CHAPTER 5: READING TEXTS: THE BASIS OF LEARNING

[…] We should now ask how these subjects were taught to the students. In other words, what teaching methods were used? The answer, in short, is two: the first was the *lectio*, a reading with commentary of the basic texts—the *quaestio* or question asked about a text was originally an element of the *lectio* and, to some extent, continued to be a part of it, as we shall see; the second was the *disputatio*, a discussion structured around questions that may have arisen directly from the texts or independently from them.

In this chapter we shall deal with the method of the *lectio*, first looking at how it appears in the commentaries and then on the evidence of the statutes of the faculty of arts in Paris. Our aim is to attempt a comparison of the information given in the statutes with actual practice as it can be reconstructed from the commentaries, especially in terms of the length and number of lessons. Then we will address the *quaestio* (or *questio*, as the normal form was in the later Middle Ages) in order to gain a clear idea of a method which completely changed the way in which texts were explained.

The Method of the *Lectio*

The method of the *lectio* is ancient. In the Middle Ages, authors (*auctores*) were 'read' (*legere*), that is explicated and commented on, long before the university era. The terms *legere* and *lectio* in this specific sense are encountered from the eleventh century onwards. In the university context they also denote the occupation of the masters and the lessons which they gave.

The *lectio*, which was common to all disciplines (focusing on the Bible in theology and the *Corpus iuris* in legal studies) had three levels: the *littera* (literally, 'letter'), the literal explanation of words, sentences and constructions; the *sensus*, or immediate meaning of the text, which was often given as a paraphrase; and the *sententia*, or deeper meaning—in other words, the author's intention—which was extracted through textual analysis.

Despite its long tradition, the *lectio* evolved over time, especially within university teaching. In order to highlight aspects of this evolution, I will compare a commentary of the twelfth century with three types of commentary from the thirteenth century, all three produced in the faculty of arts.

As the twelfth-century example, I will take Peter Abelard's commentary on the logical writings of Aristotle, for instance the *Perihermeneias* or *De interpretatione* (*On interpretation;* ed. Dal Pra 1954). He used Boethius' translation and relied heavily on his commentary.

Abelard wrote two types of commentaries on the books on logic. The first is a literal 'gloss' referring very precisely to the basic text. In a later work, he develops a more elaborate commentary where he relates the different treatises on logic to one another, inserting problems (*quaestiones*) arising from the text but treating these separately from it.

This second type is a continuous commentary, following the original text sentence by sentence without previous fragmentation or division. Aristotle's sentences are marked as *lemmata* by their first words. The commentary clarifies the text, in places literally, elsewhere shedding light on possible contradictions—and always following Boethius' commentary closely. This type of commentary is more elaborate than Abelard's 'literal glosses'—dealing with the same passage in one page rather than five—and contains some independent developments in explanatory notes introduced by *Nota* or *Notandum quod*. There are also

questions treated at length; several possible answers to these are given. We could call this work a commentary in gloss-form, a sort of *glosa continua.*

Abelard's commentary is typical of the twelfth century: the text is divided into small chunks identified by the opening words and the commentary focuses on literal explanation. In the manuscripts the *incipit* of the commented passages is usually underlined. The word *continuatio* often indicates a jump to the proceeding passage, with the author first providing a brief summary of this. Most of the commentaries of the period adjoin sections where problems arising from reading the text are discussed. At times these sections appear more prominent compared to the literal commentary, but in most cases the two elements have equal weight and complement each other (Ebbesen 1993).

Moving on to the thirteenth century, three types of commentary can be distinguished here: we can divide them by whether they are in the form of *lectiones*, *questiones* or *sententia.* We will look at each of these in turn.

