of their own deification (on all this, see Hoffmann, 1998, pp. 228–40).

The Doctrinal Fecundity of Exegetical Misinterpretations

In a mental universe very different from our own, a universe that condemns *originality* and enjoins a faithful respect for the Ancients, philosophical thought willingly saw itself as a mere unfolding of doctrines more or less explicitly (or implicitly) contained in texts that had *authority* (treatises of Aristotle, Plato's dialogues, etc.): Plotinus (*Enn.* V.1 [10], 8.10–14) presented himself as merely the "exegete" of very old doctrines of Parmenides and Plato, and even if the novelty of his thought in relation to classical philosophy is for us a manifest reality, it nonetheless remains that Plotinus – like his successors, for that matter – must have considered himself an authentic Platonist.[3] The appearance and development of new doctrines are not, in antiquity, the fruit of a departure claiming to be "original," but rather the result of exegeses that, if we may put it so, abandon themselves in good faith to the fecundity of errors and misinterpretations of the text on which they comment. In order for such distortions of meaning to attain their full fecundity, a constant and minute attention to the text itself is necessary: the role in it of the explication of the *letter* of the text (the *lexis*, as distinct from the *theōria*, i.e., the *meaning*, or rather the *doctrine*: Festugière, 1963) is known; and it has been possible to show the taste of certain exegetes, such as Damascius, for an interpretation that attends to the literary content of the dialogues, which perhaps led him to a better reading than others of the text of Plato (Westerink, 1971; and Hoffmann, 1994, p. 572).

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. In such a context, it is frequently quite vain to try to interpret the philosophers of antiquity in terms of our modern, post-Hegelian concept of a "system" – even if, for example, a major work, Proclus's *Elements of Theology*, is a (successful) attempt to present *more geometrico* the whole system of reality, as it issues from the One-Good, according to Neoplatonic theology and ontology; and even if the *Platonic Theology* is the perfect and systematic fruit of generations of exegetical research conducted

3. See Brisson and Pradeau, PLOTINUS, in this volume.

by Neoplatonic philosophers on the dialogues of Plato, and particularly on the *Parmenides* (Saffrey, 1984d).

The "Symphonic" Presupposition: Syrianus, and the Harmony of Plato and Aristotle according to Simplicius

Syrianus had written two works on Orpheus: *On the Theology of Orpheus* and *Harmony (sumphōnia) of Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato with the Oracles* (i.e., with the *Chaldaean Oracles*). This latter treatise seems to have expounded the exegetical program that held sway in the Neoplatonic school in Athens, and doubtless also in the school of Alexandria: the rule of harmony among authorities, and of the harmony of "divine men" (Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato) with the *Chaldaean Oracles* revealed by the gods themselves (Saffrey, 1992). Unfortunately, we have lost the contents of this treatise, but a reading of the Neoplatonic commentaries of late antiquity confirms that the search for *sumphōnia* between philosophers must have been the exegete's golden rule. The perfect doctrinal agreement between Plato and Aristotle was a postulate granted by all the Neoplatonic interpreters from Porphyry onward. A long evolution of interpretative methods, which had begun with Antiochus of Ascalon, here culminated and found its perfection (I. Hadot, 1978, pp. 68–9, 72–6, 148 n. 3, 195).[4] When, in particular, and at an earlier stage of the *cursus*, it came to commenting on Aristotle, the task of the good exegete (point 8 of the first introductory schema described below) was defined thus: "he must, when Aristotle contradicts Plato, not consider only the letter of the text (*lexis*) and condemn the discord (*diaphōnia*) of the philosophers, but take into consideration the spirit (*nous*), and seek to track down their harmony (*sumphōnia*) on the majority of questions" (Simpl. *In Cat.* 7.29–32). In fact, if the discords are verbal, and *purely verbal*, that is due to the difference of attitude of the two philosophers with regard to language, and thus to a difference of philosophical attitude, but not to a difference of *doctrine*: "It is necessary, in my opinion," Simplicius explains elsewhere,

> to consider at the same time the aim (*skopos*) and the words, and to understand that in these matters the divergence (*diaphora*) between the two philosophers bears not on the reality of things (*pragmata*) but on words (*onomata*): Plato, on account of his taste for precision, rejects the ordinary usage (*sunētheia*) of words, whereas Aristotle employs it – a method that, according to him, is in no way injurious to truth . . . (Simpl. *In Cael.* 69.11–15; cf. 15–29)

Plato scorns the language of the multitude, while Aristotle does not wish to abandon it (*In Cael.* 679.28–29). A difference in philosophical *method* underlies this difference in attitude toward language:

> thus, it is not reality itself (*pragma*), but the word (*onoma*), on which bears the present divergence (*diaphora*) between the philosophers; and it is likewise in most other cases. The

4. On Antiochus, see Lévy, THE NEW ACADEMY AND ITS RIVALS, and Zambon, MIDDLE PLATONISM, in this volume.

> reason for it is, I believe, that often Aristotle wants to retain the ordinary meaning of words and sets out, in building his arguments, from what is manifest to the senses, whereas Plato displays several times over his contempt for ordinary significations, and rises gladly to intellectual contemplation. (*In Phys.* 1249.12–17)

As we shall see below (point 6 of the first introductory schema: Simpl. *In Cat.* 6.22–30), Plato's attitude is "Pythagorean" because he "examines natural realities in so far as they participate in what is above nature," and he bases his demonstrations on intellection (*nous*), whereas Aristotle begins from sensation (*aisthēsis*), conscious of addressing himself to beings "who live with sensation," and he does not set himself apart from nature, studying the realities that are above nature only in their relation to nature. From an epistemological viewpoint, demonstrative perfection results from the conjunction of the two types of demonstration (that which begins from intellection and that which begins from sensation), which is strictly coherent with the principle of the *sumphōnia* of Plato and Aristotle (I. Hadot, 1978, p. 148; Hoffmann, 1987b, pp. 212–13).

