

Literary Mediation of Knowledge and Biblical Studies

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PARADOXICALLY, the most critical biblical scholars who deal with history, as well as rather conservative theologians who defend the theory of “subjective inspiration,” share the same prejudice about the “extrinsic” relationship of signification among language, thought, and reality. They assume plainly that language represents thought, just as thought represents reality. As “Aristotelian” as it may seem, such an understanding of the relations between language, thought, and reality in terms of representation falls away from the balance produced by Aristotle’s vigorous taking into account of the *doxa*, on the one hand, and of the senses, on the other, in the very “fabric” of knowledge.

However, this assumption allows critical historians to distinguish between historical facts and the (hagiographic, nationalistic, poetic, mythic, epic, etc.) way in which they are told and written, while it lets theologians imagine they can construe divine inspiration in terms of superior knowledge (“meaning” or “information”) directly infused into the human mind as if it were utterly deprived of language (and of cultural features inherent in it).

Now, this account of human knowing is not only simplistic—which has been very well established by philosophers and theologians, since H.-G. Gadamer denounced the “oblivion of language” in western thought;¹

¹ Cf. J. Grondin, “L’universalité de l’herméneutique et de ma rhétorique: Ses sources dans le passage de Platon à Augustin dans *Vérité et méthode*,” *Revue internationale de philosophie* 54 (2000): 469–85; and, obviously, H.-G. Gadamer, *Vérité et méthode*, rev. ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1965, 1990), French trans. Pierre Fruchon, Jean Grondin, and P. Merlo (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

it is also unrealistic (and finally wrong): The “incarnation” of thought in words necessarily accompanies the beginning of all human knowledge in the senses. In the following pages, I would like to suggest that, surprising as it may seem—dealing with such a “postmodern” theme—the “linguistic turn” of contemporary thought could allow a deep renewal of biblical studies—theology as well as exegesis.

1. The “Oblivion of Language” in Biblical Studies

A strong criticism of historicism was already proposed a long time ago; it would be useless to repeat here what others have better said before.² One could just add that the (Kantian?) dualism between historical fact and its biblical account may be analyzed as an expansion of a deeper dichotomy between things and words³ spread in all fields of knowledge since the beginnings of nominalism. One cannot be more unfaithful to the biblical way of thinking, which usually supposes a continuum between word, actions, and things (from *dābār* in the Hebrew Bible, to *rhēma* in the New Testament).

I would like to focus here on linguistic and literary lacunae in the meditation of the theologians who try to revive the theme of subjective inspiration. Over and against those defending the idea of an “objective inspiration,” namely an inspiration of the text as text whatever its historical producers might have had in mind as they wrote or transmitted it, the main point of these theologians is that to be a true human author (and not only the producer of a text), one should act in order to communicate a meaning, and that there should not be too large a gap between the human meaning intended by the human author and the inspired, divine one. Would I dare note that even official documents such as the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s “Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1994) are imbued with far too simple (and rather rationalist) conceptions of what “to be an author” means? One has rightly expressed that “God speaks in Sacred Scriptures through men in human fashion,” but so far as one’s anthropology is influenced by modern subjectivism (and its rather “angelic” reduction of humanity to the pure alliance of reason and will), one does not draw all the consequences of this statement in terms of culture. That is why I would like to focus on that theme.

² I think here of the brilliant essay by J. Ratzinger, *Schriftauslegung in Widerstreit*, *Quaestiones disputatae*, 17, *Herausgegeben von Joseph Ratzinger* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 15–44; in French, “L’exégèse biblique en conflit,” trans. and ed. Cl. Barthes, *L’exégèse chrétienne aujourd’hui* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), 65–109.

³ Cf. my “Esquisse d’une critique des méthodes littéraires,” in *L’autorité des Écritures*, ed. J.-M. Poffet (Paris: Le Cerf, 2002), 259–98.