Commentaries in the form of lectiones

Commentaries in the form of *lectiones*, common in Paris from 1230 onwards, resembled the traditional literal explanation. They were divided into units of reading or lessons (*lectiones*), and each *lectio* had several fixed elements. The divisions of the commented passage (into several sections and subsections) are set out at the beginning of each *lectio*. The exposition or paraphrase (*expositio* or *sententia in speciali*) then follows; this is sometimes preceded by the *sententia* (*in generali*; alternatively called the *intentio*), in other words the general meaning, so that the reader is given the broad sense of the passage before the commentary moves to literal analysis. The final section, sometimes following an *ordo* or *ordinatio* (describing the place of the passage within the text and the order of its parts) contained the *dubia* or *questiones*, questions or uncertainties arising from the text.

As an example we can take a commentary on the *Topics* ascribed to Robert Kilwardby and dating from before 1240 (Weijers 1995). It has the main elements described above: the division of the text, the exposition—opening with 'in the first part he proceeds as follows', continuing with 'secondly', 'then', etc. and containing explanatory notes often introduced by 'and here one should note'—and questions, introduced for instance by 'firstly we are unsure of', 'secondly we ask the question', etc.

How does this form differ from twelfth-century commentaries? First, there is the systematic division of the basic text into *lectiones*, which would have arisen naturally from the structure of university teaching. Second, the *divisio*, no doubt intended to facilitate memorisation, exposes the structure of the passage and determines its place within the whole work. Third, the questions are not interspersed through the explanation or paraphrase, but assembled at the end of the *lectio*, and, though they are more numerous than in the earlier period, always refer to the form or the interpretation of the basic text.

But there are similarities too: although their structures differ, the aim of the different commentaries remains the same—to provide the reader with a detailed, comprehensive survey of a text. Furthermore, just as in the continuous commentaries of the twelfth century, the basic text is not cited in its entirety: the passages commented on are indicated only by their *incipit*. That is not necessarily to say that during his oral teaching the master would not have first read the whole passage he intended to comment on—it is highly probable that he would have done. The basic texts seem to have circulated widely enough for them to be omitted in the

commentaries, in contrast to preceding centuries, when glosses were placed in the margins of the texts they were explaining.

Commentaries in the form of questiones *and* sententia: *changing methods*

1. Questiones

From the second half of the thirteenth century, another type of commentary appears frequently. This consists exclusively of questions (there are no paraphrases). The number of questions is limited—sometimes they deal with all the basic text's chapters in order, sometimes they address only a few points—and while they often help the reader to understand the text, they also frequently bear no obvious relation to it. A very important characteristic is that they take the form of disputed questions and use a basic dialectic scheme.

As an example we can take Boethius of Dacia's commentary on the *Topics*, written around 1270 (ed. 1976). This is representative of a transitional phase, as it still contains a few passages commented not in the form of questions but using paraphrase. One of the questions, corresponding to the second *lectio*, runs as follows:

The question is raised: is the conclusion a different thing from the syllogism?
- *(3 arguments for the affirmative answer)*
- For the contrary position: Aristotle says so in the text *(explication and five other arguments)* From these arguments it appears that the conclusion is not the essence of the syllogism.
- Solution: One must say that the conclusion is not the essence of the syllogism, because […]. And that is why Aristotle says in his text that […]. Thus the conclusion seems to be a certain effect of the syllogism.
- As for the first argument [for the contrary position] one must say […] *(refutation of the three contrary arguments)*.

The form of this question is a good example of the ones occurring in this type of commentary. The questions of these commentaries typically take a dialectic form: they formulate the question, take a stance on the answer (either yes or no), provide arguments to the contrary, propose a solution and refute any opposing arguments. Instead of the *lectiones* with their divisions by passage, literal exposition and *dubia* (points of doubt) at the end, the new type of commentary merely consists of a series of this type of question relating to those points seen as important. It therefore assumes that students already know the basic text.

When would the basic text have been read? Most probably the master would have dealt with it during his ordinary lessons in the manner we have just seen—by selecting important points and developing them in the form of questions—while the students or sometimes, it seems, the master himself carried out the continuous reading of the text during classes reserved for the *lectio cursoria*.