An example of fecund misinterpretation: The composition of the substance of the heavens

The determination of the nature of celestial substance offers a perfect example of this conjunction of Aristotelian and Platonic methods of demonstration (Simpl. *In Cael.* 84.30–85, 31; cf. Hoffmann, 1987b, pp. 213ff.). Simplicius, commenting on Book I of *De Caelo*, wants to show the harmony on a fundamental point between the doctrines of the two authorities in a polemical anti-Christian context and in a spirit of traditional piety toward the Heavens and the Cosmos: the latter is not "born" at a moment of time – it has no temporal origin – and it is not consigned to destruction: it is unbegotten and incorruptible (as the *De Caelo* affirms). If Plato says it is "begotten," it is in so far as it proceeds ultimately from the One-Good. The Aristotelian assertion of the existence of a primary body, unbegotten and incorruptible, without change, growth or diminution, moved only in its circular motion, and distinct from the four sublunary elements, conflicts in no way with the teachings of the *Timaeus*, though it asserts no distinction between a sublunary and a supralunary sphere, and though it posits only the supremacy of fire in the Heavens – the latter also being composed of the other three elements (*Ti.* 40a). Where the modern historian reasonably sees a difference in doctrine, Simplicius – who reverts to a Proclian celestial physics whose origin lies in Treatise 40 of Plotinus – sees only a perfect *sumphōnia*: what Aristotle calls "primary body" is a mixture of the four elements under the pure form of principles (the "summits," *akrotētes*), which transcends the "sublunary" elements. This mixture is determined in its essence, characterized and denominated, according to the principle of "predominance," by the elementary "summit" predominating in it, and, as Plato says (*Ti.* 40a), what predominates on high is fire, in its purest form – light (*phōs*) that shines and does not burn, and which is as different from flame (*phlox*) as from glowing embers (*anthrax*) (*Ti.* 58c). The Aristotelian "primary body," or "aether," is such a mixture, the description of which coincides with the meaning attributed to Plato's text, and it is the reading of the *Timaeus* that guides that of *De Caelo*. This example

illustrates the subtle exegetical mechanism by means of which texts are unduly reconciled in a *sumphōnia* that is a fecund misinterpretation. It is the Neoplatonists' joint reading of Plato and Aristotle that allows them to find a single, identical doctrine of celestial physics in the works of the two authorities: notice that the privilege accorded to Plato over Aristotle is decisive in this proceeding. And the religious horizon of this physics constructed through a reconciling exegesis is the reaffirmation of the piety handed down by the Ancients, and the "sympathetic" union (*henōsis*) with the Heavens and the Demiurge.

The Explication of Texts: The Neoplatonic *cursus* of Study

Aristotle, Propaedeutic to Plato

The heart of life in the Neoplatonic schools of Alexandria and Athens was constituted by daily lessons in the explication of texts (called *praxeis*), conforming to a strict program codified beginning with Iamblichus – to whom was owed the choice of twelve principal dialogues of Plato (Festugière, 1969). The program of the Neoplatonic *cursus* of studies may also be read as an ideal list of books – the core of fundamental books, to which was added the corpus of traditional commentaries – constituting a Neoplatonic library.

Without going into the details of all the questions raised by the contents of this *cursus*, let us recall its main stages (Goulet-Cazé, 1982, pp. 277–80; I. Hadot, 1978, pp. 148–9, 160–4; P. Hadot, 1979, pp. 218–21; Westerink, Trouillard, and Segonds, 1990, pp. xlviii–lvi ff.). Study began with the authors of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* that made up a cycle propaedeutic to philosophical studies (I. Hadot, 1984). Then a set of preparatory ethical studies and prologues involved recourse to three hortatory discourses by Isocrates (discourses *To Demonicus*, *To Nicocles*, and *Nicocles*), to the Pythagorean *Carmen aureum* (commentary by the Alexandrian Hierocles), to the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus and to Porphyry's *Isagoge* – with which began the properly philosophical instruction, and on which we have several sixth century commentaries (Ammonius, David, Elias; edited by A. Busse, in the series Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca (= CAG) vols. 4 and 18).

The chief part of the *cursus*, after Porphyry's *Isagoge* and various Introductions, was dedicated to the reading of Aristotle (the "small mysteries" of philosophy) and Plato (the "great mysteries"). Because the *Life* of Aristotle was placed at the beginning of the edition of the works of the Stagirite and could be read in that sort of volume, the Introduction to the Philosophy of Aristotle, given preceding the commentaries on the *Categories*, did not include a biography, but rather an elucidation of the names of the philosophical schools. The peripatetic philosophy, regarded as a propaedeutic to that of Plato (I. Hadot, 1991, 1992), and interpreted from this "symphonic" perspective, were studied in a sequence of readings as follows: the logical writings of the *Organon* (in an order to which we shall return later); then the "practical" writings, with the *Ethics* and the *Politics*; and finally the "theoretical" writings, which corresponded to Physics (*Physics*, *De Caelo*, *On Generation and Corruption,* etc.), to Mathematics (probably *De Lineis Insecabilibus* was read), and to Theology, that is, essentially the

Metaphysics, with which the "small mysteries" culminated. This sequence of readings derived from a very strict classification of the works of Aristotle, which left aside the treatises considered to be less philosophical, since they dealt with particular beings. Marinus tells us that Proclus put only two years into running through this Aristotelian propaedeutic cycle.