But before I begin, it is important to recall that the study of objective inspiration is not a mere exegetical trend. It is required by the Tradition and the Bible themselves. As Denis Farkasfalvy is so right to remind us in his contribution, inspiration at its first appearance as a theological theme was more a matter of reception (precisely, the result of regressive analyses concerning the condition of exegesis) than of production. We have but few examples of texts that would have been reputedly inspired straight from their composition (prophetic oracles?—note that judging from the very fate of the prophets themselves, these texts, as inspired as they claimed to be, rarely raised great enthusiasm). On the contrary, whereas the author of one very “Jewish” book, namely Sirach, shows several signs of a pretension to be inspired (or to be considered as such),⁴ the Jewish rabbinic tradition has excluded it from the scriptural canon; nevertheless the rabbis loved it greatly (the *Talmud* quotes it several times). One of the best hypotheses to explain this paradoxical decision is that in the first leading milieux of the reorganized Judaism, one was shocked by any pretence of direct inspiration, by any claim to have a personal and privileged relation to God.⁵

Let us go back to what authorship really is. To compose or to write a text does not mean simply to try to communicate one’s thoughts; what goes on when human beings write is not only a sort of translation of pure, preceding thought into words for at least two reasons. First, thought is formed only once it has been worded.⁶ Second, in the very act of speaking or writing lies an implicit assent to the general rules of human communication—including its difficulties, impossibilities, and other phenomena related to a “murkiness” of human relationships. To speak, and even more to write, is to accept that one’s words will be misunderstood, or understood

⁴ Cf. Sir 1–14 and the constant tendency of Ben Sira to involve himself in the series of ancient heroes and fathers he praises (compare Sir 46–48 and Sir 51:1–12).

⁵ I owe this opinion to M. Gilbert, S.J., in a seminar on Sir 51:1–12 he led in 2005 at the Ecole Biblique, Jerusalem. I wonder if the use of Sirach by *minim*, especially by *nozerim*, and the social exchanges between Jews of diverse beliefs it supposes, did not as well play a part in the exclusion.

⁶ German Romantics and later French Surrealists were fond of these kinds of phenomena; even Thomas Aquinas confides this here and there. Cf. *Sermo in I Dominica post Epiphaniam*: “Puer Jesus” (Paris: Vivès, 1889), XXII, 668–69, quoted, translated, and commented on in my *Littérature et théologie, une saison en enfer*, vol. 1, *Thomas d’Aquin, poète théologien* (Geneva: Ad solem, 2003), ch. 8, “‘Transmettre à d’autres ce qu’on a contemplé’: la dramatique littéraire de la vocation du théologien,” esp. 286–87. All of us who are not only researchers but also teachers have experienced the inventiveness of speaking as such!

in a way other than that which one intended.⁷ Thus, to speak means to yield to all sorts of anti-communicational hindrances, and to yield to linguistic conventions more or less related to death. That is the reason why Northrop Frye, in a sublime sentence, said that as soon as God agrees to speak, he somehow condemns himself to death.⁸

Ongoing research, like that of John Milbank—very much inspired by G. Vico—lets us better understand that, insofar as they are expressed, one's ideas are always more than one's ideas, and that it is possible to think this without necessarily subscribing to any (post)modern materialistic theory of the "dissolution of the subject" (whether into psychological impulses or into sociological features). The linguistic ground for this would be the very structure of linguistic signification: The meaning of one word is determined by that of all other words in the language in question; to speak is also to yield to those connotations. To think, as well, is to forge concepts out of originally linguistic materials. Thus authorship, even in the modern acceptance of the term, implies a sort of dispossession of the eventual meaning of one's text in the very effort to communicate.⁹

This was more true in the time of oral and semi-oral civilization, before the invention of printing: At that time, to write seldom meant to address one's contemporaries as such. Rather, the very medium one used implied a desire to transcend time and space and an (implicit) contention to get rid of all relative conditions determining one's words, to reach a more universal level of assertion and truth.¹⁰ Here one sees how narrow the definition of the literal meaning can be, as "what the author wanted

⁷ Cf. the famous article Paul Valéry wrote after he had followed a lecture about his poem "Le cimetière marin" given by G. Cohen, *Essai d'explication du Cimetière Marin suivi d'une glose analogue sur La Jeune Parque précédée d'un avant-propos de Paul Valéry au sujet du Cimetière Marin* (Paris: N.R.F., 1946).