2. Sententia

From the second half of the thirteenth century we also find commentaries of another type. These mainly provide a detailed paraphrase explaining the sense (*sententia*) of the text and, as with the first type, are divided into *lectiones.* The commentaries may contain a brief division of the passage and always contain a detailed paraphrase with short questions inserted.

An example of this is Angel of Camerino's commentary on the *Topics*—entitled *Sententia totius libri Topicorum*—which was written before 1296, probably in Paris (ms. Firenze, Conv. Soppr. G.8.265). We can summarise the structure of the second *lectio* on the passage containing the definition of the syllogism, which we have seen previously. It starts with a brief division of the commented text, followed by an explanatory note (*Notandum*) and by a *dubium* (*dubitaret forte aliquis…*), though the response to this is not structured according to the dialectic scheme. Aristotle's definition of syllogism and a paraphrase of this passage follow, before three explanatory notes, the third of which is in fact nothing more than a paraphrase. Concluding the section, the commentary takes up again and explains the remainder of the passage in the form of a paraphrase.

Compared with the first type of commentary (in the form of *lectiones*), we should note that the paraphrase is not continuous and does not form one of the constitutive parts of the commentary. It is interrupted by *notanda* and *dubia*, in this case thirteen explanatory notes and a single question, and far fewer questions are asked about the text. Further, the *sententia* commentary differs markedly from the type exemplified by Boethius of Dacia, for it consists predominantly of literal exposition. The fact that it provides a thorough explanation of the basic text might prompt us to the conclusion that it represents the type of reading undertaken during the *lectio cursoria*, as we shall see further on.

In short, it would appear then that the literal type of commentary was replaced during the second half of the thirteenth century by two new forms: the *sententia* commentary, for a complete and detailed exposition, and the disputed question commentary, for a more profound investigation of the text.

While this description is helpful, it is too schematic and does not consider various deviant forms. Moreover, it is limited to only some texts, albeit ones which seem largely representative of the production of the time, as suggested by the findings of Sten Ebbesen on the commentaries of the *Sophistici elenchi* (Ebbesen 1993). It is crucial that we do not rely on an excessively clear-cut distinction. The fact that it is impossible to find any new commentaries of the literal type on the *Topics* after 1260 (Green-Pedersen 1980) does not prove that the extant commentaries were then seen as inconsequential. Above all, we should point out that we have only written records, and these offer merely an indication of what took place in the classes. Thus, the schematised summary should be treated with a degree of caution, for no generalisation can take into account the multiplicity of forms that existed.

On the whole, however, it would seem that this classification of the commentaries remains valid: it traces a relatively clear evolution from the continuous literal commentary of the twelfth century towards more academic commentaries, some literal in character and others more selective and innovative (Ebbesen 1993; Flüeler 1994). We shall later return to the commentaries in the form of questions (see Chapter 6), which provide evidence a major transformation in teaching at that time.

The *Lectio* in the Statutes of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Paris

The information on the *lectio* that we can derive from the statutes is different. It is less concerned with the content and method of the classes than with their actual organisation. Let us begin by looking at what they tell us about the distinction between two types of classes. The first type is the *lectio ordinaria*, the teaching of set texts by the *magister regens* (the regent master) in the morning (*hora ordinaria)* and in accordance with the 'ordinary' method

(*legere ordinarie)*, which involved commenting in a general but thorough way on the texts and subsequently developing questions. The second is the *lectio cursoria* or *ad cursum* on the same texts but this time using a different method, the 'cursory' or rapid explanation of the immediate sense. A third type could perhaps be added to these, the *lectio extraordinaria*. We shall return to this later.

The first statute to mention the *lectio* is Robert of Courson's letter from 1215, which we have already come across in Chapter 2. Here we encounter the expression *legere ordinarie et non ad cursum* which shows that a distinction was already being made at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Then there is the letter of Gregory IX from 1231, also quoted above (Chapter 2), which includes the phrase *ordinarie legere* on the subject of Priscian's books.