Reading Platonic dialogues

After the reading of Aristotle came that of Plato, based on a "choice" privileging – according to the canon attributed to Iamblichus – certain dialogues (Westerink et al., 1990, pp. lxviii–lxxiii): they constituted a processional and initiatory pathway leading from the "propylaea" (the *Alcibiades* I) to the "adytum" of the temple (the *Parmenides*). A first cycle was structured, fundamentally, by the Neoplatonic hierarchy of the virtues, and by the distinction between "political," "cathartic," and "theoretical" virtues. The "theoretical" part was itself divided in three, corresponding to the triad of names, notions, and realities, which plays a leading role in Neoplatonic ontology and in the doctrine of language. The theoretical study of realities was itself also divided into the study of *physical* realities and the study of *theological* realities. The first cycle thus included, in succession, the *Alcibiades I* (which served as an introduction, through the knowledge of oneself and the turning toward oneself), then the *Gorgias* (which corresponds to the practice of the "political" virtues, those of the soul that uses the body in the manner of an instrument, in the context of social life) and the *Phaedo* ("cathartic" virtues, corresponding to the separation of soul and body), the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus* ("theoretical" virtues trained through the study of *names* and of *notions*), the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* ("theoretical" virtues trained by the study of physical realities, then the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* ("theoretical" virtues trained by the study of theological realities), and it culminated with the *Philebus*, which provides a first instruction about the Good, preparatory to the reading of the *Parmenides*. Notice that this kind of selection, and classification, implies that in the *Statesman* only the cosmological myth is retained (corresponding to a physics) and in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* only the development of the doctrine of Ideas or intelligible divine Forms. A long work like the *Republic* had no place in this scheme, but it was not on that account neglected or forgotten in Neoplatonic instruction, as demonstrated by the very existence of the great Commentary by Proclus on this dialogue, and the same may be said of the *Laws*. This first Platonic cycle was crowned by a second one, organized according to the division between physics and theology: it consisted in the study of the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, to which Proclus devoted huge commentaries thanks to which we have partial access to the exegeses of his predecessors as well. Indeed, in many ways all of Neoplatonism is a perpetual commentary on the *Parmenides*, read word by word and ceaselessly meditated on: the Platonic dialogue is a sacred book, the reading of which "becomes the religious act *par excellence*" (Saffrey, 1984b, p. 171).

Beyond philosophy: Orphic Hymns *and* Chaldaean Oracles

Thanks to the *Parmenides*, the soul raised itself up to the One. But the *Parmenides* is not the final word of the course in philosophy: after the philosophical cycles the Orphic

Hymns (the only books possessed by the pagan monk Sarapion in Alexandria in the fifth century) and the *Chaldaean Oracles* were read and commented on (Festugière, 1966 [1971, pp. 583–4]; Goulet-Cazé, 1982, pp. 277–80). This collection of "theological" oracles, forged by theurgists (Julian, father and son) in the second century, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, was a true "sacred book," destined to provide pagan theology at the end of antiquity with the equivalent of the Jewish and Christian sacred books: this pagan bible constituted the touchstone of all Neoplatonic exegetical enterprise, and the meanings attributed to the doctrines of Aristotle and Plato were founded on this revealed authority (P. Hadot, 1987 [1998]). Even if Plotinus paid no attention to these *Oracles*, their importance was the topic of a lively debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus, and they were commented upon by Proclus and Damascius. It is known that, in Byzantium, they attracted the interest of Psellos, and later in the fifteenth century, Georgius Gemisthus Pletho.

The Beginning of the Cursus: The Introductions Taught in the Framework of the Exegesis of Porphyry's *Isagoge* and Aristotle's *Categories*, and The General Principles of Exegesis

When he had received preparatory ethical instruction, the student in the Neoplatonic school began the study of philosophy with a set of six discourses which followed one another, each having, in various ways, the status of an "introduction," which led him to the heart of an Aristotelian propaedeutic integrated from the outset with the purest Neoplatonism. A brief overview of this complex structure (I. Hadot, 1987a [1990, p. 21ff.]; Hoffmann, 1998; Westerink et al., 1990, pp. xliii–lvi) shows the degree to which dogmatic instruction, exegesis of canonical texts, and psychagogical concerns are inseparable in the Neoplatonic school. The student thus studied, in succession: (1) a general Introduction to Philosophy, as a part of an introduction to the explication of Porphyry's *Isagoge*. The content of the different Introductions that have been preserved is well known, and it is enough to recall that they mainly taught, after a study of what a "definition" is, the six ancient definitions of Philosophy: knowledge of beings in so far as they are beings; knowledge of divine and human realities; assimilation to god as far as is possible for man; the practice of death; the art of arts and science of sciences; love of wisdom. They also expound a bipartite division of philosophy into a "theoretical" and a "practical" part. (2) An Introduction specifically to the *Isagoge*, developed in eight points, that is, the seven points addressed in principle in connection with Aristotle's *Categories* and other treatises of the Stagirite, plus an eighth point: "What is the form of instruction?" (3) Porphyry's *Isagoge*, which is an introduction at once to Aristotle's *Categories*, to logic, and to the whole of philosophy. It was important to elucidate correctly the "aim" (*skopos*) and the "utility" of the *Isagoge*, and it was the occasion to prepare for the explication of the *Categories.* In fact, in Neoplatonic instruction, the determination of the usefulness of the *Categories* was strictly connected to the determination of the usefulness, or rather several utilities, of the *Isagoge*, just as the aims of the two treatises are affiliate, since both alike bear on universal "signifying words." Ammonius taught several of the "utilities" of the *Isagoge*: the work is useful for the whole of philosophy, for the *Categories* (that is, for the reading of philosophical