⁸ Cf. N. Frye, *The Great Code, the Bible, and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), as found in *Le Grand Code, la Bible et la littérature*, "Poétique," trans. C. Malamoud (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 168: "Parler, c'est entrer dans les conventions du langage, qui font partie de la conscience humaine de la mort; ainsi, si nous poussons cette image assez loin, nous arrivons à la possibilité qu'aussitôt que Dieu parle et se transforme en Parole de Dieu, il s'est condamné à mort."

⁹ See John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (London: Blackwell, 1997), ch. 3, "Pleonasm, Speech and Writing," 55–83.

¹⁰ Surely Israel's prophets intended to make use of such properties of writing when they decided to write down some of their oracles (cf. Ez 37:16; Hb 2:2; Is 8:1, 30:8; Jer 30; and the fate of Jeremiah's scroll in the intriguing narrative of Jer 36 and the prophet's decision to dictate another one). In the New Testament, Paul exploits the resources of writing in the same way: He is fully aware of the possibility letters offer him to reach many readers beyond the original addressees (cf. 1 Thes 5:27; 2 Cor 1:1; Col 4:16).

to communicate to his contemporaries.” Ought not one to think that God, without reducing the human (that is, rational and free) way of composing, used this human wish to transcend the space and time manifest in the cultural device of writing to deliver his own Word through the human words of this precise person? This harmonizes with the Augustinian “Deus intimior intimo meo” in the economy of creation and with the Johannine “Ego sum vitis et vos palmities”¹¹ in that of redemption.

Moreover, authorship in ancient times was not understood in the quite subjective way it is today. Rather than a personal, original, skillful, or gifted individual succeeding in setting forth his own ideas, the author of a book was first and foremost the public warrant of it as a whole, however much work he had actually done on it. This allowed the so-called “pseudepigraphic” books to enter the biblical canon without any intention to deceive anyone. One must also take into better account the different roles of the composer, the redactor, the publisher, and the author of a book in antiquity. In the precise case of biblical literature, which is very much an ethnic one, one could say that a book has several *authors* (in the modern sense of the term): Compilers and redactors added their intentions to that of the primary composer (when they did not substitute them for it). Sometimes, their intention may well have been closer to the divine one, as far as we know it after the story of Redemption has taken place—the Hebraic rewritings of some Sumerian myths or hymns are certainly closer to God’s intentions than the original pagan prayers they imitate. Sometimes the publishing phase (its inclusion into a canonical book) may have been more important than the compositional one, by way of thinking about the text as inspired. At least it might be assumed that the inspired meaning of a biblical text results from the providential guiding of the cultural succession of human intentions and from the “sublation” of the former by the latter rather than from their merely chronological heaping up.

What was called the “grindings” (*bruissements*) of the text by the French literary theorists in the 1960s and 1970s¹²—from the mere lacuna to the most illogical passage, passing through all kinds of textual corruptions and other accidents in the oral or written handing over of the text—do belong to “the Word of God in its historical communication,” to speak in the magisterial way, and one should strive to get rid of an overly romantic vision of inspiration as a psychological or noetic phenomenon. Besides, even those who insist on subjective inspiration are eventually bound to admit that, gifted as they may have been with extra insights, the human

¹¹ John 15:5.

¹² Cf. R. Barthes, *Le bruissement de la langue*, “Points Essais no. 258” (Paris: Seuil, 1984, 1993).

authors of the Bible “were still somewhat in the dark,”¹³ which may simply be a way of evoking the irreducible “murkiness” of human communication in its (necessarily) cultural condition recalled here above.

Among all other literary phenomena flowing from this complex human authorship of biblical texts, special mention should be made of the literal play on the enunciative framing of words and discourses, which enables authors or redactors to disentangle pieces of words from any specific intention of their original speakers. As it usually deals with literary-theological issues, John’s Gospel expressly mentions that possibility,¹⁴ and further examples may easily be found.¹⁵ Whatever the enunciative framing of a word may originally have been, as soon as it has entered the canon, it is in the way of being said “by the Holy Spirit,” as the redactor of Acts usually makes explicit. Direct shift, without any transition, from an “I-you” to an “I-he” enunciative structure is a massive phenomenon in the Psalms as well as in many prophetic passages, so that the reader is sometimes not able to say who is speaking to whom; rather than the defective result of textual transmission one could interpret these facts as a strong poetic principle working throughout the entire Bible and preparing Jesus’ unique manner of speaking. This could perhaps offer a useful distinction between a generic intention (to utter an inspired message) and specific intentions (a message destined to such-and-such people) to conciliate the theories of subjective and objective inspirations.