An important statute laid down by the faculty of arts in 1244 or 1245 determined the practical details of the *lectio cursoria.* It allows us to conclude two things. First, we can see that the *lectio cursoria* was minutely regulated. The year was divided into three periods—from the beginning of October until Lent (essentially autumn and winter), from Lent until Easter (the forty days during which the examinations for the baccalaureate took place) and from Easter until the beginning of October. For each period the hours when 'cursory' lessons could be held are specified. The importance attached to the *disputatio* and the bachelors' disputations related to the *determinatio* (the test by which they obtained their degree) is also clear. These are topics to which we shall return later (see Chapter 6 and 9). Furthermore, the time intended for the 'ordinary' lessons was the beginning of the day, before the 'third hour' (about nine o'clock). They were followed by time reserved for disputations (on days when they were authorised). The *lectio cursoria* was evidently considered less important than these other two types of teaching and the reason for laying down this statute was probably that the cursory reading had begun to take up time intended for other types of teaching.

The second piece of information this statute provides is that the *lectio cursoria* could be given by both masters and bachelors. No doubt the masters often entrusted this type of teaching to one or other of their students, though this was neither obligatory nor commonplace.

Another statute, issued by the English nation in 1252, mentions the 'ordinary' and 'cursory' lessons from the point of view of the students since it uses the expression *ordinarie*/*cursive audire* ('hearing' or following lessons) and draws attention to the issue of repeated reading of the same texts, to which we shall return later.

The 1255 statute of the faculty of arts, which contains prescriptions for reading together with the minimum time required to be spent on this, mentions 'extraordinary lessons'. From 1 October till 24 June the masters were authorised to give a maximum of two 'ordinary' classes a day, both of which were required to take place under 'ordinary' conditions. 'Cursory' classes were limited to two if the day were to start with 'ordinary' classes and to three on all other days. The masters were unable to escape from this limitation by giving their 'extraordinary' classes, by which one should probably understand lessons outside of hours intended for 'ordinary' classes and following the method of the 'cursory' lessons.

In 1283 or 1284 some masters responded to accusations made by the chancellor as follows:

When this same chancellor then goes on to say that the masters only give one class a day reading a passage from one book and another day from another book, he fails to demonstrate that the Faculty is in any way deteriorating. We believe that reading thus is of more use to the students than proceeding in any other fashion, as the children (*pueri*) who receive education in one discipline lose their accumulated knowledge if not subsequently assimilated through repetition. However, the students are incapable of undertaking any such repetition if, after having read one book, we pass immediately on to

read them an entirely different book. Indeed, one finds today that we read more out of the same book than was done previously, when two books were read simultaneously (*CUP* I, 515).

Clearly, the situation had changed. The 'ordinary' classes were reduced to only one a day, or at any rate to just a single basic text at a time, with a subject repeated, no doubt in the afternoon, before the master began another text the following day. The two ordinary classes which the previous statute mentioned were thus held on separate subjects, corresponding with what we have seen on the subject of the times of reading the various texts. The *De anima*, for instance, was read either at the same time as the *libri naturales* or at the same time as the books on logic.

'Ordinary' and 'cursory' reading

What do we now know of the *lectio ordinaria* and *cursoria*? The answer is, in fact, very little. These two types of classes and what they involved are not described. The *lectio ordinaria* clearly took place under 'ordinary' conditions; it was given by the *magister regens* ('regent master') on the texts on the official curriculum and according to the method of the 'ordinary' lesson, as we have seen previously. The only time that we encountered the term *lectio extraordinaria*, it had a vague sense, denoting 'non-ordinary', and could well have been identical to the *lectio cursoria.* But what do *lectio cursoria* and *legere cursorie* mean?

A comparison with other universities offers no solution. We find the same terms elsewhere, for instance in England, but their meaning in the texts appears equally indefinite. However, an interpretation of these expressions is not impossible. From the very beginning we have seen there was a distinction between two ways of taking classes: 'ordinary' and *ad cursum* (later *cursoria* was used). This last expression can be translated as 'rapidly' or 'without delay'—in other words, passing over difficult points—and therefore probably refers to the 'running' paraphrase of the basic text (Maierù 1994).