treatises containing the doctrine of universal predicates, that of Aristotle but also that of his Pythagorean source Archytas of Tarentum), "for all the treatises of philosophy," and "for the whole method of discovery that philosophy employs" (26.3–5). This last expression should be understood to refer to the four methods of dialectic (division, definition, demonstration, and analysis). And, adds Ammonius, even if there were no *written* philosophical treatises, the *Isagoge* would be useful "to the very methods used by philosophers, thanks to which the philosophers can discover every reality" (35.27–29). After Ammonius, the Alexandrians David and Elias rearranged these utilities under three or four heads, and Elias gave primary place to an anthropological consideration: the *Isagoge* is useful "for our very essence" (*ousia*) as living beings endowed with the capacity to communicate with one another by means of language. In a more immediate fashion, it was the pedagogical need for explanations preliminary to reading the *Categories* that led Porphyry to draw up – at the request of his audience, the Roman senator Chrysaorius – an "Introduction" to the *Categories*: the *Isagoge* is an explication of the most fundamental "five words" of Aristotle's logic (genus, species, differentia, property, and accident), and their *elucidation* is a necessary preliminary to that of the *Categories*. Then came (4) a general Introduction to the philosophy of Aristotle, which was to fix the general frameworks for the exegesis of the whole of Aristotle's philosophical corpus; this Introduction is imparted as the first part of the Introduction specific to the *Categories*, and it includes the ten points described below. The fifth stage consisted of the Introduction to the *Categories* proper, according to six or seven points that were also to be examined (some being optional) in connection with each of the Aristotelian treatises of the *cursus*. These schemas seem to have been expounded by Proclus in a lost treatise entitled *Sunanagnōsis*, "Explication of a Text under the Supervision of a Master" (Hadot et al., 1990, pp. 26, 34). Finally, (6), the reading of the *Categories* itself constituted the *beginning* of logic and the *prologue* to Philosophy as a whole: the general principles of exegesis were inculcated throughout all the previous Introductions.

The first introductory schema, in ten points, formed a general introduction to the philosophy of Aristotle, and to the exegesis of the whole set of treatises (see Hadot et al., 1990).

1. What is the origin of the names of the philosophical sects? The answer supplies a historical framework for the hermeneutic principle of the harmony (*sumphōnia*) of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, which is to guide all the reading of Aristotle. Aristotle is presented as the successor of Plato through the intermediary of Speusippus (Plato's successor as head of the Academy), and Olympiodorus went so far as to imply that the true successor of Plato, when it came to doctrine, would have been Aristotle rather than Xenocrates (who succeeded Speusippus).
2. How are the writings of Aristotle classified? The organization of the Aristotelian corpus proceeded from several distinctions: between "general," "intermediate," and "particular" works; between "syntagmatic" and "hypomnematic" works; between the dialogues and the works in which Aristotle speaks in his own name (*autoprosōpa*). The *division* allows us to discover the *sequence of readings* that constituted the program of exegesis for the whole Aristotelian corpus. The syntagmatic works were the only ones to which full dogmatic authority was

credited, because their doctrinal content is complete and they have a perfect literary form, as well as a title. They are divided into three classes: "theoretical" works, classified according to the threefold division into physics, mathematics, and theology; "practical" works, classified according to the threefold division into politics, economics, and ethics; "instrumental" works, also divided into three: those that appear to be "method" (*Poetics*, *Rhetoric*, *Topics*, *Sophistical Refutations*), those that bear on "method" (*Posterior Analytics*), and those that precede "method" (*Categories*, *De Interpretatione*, *Prior Analytics*). Based on this division, the logical writings were thus arranged according to an exegetical and pedagogical progression in the following order: the *Categories* (the doctrines of predicates and of the simple terms of the proposition), *De Interpretatione* (the doctrine of the "declarative statement" and of the premises constituting the syllogism), the *Prior Analytics* (the doctrine of the syllogism or deductive reasoning), the *Posterior Analytics* (which culminates in the teaching of the demonstrative syllogism, the "instrument" for discerning truth and falsity in *theory*, the good and the bad in *practice*), then the *Topics* and the *Sophistical Refutations* (notice that the "long" *Organon*, which included the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, had no success in the worlds of late antiquity and Byzantium).

3. Where ought one to begin in grappling with Aristotle's treatises? With ethics (since without purifying one's ways one cannot think rationally), or with logic? The Neoplatonists answered that one ought to begin with logic (to which Porphyry's *Isagoge*, then the *Categories*, were an introduction), but that preparatory ethical instruction was to be given, as a preliminary, in an "unscientific" manner – the explicated reading of the Aristotelian *Ethics* being possible only later in the *cursus*.
4. What is the "end" (*telos*) of the philosophy of Aristotle? To this question, Simplicius replies that the "end" is happiness obtained by turning toward the One (the ascent back toward the First Principle) and by the *ethical* turn that consists in attaining perfection by the training in and practice of virtues. It is thus Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that teaches the *telos*, and "demonstration," the keystone of the *Organon*, is the necessary instrument of an ascending movement that, through the interpretation of authoritative texts, is ethical and theoretical, but also spiritual and religious.
5. What are the means for attaining this end? They are the contents of the *cursus* itself (logic, ethics, physics, mathematics, theology).
6. What manner of expression is employed in Aristotle's writings? All the commentators describe Aristotle's style as compendious, concise, aporetic, and obscure. Plato and Aristotle practice inverse methods: Plato studies all things, and especially physical realities, based on the consideration of the divine intelligible Forms, and in this regard he conforms to the "Pythagorean" method (also known as "doing physics as a theologian"), whereas Aristotle sets out from current linguistic usage and the usual meanings of words, as well as from the consideration of particular sensible realities – the first that claim the attention of the novice, to whom it seems natural that the individual is "primary" substance. When he does theology, Aristotle remains a "physicist."
7. What is the source of Aristotle's obscurity? This obscurity, which Aristotle preferred to (Platonic) myth-making and (Pythagorean) symbolism, functions

to protect knowledge from being divulged (truth must be revealed only to those who are worthy of it), and furthermore it gives to those worthy of accession to Truth the opportunity to exercise and shape their sagacity (*agchinoia*). Obscurity has an initiatory and gymnastic value.