Beyond this peculiar point, let us conclude that only a careful consideration of what to think or to write really means will allow theologians to hinge the divine and human authorships of the Bible upon one another. To grant the cultural “murkiness” all its bearing in the process of human communication could bring about a new cultural understanding of the traditional account of *oeconomia revelationis* taking place “gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis.”¹⁶ The *gesta* in question might refer to the literary pragmatic bearing and shaping of the *verba* throughout time, as well as to the events told in these texts. These cultural events,

¹³ M. Gorman, “Inspired Authors and their Speech-Acts: A Philosophical Commentary on Papers by Denis Farkasfalvy and Gary A. Anderson,” in this volume.

¹⁴ Cf. Jn 11:51, 19:19–22 deals also with the problem of enunciation, enhancing the point that those who require factual exactitude are Jesus’ enemies. (It is commented on beautifully in that way by Thomas Aquinas, especially in his *Lectura super Johannem*, XIX, l.4.)

¹⁵ Cf. Mt 18:4–5, quoting Gn 2:24 as if it were a divine saying, though it is a narrative comment on the preceding story: The whole of the narrative, diegesis and metadiegetic comments is considered as worded by God. I am indebted here to D. Farkasfalvy, “Biblical Foundations for a Theology of Inspiration,” in this volume.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, no. 2.

taken over by God when he inspires authors and texts, are also part of the historical communication of God's Word. But even this divine overtaking has to be described in cultural terms. Let us now come to this point.

2. The "Fulfilment of Scriptures" as a Practice— Not a Theme—in an Oral Civilization, and Its Hermeneutical Consequences

Not just any word allows God to speak through human speeches. In order to reveal himself to the extent he wishes, God coins specific language. This is "the language of the Scriptures." I would like to stress here the decisive importance of the fulfillment of the Scriptures and relate it not so much to precise theological aims one can attribute to specific authors as to cultural conditions shared by a whole society.

For too long this has been considered one theme among others in biblical studies. Much theological work has been achieved concerning the importance of events happening "according to the Scriptures" in the *Credo* as well as in the Gospel. Exegetical research has also dealt with the "quotations of fulfillment," for example in Matthew and the other Gospels. But the present-day literary theory of "dialogism" and "intertextuality,"¹⁷ which has drawn our attention to the fact that each of our words is made up of a lot of words already said by others, could help us to understand better that such explicit quotations are only the tip of the iceberg. Moreover, in modern times, to quote the Scriptures means to open books and concordances to make an erudite composition. Such was not the case in the culture of Jesus, for example. In those times, one was taught to read and sometimes to write with (and within) the Bible, so that the Bible itself became a sort of language.

How many people were actually literate in first-century Palestine is a disputed issue; however, for those who were, this was realized through several social institutions, especially schools (to say nothing of the religious dealings with texts in the *bet ha midrash*). One learned to read by means of biblical texts, and probably one of the first to be learned was Deuteronomy 6:4–7.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children,

¹⁷ I would mention especially M. Bakhtin, *Le principe dialogique*, ed. T. Todorov (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981); O. Ducrot, *Le Dire et le dit* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984); P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1990).

and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

Rather than “talk of them,” one should understand “we-dibbarta bam” as “and you will speak in them,” or even better (*be-* with the agentive meaning), “so that they will be your language.”¹⁸ The Hebrew boy was given, at one time, a fixed corpus of special texts to be learned by heart, and an actual linguistic competence. To this competence the first psalm probably alludes. It is superbly illustrated as well by the longest of our psalms, Psalm 119, a poem that exhausts the whole alphabet—symbolically, all possible words—only to tell how wonderful the word of God is for those who agree to speak and live in it.