A comparison with the faculty of theology might help. Towards the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth century, we encounter three categories of bachelors enrolled there. The first, the *biblici* or *cursores*, read the Bible. In fact these two terms are not synonymous: a student would need to be a *cursor* before becoming a *biblicus.* But short of entering into the details of this complex subject, one can say that the *cursores* read the Bible in a 'running' fashion, explaining the literal meaning without developing or pondering any questions arising from the text. We could see this style of reading as parallel to the 'cursory' class.

Cursory reading corresponding to sententia *commentaries*

So do we have texts corresponding to the *lectio cursoria*, just as we have written traces of the *lectio ordinaria* in numerous commentaries? As far as the beginning of the university period is concerned, until about 1270, there are only very few texts which could be identified with the *lectio cursoria.* It is likely that the masters or bachelors simply used their basic texts to hold this type of lesson, occasionally noting in the margins what they required for the current explanation. Those manuscripts of Aristotle's texts that are simply dotted here and there with a few glosses are undoubtedly remnants of this type of teaching. Moreover, there are certain commentaries which, because of their brief, rapid character, seem to represent the notes from a 'cursory' rather than an 'ordinary' lesson. Robert Kilwardby's *Notule posteriorum*, for example, differs from other commentaries surviving by this well-known master. It is a quick explanation of the basic text with explanatory notes, with no section dedicated to questions. We could suppose that it is the result of a 'cursory' lesson, perhaps written down in order to complete the corpus of commentaries on Aristotle's logical works, usually taught in the 'ordinary' classes.

It is possible then that from around 1270 onwards the commentaries in the form of *sententia* which we have seen above developed from the *lectio cursoria.* Their structure, with a literal

explanation of the text concluding with explanatory notes, seems to correspond to this type of reading. The fact that they are fairly numerous is explained by the transformation of the *lectio ordinaria* at this time. During the ordinary classes, when the masters commented upon the manuscripts in the form of disputed questions, the continuous explication of the basic texts shifted in importance. It seems clear that the teachers developed a greater tendency to write down this type of lesson than previously.

Repeated reading of the same texts

Although it may now be clearer what the *lectio ordinaria* and the *lectio cursoria* actually denote, one problem remains to be resolved: why was it thought necessary to take the same course several times prior to being examined on it? The statute of the English nation, mentioned above, provides no hint as to the reason for this. It prescribes two 'ordinary' lessons and one 'cursory' lesson for some books, while for others it prescribes two 'cursory' and one 'ordinary' lesson, or one of each. We can understand why the students were required to take one 'ordinary' lesson and one 'cursory' lesson, since this would provide them with two different and complementary ways of reading. It is also clear that allowance was made for two 'cursory' lessons for those books considered sufficiently important, so that the students might gain a thorough knowledge of these fundamental texts. However, it remains unclear why certain books needed several 'ordinary' lessons. We should note that the statute dates from 1252 and is therefore prior to when 'ordinary' classes generally consisted of disputed questions on the topic of only a few important points.

Furthermore, right from the outset, the 'ordinary' lessons included a series of questions on the difficulties arising from the reading of the text, questions that naturally depended upon the master. Should we assume that the students followed the lessons of more than one master? Or did the masters simply repeat what had been said in the previous class? Perhaps here too it was simply believed that the repetition of the reading of a text, together with its division, its general meaning and its questions, would only assist memorisation, knowledge and understanding. One important point that should be made here is that this problem applies only to books of logic and grammar, the primary basis of any further study.

Statutes and Real-Life Practice

Let us attempt to imagine a day of classes at the faculty of arts in the thirteenth century. During the period when teaching was regulated by the statutes, from 1 October to 24 June, the day would start early with up to two 'ordinary' lessons given by a master. For most of the thirteenth century the masters would have taught two different texts at the same time. As we have seen, they would, for instance, have taught the *De anima* after a lesson on one of the books on logic or after a class on natural history. During days on which public disputations could be held, these would proceed only after the ordinary classes had taken place. As we shall see later, on days when there was solemn disputation by the masters, no classes were held at all and the entire faculty would attend the session.