8. What qualities does an exegete of Aristotle need to have? According to Simplicius, the exegete should be at the same level of "greatness of thought" (*megalonoia*) as Aristotle. He should have a perfect and complete knowledge of the whole of Aristotle's work, as well as of his linguistic habits. He should not display sectarianism in his exegetical work, proceeding "as though he were a member of the philosopher's sect": his maxim should be, "*Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas*" (Tarán, 1984). Above all, he is to seek, on most points, the deep harmony, the *sumphōnia*, between Aristotle and Plato, between whom disagreement can only be verbal, and can hardly concern doctrine itself. This principle of *sumphōnia* is the golden rule of Neoplatonic exegesis, and respect for it is the mark of the exegete "in love with knowledge," *philomathēs*, an epithet equivalent in the Platonic tradition to *philosophos*. This point is of the highest importance, because it describes the task of the exegete – minute and exhaustive explication of Aristotle's text, considered in all its detail and in the vast context of the corpus – and creates the conditions for a kind of autonomy for exegetical activity, accounting for the range of Simplicius's own commentaries.
9. What are the qualities needed by a good "hearer," that is, a good student of Aristotelian philosophy? He should be virtuous (*spoudaios* in the sense of Aristotelian metriopathy) or again with his behavior refined (*kosmios*) at the end of the preparatory ethical instruction, but not yet "scientific" (this "scientific" ethical instruction not being possible until later, when mastery of the syllogism allows for the rigorous study of the Aristotelian *Ethics*). The good student should meditate frequently on the fundamental notions of Aristotle's philosophy – which corresponds to a kind of spiritual exercise, already practiced with regard to the "five words" when the *Isagoge* was explicated – and he should engage in such meditation alone or in the company of friends equally "in love with knowledge." Finally, he should deny himself all "eristic" chatter, on pain of deserving punishment.
10. The tenth point was devoted to the list of six or seven points constituting the second introductory schema, which had to be expounded before the reading of *any* work by Aristotle – some points being optional, when the point was clear – and this schema is amply developed in the Neoplatonic introductions to the *Categories*, the inaugural treatise.

The six or seven points to be treated before reading any treatise by Aristotle

In the introduction to his Commentary on the *Categories*, Simplicius treats, in a manner both extremely probing and wholly exemplary, the *seven* points of the second introductory schema, in the following order:

1. What is the "aim" of the treatise, its intention (*skopos*)? This governing question, to which Iamblichus gave the force of law, orients all exegesis, and it is encountered in other types of commentary (patristic, medical, or rhetorical exegesis): all the doctrines and assertions of a philosopher whose works receive commentary should be coherent with this unique *skopos.* (A treatise, or a Platonic dialogue, cannot have several *skopoi*: the meaning of texts, like the World or Reality, is oriented toward a principle of unity.) Thus it will be explained that the categories are, in the human language proceeding from incarnated souls, the simplest "words" (*phōnai*) – established at the time of a "first institution" – and that these words signify, through mediation of simple and universal "notions" that are in the soul and that coincide with the *signifieds* of these words, the simplest and most universal "realities", that is, the "most generic genera," beyond which there are no more inclusive genera, since – as Aristotle himself teaches – being is not a genus (see Hoffmann, 1987a).[5]

   Another very interesting example is that of the *De Caelo* (Hoffmann, 1997, pp. 86–8). Simplicius confronts, and discusses, the interpretations of his predecessors, i.e., the commentators who preceded him in the study of the *De Caelo*: on one side, Alexander of Aphrodisias and in a more ancient time Theophrastus; on another side, Iamblichus and Syrianus. Alexander thinks that the *skopos* concerns the World and the simple bodies in it (earth, water, air, fire, and celestial substance), and he appeals to the authority of Theophrastus. By contrast, the Neoplatonic exegetes – Iamblichus and Syrianus – accord a distinct prominence to the "divine" body, and thus to the theological aspect of the treatise, thus privileging the first two books. According to Iamblichus, the treatise is mainly "about the celestial and divine body," even if it includes in a secondary way the theory of the Universe and that of the elements. Simplicius discusses Alexander's opinion as well as that of his Neoplatonic predecessors, and is led by the (Neoplatonic) twofold requirement of the unity of the *skopos* and the unity of the treatise itself to affirm the coherence of the four books and to integrate the study of the four sublunary elements within the horizon of the unique *skopos*, all the while recognizing the primacy of the divine Heavens – which generously communicates its perfections to the totality of the World: "it should not be held that the aim of the treatise (*skopos*) concerns the World: on the contrary, it concerns the simple bodies, of which the very first is the Heaven, in whose own goods it has made the World as a whole participate" (Simpl. *In De Cael.* 5.32–4).
2. What is the utility (*chrēsimon*) of the studied treatise? In the case here taken as an example, it will be said that the doctrine of the categories is useful for the construction of the apodictic syllogism or "demonstration," which is the instrument (*organon*) for distinguishing truth from falsity in the domain of "theory", good from bad in the domain of "practice" – theory and practice being the two "parts" of Philosophy, of which logic, based on the doctrine of the categories, is the "instrumental part." The categories are the "terms" of the proposition, the elements of the declarative statement (*logos apophantikos*) which, as a "premiss"

5. Cf. M. L. Gill, FIRST PHILOSOPHY IN ARISTOTLE, in this volume.

(*protasis*), is in turn an element of deductive reasoning or syllogism, of which a major type is precisely the apodictic syllogism. (On terms, see Aristotle in Modrak PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE, in this volume; and on the syllogism, see Detel, ARISTOTLE'S LOGIC AND THEORY OF SCIENCE, in this volume.)