Specific religious institutions, like those one can imagine thrived in Qumran, elaborated on this common canvas. According to Essene rules, for example, one was reputed to be gifted with the Holy Spirit at the same time as one was definitively admitted into the community; this Spirit was not construed as anything other than a special ability to interpret the Scriptures anew, to interpret times and events according to Scripture (collections of relevant passages were probably worked out therefore, in order to boost one’s memory and skillfulness, and these are probably the ancestors of the later Christian “testimonia”) and, even more, to compose fresh “inspired” texts.¹⁹

Finally, in a way that could remind us of the influence of trends diffused by contemporary mass media on our very own manners of thinking or of speaking (in fact, in a much stronger way, because at that time of papyri and parchments, there was obviously less competition than in modern times between what one was taught and foreign information), the Bible happened to frame not only the overall expression of human thought, but also to imbue the very perception of reality. Holy Scripture eventually brought forth all the linguistic material necessary to signify one’s feelings, memories, or stories. Scripture was not so much read as enacted.

This passage of perception through words (which is in fact a *shaping* by them), modern as it may seem, is of pure biblical vein: From Exodus 20:18 onward, the Israelite story is that of a People who “sees voices.”²⁰

¹⁸ Cf. E. Nodet, *Histoire de Jésus? Nécessités et limites d’une enquête* (Paris: Le Cerf, 2003), 35.

¹⁹ Cf. E. Nodet and J. Taylor, *Essai sur les origines du christianisme, une secte éclatée* (Paris: Cerf, 1998) 20–23.

²⁰ Cf. Ex 20:18: “wəkol-ha’am ro’im ‘et-haqqolot [wəet-hallappîdim],” usually translated in a soft way: “and all the people saw the thunderings [and the lightnings].” In fact, “pas d’oralité sans voracité. On n’accède au sens qu’en mangeant du signifiant. Il faut en passer par la guerre des signes et des sens pour connaître

This constant synesthesia of hearing, seeing, and reading in the Bible should be related to the oral tradition that has been bearing it for centuries, for the features listed just above point toward institutions bearing an oral literature and, more generally, toward oral civilization. In a recent contribution, J. Dunn has listed some of their main characteristics, and stressed the major methodological consequences a new appreciation of this fact should have in biblical studies. What is required is nothing less than “re-altering the default setting” of biblical exegesis.²¹ I would like to stress here an issue he has not addressed directly in this article, namely that of our access to history.

In oral civilization, to keep the memory of an event or of a person does not mean simply to let one’s memory be printed by mental traces that—maybe, maybe not—will be recalled afterward and transformed into materials for narrative-buildings. Straight from the outset, unusual events are being committed to memory; they trigger a cultural process of memorizing-through-telling. They are carefully worded; words are shared with other witnesses or with different hearers among institutional audiences, who contribute to choose, hone, and fix them (nevertheless, one should not exaggerate the fixity of oral traditions²² that convey as well a conception of understanding events or words as the possibility to retell them afresh). Obviously a good means to agree about the way you should express something with other hearers or tellers (who would then share in that oral tradition) is to use preexisting patterns that are already “telling” for the people—as well as being told to them. For that reason, “scriptural” narratives or poems played a great role, through quotations or allusions, as soon as the composition of an oral text began in the “biblical civilization.”

One’s skill in referring to Scriptures was boosted by the fact that in the reception of Scripture itself, the principle of commenting on Scripture according to Scripture reigned. Subtle techniques were elaborated among prerabbinical circles, the most famous and refined of which was probably the *remez* (or “wink”)—that is, echoing discreetly but systematically in

que le cosmos est serein.” [no orality without voracity. One cannot arrive at the meaning but by eating some signifier. One must proceed by way of a struggle between signs and meanings in order to understand that the cosmos is serene] J.-L. Evrard, preface, in Franz Rosenzweig, *L’écriture, le verbe et autres essais*, trans. J.-L. Evrard, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998), 6–7.

²¹ J. D. G. Dunn, “Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition,” *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 139–75.