After this, the 'cursory' lessons took place, frequently in the afternoon. These were limited to two on days when ordinary lessons were held and to three on other days. The 'cursory' lessons were given by the masters themselves or by one of their students on texts on logic or grammar. We have seen that the precise time of this lesson was dependant on other activities: when there was no disputation, classes could start relatively early, while at other times they might only start towards the evening.

Afterwards, students would undoubtedly have continued their studies in their hostels, going over what they had covered during the day. It was an exhaustive programme. There were numerous feast days and these would certainly have been *non legibiles* ('without lectures'), but we have seen that this applied only to the 'ordinary' lessons and not to the 'cursory' readings or the reading of optional texts. One also needs to take into account that the hours were not time-tabled and fixed, as

they are today; they were dependant on the time of year and the length of the day. In winter, when daylight was curtailed, the hours would have been shorter than in the summer.

Determining the length of a class is difficult. We know that in theology one could not read more than one chapter of the Bible per day, but the length of the class would obviously depend on the commentary. I have attempted to work out the length of the *lectiones* by assessing the length of the text in two commentaries on the *Topics*—one by Robert Kilwardby and one by Adenulph of Anagni, the last one more widely diffused. Both are explicitly divided into *lectiones*. The division into *lectiones* does not always correspond to the chapters of the Aristotelian text, reflecting the fact that these are variable in length. Also, the divisions are not consistent between the two authors. For instance, Robert divided the first book into fifteen lessons, whereas Adenulph split it into twenty-three. The length of the *lectiones* by Robert are highly variable (from three-quarters to more than two columns in the manuscript), whereas Adenulph's are more consistent (at least for a large part of the first book, where each lesson takes up about three and a half to four columns).

The impression is that the length of a *lectio* could vary from one to two hours, but it is not possible to establish changes in length according to season. In all probability we should see the term *lectio* as a unit of meaning, a logical section of the text, rather than an hour, for example, of class time. The duration of the oral commentary corresponding to such a section would, of course, vary.

We might also ask ourselves in how many *lectiones* each text was dealt with. We have already seen in a statute of 1255 that the faculty of arts set a minimum time for the reading of each text on the curriculum. The treatise *De accentibus*, for example, was to be read with the *Barbarismus* in a minimum of six weeks and we find that the commentaries on this text are usually divided into six sections. We could thus assume that the master gave one class per week on this particular topic. Furthermore, Adenulph's commentary on the *Topics* is divided into around one hundred and ten *lectiones*, Robert Kilwardby's into sixty-five. If they were read at the rate of one a week, in parallel with other books, the *Topics* would thus have taken more than a year (the academic year lasted from 1 October until 24 June, or thirty-nine weeks). But it is also possible that there were several lessons a week on the same book. According to the statutes, the *Ethica* had to be read in twelve weeks when studied in conjunction with another book, or six weeks if studied in isolation. A commentary on the *Ethica* attributed to Robert Kilwardby is composed of thirty-six *lectiones* of varying length. Was this taught in three *lectiones* a week while read alongside another text and six a week when on its own?

Unfortunately it is impossible to establish any sort of concrete timetable for the faculty of arts. More generally, however, one can say that the students followed both 'ordinary' and 'cursory' classes for all the books on the curriculum, starting with the 'old logic' and grammar before moving on to the 'new logic' and Aristotle's treatises on the soul, ethics, natural history etc. At the beginning of the thirteenth century this programme would have taken about six years from start to finish, but in the course of time the length of studies was reduced to some three or four years, as we have seen. In addition, the students almost certainly followed extraordinary classes on subjects that were not requisite components of the examinations. As we shall see in the following chapters, they also participated in various disputations and exercises.

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