3. What place does the treatise occupy in the sequence of readings? Each treatise is situated, in virtue of its *skopos*, in a precise place in the *cursus* already described, according to a strict progression corresponding at once to the sequential unfolding of doctrinal instruction, to a pedagogical (or psychagogical) progression, and, fundamentally, to a spiritual and religious progression – since even the doctrine of the categories constitutes a "viaticum" toward the contemplation of the Forms and divine principles. In the sequence of the initial reading of the *Organon*, the *Categories* therefore comes first, immediately before *De Intrepretatione*, the *Prior* and the *Posterior Analytics*.
4. What justifies the title of the studied treatise? (See Hoffmann, 1997). In some cases the title is clear and needs no justification: thus *De Anima*, "On the Soul." Occasionally (*De Caelo*, "On the Heavens") its elucidation derives directly from the elucidation of the *skopos*, and Simplicius explains that Aristotle's treatise draws its title from the first and divine body that communicates its perfections to the whole World. In the case of the *Categories*, the question is much more complicated. A multiplicity of titles is actually discussed in the philosophical tradition. The Neoplatonic exegetes reject titles like "Pre-Topics" and "On the kinds of being." In the first case they do so because it implies a sequence and contiguity between the *Categories* and the *Topics*, and thus a "dialectical" reading of the *Categories* incompatible with the architecture of the *Organon* – inherited from the edition of Aristotle's writings by Andronicus of Rhodes – and with the Neoplatonic interpretation that is inseparable from it. In the second case, the title is rejected because "Plotinian" titles – those of the Porphyrian edition of the *Enneads* – imply a strictly ontological interpretation of the categories, which are thus seen as *realities* rather than as *signifying words*: so such a study belongs to the "theoretical" part of philosophy rather than to logic. The "good" title can thus only be "Categories." The word is not to be taken in its rhetorical sense ("accusation" as opposed to "defense," *apologia*), but in a "homonymous" sense given by Aristotle himself – who thus acts as *onomatothētēs*, or "name-giver". The categories are the predicates *par excellence*, the predicates that are predicates and nothing else and which signify the supreme genera in which participate all things at lower levels of reality – the interpretation of Aristotle's logic being aligned with a Platonic ontology from the outset, applying the principle of *sumphōnia*. It was also pointed out that the title, like the titles of Platonic dialogues and some titles of discourses by the sophist Aelius Aristides, is in the nominative case (rather than the usual construction, *peri* + genitive): such a formulation manifests the capacity of language to present *the things themselves*.
5. Are we dealing with an authentic work of the Philosopher? The dogmatic authority of the treatise depends on its authenticity, and this point is – when the question can arise – of prime importance. Various arguments are discussed (stylistic and doctrinal ones, but also the existence of cross-references in the corpus) in order

to establish the authenticity of the *Categories*. A structural argument plays an essential role: it is because it is *necessary* for the completeness of the *Organon* that the *Categories* is authentic. Without this inaugural treatise giving the terms of the proposition, the *Organon* would be "without a beginning" and "without a head."

6. What is the "division into chapters," that is, what is the structure of the treatise? A "syntagmatic" treatise is perfect from the twofold doctrinal and formal viewpoint, and it must have an organic unity. The literary perfection of the *Categories*, which is "tripartite," would therefore be affirmed; and the coherence of the four books of *De Caelo*, unified by the *skopos*, would be insisted upon.
7. To what part of Aristotle's philosophy does the treatise belong? The point is not in doubt in most cases (no hesitation, for example, in the case of the *Physics*, the *De Caelo*, or the *Metaphysics*), but it must be clarified in the case of the *Categories*, in conformity with what has been established in the study of several other points (the aim, the utility, the place in the sequence of readings): the *Categories* belong to the "instrumental part" of philosophy that is logic, and the categories should be carefully distinguished, as generic "beings" studied by ontology, from the "words" (*phōnai*, *lexeis*) that grammar studies.

Questions Preliminary to the Study of Plato

Although we have abundant commentaries on Plato, the only theoretical text that expounds the exegetical principles that should guide the reading of Plato is an anonymous work attributable to the second half of the sixth century, the *Prolegomena to the Philosophy of Plato*, which has been edited and studied by L. G. Westerink, J. Trouillard, and A.-Ph. Segonds (1990). We shall refer to the introduction to this edition (1990, pp. lix–lxxvi), as well as to the parallel presentation given by I. Hadot (1987a, [1990, pp. 30–4, 46]).

Here is a very brief summary of this Introduction to Plato, which occasionally derives from (lost) prolegomena composed by Proclus:

A. Biography of Plato
B. General introduction to Plato's philosophy, in ten points:

1. The character (*eidos*) of Plato's philosophy: this point consists of a summary history of Greek philosophy, intended to show the superiority of Platonism.
2. Why did Plato write, unlike Pythagoras and Socrates?
3. What reasons justify Plato's use of dialogue?
4. Of what elements are Plato's dialogues composed? A correspondence is set up between the elements of the dialogue and those of the cosmos: to the level of Matter (*hulē*) correspond the speakers of the dialogue, its time and its place; to the level of Form (*eidos*) corresponds its style; to Nature corresponds the form of the teaching, which may be either a mere exposition of Plato's opinions without investigation or demonstration, or an investigation, or a mixture of these two modes; to the Soul corresponds scientific demonstrations; "to the Intellect

corresponds the problem from which demonstrations project in the manner of a circumference;" to divinity corresponds the good at which the dialogue aims. Another correspondence is set up with a list of six causes: "to the material cause correspond the speakers, the time and the place; to the formal cause, the style; to the efficient cause, the soul; to the instrumental cause, the demonstrations; to the exemplary cause, the problems; to the final cause, the good aimed at by the dialogue."