²² Cf. H. Wansbrough, ed., *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 12: “We have been unable to deduce or derive any marks which distinguish clearly between an oral and a written transmission process. Each can show a similar degree of fixity and variability.”

one text many former texts. The understatement inherent in this kind of literature was obviously a source of aesthetic pleasure as well as a means to let the reader experience for himself the deepest meaning of the text, rather than provide him with a ready-made teaching, as if teaching meant delivering a “fast thought.”²³

The reference to Scripture was certainly of paramount importance in Jesus’ word as far as he obviously intended to transmit a religious knowing. One fact relevant to this point should be understood: John tells us several times about the disciples eventually believing “in the word of Jesus and in Scripture,”²⁴ and he enjoys contrasting the theme of “believing in Scripture” with that of “knowing Scripture.”²⁵ One must precisely study the different theologies of (inspiration of) the Word in the Jewish parties of the first century to be able to appreciate these expressions: Clearly, there were different stances about the openness of Scripture to actual, present realization; and not less clearly Jesus claimed to be the principal referent of all former Scriptures, whether explicitly²⁶ or not.²⁷ I am not convinced that one can assume that the Church’s faith in the Christian Bible resumes and develops the Jewish faith in Scripture. For Christians, belief in the Scriptures did not only become an integral part of their faith in Christ, it is because of Christ that they had to believe in the Scriptures (and not simply know them); even more, it is because of their belief in the incarnation of the Word that they eventually came to determine a canon. Origen did not hesitate to affirm that before Jesus Christ, it was difficult to think about most passages in the Scriptures as inspired!²⁸

²³ Notice that this is nothing but an expansion of the phenomenology of the very reading of the Hebrew text, wherein the lack of vowels requires an inventive posture from the reader. Cf. David Banon, *La lecture infinie, les voies de l’interprétation midrachique* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 188–215.

²⁴ Jn 2:22: “When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had said.”

²⁵ Cf. Jn 3:2–3, 10–11; 5:39–40.

²⁶ Cf. Jn 5:39, 46.

²⁷ Cf. his use of ancient narratives from the Torah, of metaphors from the Nebi’im, or of sayings from the Ketubim in his very own linguistic productions (the parables).

²⁸ “The divine inspiration of prophetic words and the spiritual dimension of Moses’ Law appeared in full light as Jesus came. It was not really possible to put forward clear examples of the divine inspiration of the ancient Scriptures before the coming of Christ; but the coming of Jesus led all those who might have supposed the Law and the Prophets not to be divine to state definitely that they had been written with the help of a celestial grace.” Cf. Origen, *De principiis*, IV, 1, 6–7, quoted according to *Sources Chrétiennes*, 252: Henri Crouzel and M. Simonetti, eds., *Origène. Traité des Principes*, 4 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1978, 1980), SC 252–53 and 268–69.

Thus, we are led up to methodology. Let me stress two consequences of what has just been said, one negative and the other positive. Reference to former "Scripture" was neither decorative nor first and foremost linked to a theological agenda: It was a foundation of the mental building itself, so that when one dealt with historical deeds (as in the evangelical traditions), the fact itself and the scriptural references were *mixed* in the very manner of narrating. So, to try to distinguish between the two afterward, without sharing in that cultural tradition, seems quite a delicate task. To be able to establish any kind of "parallel narrative" supposes that one is in possession of textual sources other than the biblical text. And for sure, to argue from the presence of scriptural reminiscences or quotations to call the historicity of the narrated facts into question is not far from the mere countersense.²⁹ In fact these texts challenge our way of hearing, reading, thinking, and studying. Shouldn't they lead us to renew our hearing faculties, rather than to superimpose scholarly prejudices on them?

Used as it is in oral civilization, language is not reduced to the mere instrument our modern western thought has construed: For speakers or hearers of oral circles, language reveals rather than represents. The linguistic practice in the Bible is not the objective application of "signifier/signified" or "word/thing" to which we have been accustomed by the dualist ontology of sign promoted since the beginnings of modern linguistics—an application today severely criticized by philosophers and linguists. The world of Scripture is made up neither of texts referring to other texts nor of objective events that would have confirmed texts foretelling them: It is a world in which events, undetectable without former texts that beforehand sharpen the attention of those who live them, come to enlighten these very texts; a world in which its inhabitants experience the mutual illuminations of the reality and the letter. It draws a logical circle: You must have already understood to be able to understand. But is this circle of preknowledge and knowledge really different from the hermeneutic circle of the most commonplace knowledge? One has to make efforts to recover at least a little of the ancient sense of language so that it should be no more *against*, but *through*, the cultural mediation that we will be detecting and finding historical effectiveness.