5. From where are the titles of the dialogues drawn? From the speaker (*prosōpa*) or from realities (*pragmata*)?
6. What is the principle of division for the dialogues? (Not the dramatic situation or the argumentation, but the doctrine expounded.)
7. In what form (*tropos*) are the conversations in the dialogues (*sunousia*) presented? It is a question of studying the form of the action or the narration, the conversations being sometimes represented directly, sometimes reported by one or more intermediaries. An analogy is proposed between these successive reports and the degrees of knowledge in *Republic* VI.
8. What are the rules for determining the aim (*skopos*) of each of Plato's dialogues? Ten rules are laid down for determining the *skopos*.
9. What is the order of Plato's dialogues? Here is found a radical critique of the tetralogical order,[6] and a discussion of the canon of Iamblichus.
10. What are the methods of instruction? Fifteen methods are distinguished: divine inspiration, demonstration, definition, division, analysis, indication, image, example, induction, analogy, arithmetic, abstraction, addition, history, and etymology.

Prior to the reading of each Platonic dialogue a certain number of "preliminary points" were treated. We possess no summary list – unlike what is available for Aristotle – but examination of the introductions to the Neoplatonic commentaries on the various dialogues of Plato has allowed I. Hadot (1987a [1990, pp. 32–4, 46–7]) to reconstruct the following list, which includes eight points, of which some are identical to points examined before reading Aristotle's treatises:

1. How is the dramatic setting of the dialogue presented?
2. Who are the speakers of the dialogue, and what is their symbolic interpretation?
3. What is the general theme (*prothesis*) or the aim (*skopos*) of the dialogue?
4. What is the dialogue's place in the order of readings of Plato's dialogues?
5. What is the utility of the dialogue?
6. What is the division into parts or chapters of the dialogue?
7. What is the dialogue's manner of expression and philosophical character?
8. What is the form of the conversation in the dialogue, and what is its symbolic meaning? (Thus, the four conversations of the *Parmenides*, the first direct, the others indirect, are related to four ontological levels.)

6. On Thrasyllus and the tetralogical order of Plato's writings, see Mejer, ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY AND THE DOXOGRAPHICAL TRADITION, in this volume.

*Commentaries composed from notes taken in the teacher's course (*apo phōnēs*) and commentaries composed by the exegete himself: The commentary as a spiritual exercise*

The exegete might choose to compose his own commentary, when important issues are at stake: if the major part of the commentaries of Ammonius were published by his disciples (such as Asclepius and Philoponus), according to the *apo phōnēs* method (Richard, 1950), the importance of his investigations of the *De Interpretatione*, the "syntagmatic" character of which he demonstrated, pushed him to compose his own commentary personally, based on that of Proclus, and accompanied by what amounts to an edition of Aristotle's text. By contrast with the mass of commentaries *apo phōnēs*, often products of the school of Alexandria, which are editions of notes taken by auditors in the courses of professors, the commentaries of Simplicius, too, are, like the great commentaries of Proclus, the fruit of a personal labor of composition and writing: they are a genuine "*œuvre*," sometimes polemical, animated by a concern to summarize the philosophical tradition and to defend the ancestral religion of the Hellenes. And in such *written* commentaries it is not unusual to come across pages attesting to the literary, rhetorical cultivation of their author.

We must add another dimension of the act of writing: the practice of "spiritual exercises" in writing. We owe to it the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius – written variations, stylistically very polished, on the fundamental dogmas of Stoicism – but also many commentaries of late antiquity: for example, the Commentary by Simplicius on the *Handbook* of Epictetus, which Ilsetraut Hadot has shown to be a genuine spiritual exercise in writing (I. Hadot 1978, pp. 147–65; 1996, pp. 51–60). This observation may be applied to many other commentaries, and we must quote a striking passage in which Simplicius expresses the meaning for him of the act of reproducing (and of copying) long passages, word for word, from Iamblichus's commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*:

> As for me, I have even read the commentaries of some of the philosophers I have mentioned; and I have taken as a model the commentary of Iamblichus, with as much care as I was capable of, *in following him step for step and in frequently using the very text of this philosopher*. My aim, in making this copy (*apographē*), was on the one hand to acquire as far as possible, *by the very act of writing*, a more exact understanding of what Iamblichus was saying, and on the other to bring to greater clarity and measure this man's sublimity of thought, which is inaccessible to most people. Third, it was also in a certain manner to concentrate in a shorter form the abundant mass of commentaries of all kinds . . . (*In Cat.* 3.2–9)

This text clearly distinguishes two acts: the literal copying is a meditation that leads the philosopher's intellect to a "more exact," i.e., true, understanding of the difficult doctrines expounded by his predecessor, and this copying alternates with a labor of literary recomposition (simplification of expression and summary of earlier exegeses). Further, the use of the phrase "more exact intelligence" suggests that the act of copying (*apographē*) plays an essential role in awakening *Truth*, which is one of the three "anagogical powers" (Love, Truth, Faith) that determine the dynamism of prayer according to Proclus and Simplicius (Hoffmann, 2000a). This observation gains in

interest when we observe, elsewhere in the work of the same exegete, that the literary whole comprising his commentaries on the *Physics* and on the *De Caelo* culminates in a final prayer in the first person, addressed to the Demiurge, which describes the Commentary itself as a "hymn" in honor of the Demiurge and the World. The hymn is meant for a god, which shows how much the exegesis of Aristotle was oriented toward Neoplatonic spirituality.

How Commentaries Were Composed

The exegesis proceeds according to a division into "lemmas" – shorter or longer sections of the text receiving commentary – and the commentator sometimes distinguishes between the explication of words (*lexis*) and the explication of points of doctrine (*theōria*) (Festugière, 1963 [1971]). Commentaries often deployed a huge documentation, and we know that Simplicius's commentaries abound with quotations and paraphrases of philosophers (beginning with the pre-Socratics) and earlier exegetes belong to the peripatetic and Neoplatonic traditions. Again, the notion of an "authority" – who might be cited through intermediaries – must be carefully distinguished from that of a direct "source": in his Commentary on the *Categories*, a large part of Simplicius's vast documentation comes from his principal if not exclusive sources, which are Porphyry's Commentary *Ad Gedalium* and Iamblichus's Commentary, itself dependent on Porphyry.

The quantitative extent of the commentaries of late antiquity also raises the question of the material media employed – the use during this period of large-format *codices* is known – but we are reduced to making prudent suppositions about the use of micrography to make whole folios or their margins (see below) hold large quantities of text: an important Byzantine manuscript of Aristotle's *Organon*, the *Vaticanus Urbinas graecus* 35 (copied for Arethas of Caesaria around 900) offers an example of micrography used for the transcription of marginal Neoplatonic commentaries, and it may be the heir of a much more ancient book-making tradition.

It may also be asked, still more concretely, what kind of books were used by the Neoplatonic commentators, and how the pages of commentaries were laid out (Hoffmann, 2000b). A major phenomenon of the history of commentaries in antiquity was the transition from the practice of putting the text commented upon and the commentary in separate books (rolls) to the practice of reuniting the commentary with text receiving commentary in the same book and on the same page – parceling the commentary out in the margins or encircling the text commented upon.

Three sets of items of evidence for the existence of commentaries written in the margins of manuscripts should be mentioned: the question is inseparably both codicological (since it is a matter of layout, the use of the space on the page) and literary (in the sense that the very composition of a commentary could take place directly in the margins of a copy, or could depend on sources distributed on the margins of another volume).

Thus the commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days*, attributed to Proclus by the tradition and by the *Suda*, is in fact a commentary by Plutarch of Chaeronea, substantially annotated, in the margins of a copy, by Proclus, to whom the whole was then

attributed: the study of this case allows us to understand the phenomenon of direct composition of a marginal commentary (Farragiana di Sarzana, 1978, 1981, 1987).

The *Life of Proclus*, by his disciple Marinus, furnishes an analogous case. The biographer informs us that Proclus, at his request, would record long commentaries of his own making in the margins of a commentary by Syrianus on Orpheus (see Brisson, 1987). This is what is described in a passage from chapter 27 of this *Life* (Saffrey and Segonds, 2001, p. 32):

> As one day I was reading in his presence the poems of Orpheus and heard him not only relating, in his explications, what Iamblichus and Syrianus said about them, but also adding many other developments more suited to Orphic theology, I asked the philosopher not to leave any longer without commentary a poetry so divinely inspired, but to comment on it too in a perfectly complete manner. And he replied to me that he had often wished to write a commentary, but that he had been obviously prevented by certain dreams: he had seen, he said, his teacher himself, who forbade him, with threats. Whereupon I thought of another way of proceeding: I begged him to consent to record his opinions in the margins of Syrianus's books. As our master, a perfect image of the Good, agreed to this, and made notes in the commentaries of Syrianus, we thus obtained, in the same book, a collection of all their opinions; and so there are also scholia and commentaries by Proclus on Orpheus which are of many lines, even though he was not able to annotate up to the end of the mythology, nor all of the *Rhapsodies.*

Proclus, therefore, had at hand a copy of Syrianus's commentary with margins large enough for him to be able to write in them scholia and commentaries corresponding to the exegesis he developed orally, in one of the last stages of the Neoplatonic cursus of study. As in the case of the commentary on Hesiod, we grasp a very interesting link between the process of literary composition and its codicological frame. Supplementary confirmation of these conclusions comes from the strange fact that the *Suda* attributes to both Syrianus and Proclus the same two works bearing on Orphism: *On the Theology of Orpheus* and *Harmony (Sumphōnia) of Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato with the Chaldaean Oracles.* It has been shown that these works are substantially due to Syrianus – and this fact is historically important, since the *Sumphōnia*, as we have seen, is like a manifesto of the exegetical presuppositions of the Neoplatonic school in the fifth and sixth centuries. Systematic examination of the quotations from the *Rhapsodies* by Damascius – who comments upon Orphic theology and integrates it into the Neoplatonic system by associating it with the testimony and authority of the *Chaldaean Oracles* – has been able to show that Damascius certainly had before him the famous copy of the commentaries of Syrianus (the *Sumphōnia* in particular) whose large margins contained the scholia and commentaries by Proclus (Brisson, 1991). Thus we glimpse the existence of a sacred book of the library in which the successors of Plato worked in the fifth and sixth century.

The sacred significance of such a book – preserved in all probability in the library of the school of Athens – in the eyes of these last pagan devotees, the Neoplatonic philosophers, is attested by an anecdote, reported by Damascius himself in his *Life of Isidorus* (= *Historia Philosopha*), which mentions – we may suppose – other copies of the same Orphic texts. In Alexandria, a "pagan monk" by the name of Sarapion lived in solitude, who cultivated poverty and whose spiritual life went far beyond the technical

subtleties of philosophy. On this account he possessed only two or three books, among them the poems of Orpheus, and these were the books that he sent to Isidorus, the teacher of Damascius, as an act of spiritual recognition (*Vita Isidori*, fr. 287 *Suda*; 231.5–6 and 233.2–4 Zintzen; see Festugière, 1966 [1971, p. 584]).

The third bit of evidence, which is more problematic, is no less interesting. In order to explain the composition and the thematic choices of Boethius, whose commentaries on Aristotle used Athenian sources, James Shiel (1958, 1987) has hypothesized that Boethius had before him a manuscript of Aristotle whose vast margins were filled with an anthology, arranged in "chains," of extracts from Neoplatonic commentaries, especially Porphyry's. This opinion has been disputed by another specialist, Sten Ebbesen (1987), who judges that the same literary and doctrinal phenomena can be explained by the use of *codices* including only commentaries – for example, a complete Porphyry. The question must therefore remain open, but taken together these several kinds of evidence open up stimulating perspectives on the concrete circumstances of the composition of ancient commentaries.

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