²⁹ Cf. the study of the narratives of Jesus' childhood by V. Fusco, "Il messaggio e il segno. Riflessioni esegetiche sul racconto lucano della natività (Lc 2:1–20)," in C. Casale Marcheselli, ed., *Parola e Spirito, Studi in onore di Settimio Cipriani*, vol. 1 (Brescia: Paideia, 1982), 293–333; cf. the very interesting debate between J. Murphy-O'Connor and Steve Mason, "Where Was Jesus Born?" *Bible Review* 16 (2000): Steve Mason, "O Little Town of . . . Nazareth?" 31–39 and 51–53; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Bethlehem . . . of Course," 40–45, with reciprocal answers 46, 54.

This last point brings about the positive consequence announced above. In the present situation of biblical scholarship, between the crisis of historical reason and the invasion of literary thought, a rigorous study of the practice of the fulfillment of Scriptures may open paths for new “scientific” inquiries to theologians who do not agree with any reduction of Revelation to anything immanent, be it historical or literary. I would like to bring into light just one of them. The mnemotechnical devices required by oral literacy imply a systematic “doubling” of what is told by a reflection about the very act of speaking: Sometimes tiny thematic or enunciative indices, sometimes clear metaphors of the very act of telling are spread by the storyteller all along his speech, in the very knitting of his discourses or narratives, which enable him (and those who will learn the text after him) to know exactly where he finds himself in the mental architecture of the text he is performing.³⁰

So, to search for meta-literary teachings in our texts, from the most explicit statements to the most implicit narrative hints, is probably not as anachronistic as it might have seemed at first glance. A threefold inquiry could be made in the evangelical narratives. First, at the evangelist’s level: What is his discourse about speaking in general and telling the story of Jesus in particular? What is his position about the word and the Word? Second, at Jesus’ level: How is he introduced or depicted as a speaker, a teacher, and a storyteller by each evangelist? Which stance is attributed to him, concerning the relationship between his own word and that of God? Third, how can one describe the relationships between those two “levels”? How does every evangelist envisage the relationship between his own word and that of Jesus? What do the Gospels provide for an overall conception of language? After some attempts to answer these questions in John and in Matthew, I suggest that such a quest might well restore the legitimacy of a unified Christology of the four Gospels.³¹

³⁰ Here is a suggestion rather than an example: Writing these pages during the liturgical time of Christmas, I am struck by the proportional importance of the theme of the word in Luke’s narratives about Jesus’ conception, birth, and childhood; only in the account of the birth is the word heard (Lk 2:10) and reheard (2:18), told (2:17) and retold (2:20), believed and memorized (2:19)—all this being accompanied by the stylistic effects of repetition and symmetries. Would it be pure fantasy to think that such an insistence is not only the result of Luke’s personal interest in a theology of the Word (which has been studied for a long time), but also the trace of an oral transmission of (parts of) these narratives before Luke inquired, understood, and wrote everything in order (Lk 1:1–3)?

³¹ As I prepare a course about Mt 13, I am led to the conclusion that the narrative (synoptic Gospels) or discursive (John) enlarging upon the theme of the Word as a seed, which is usually considered as a *theologoumenon* (cf. M. E. Boismard, review

3. The Biblical Ontology of the Text and the Primacy of Language over History

All this has amazing hermeneutical consequences. I wish now to look at two that are closely linked to one another: the conception of history and the concrete status bestowed on the text as text.

According to the vision of the world implied in (and brought about by) the very *practice* of orality, *history is dependent on word*, rather than the reverse. In the civilizations that produced the Bible and handed it over to us, there was no such thing as a “historical reality” conceived of as something objective, independent of the interests or goals of the narrator. Whatever the modern pretensions of scholars, isn’t this still the case? As far as history is *told*, the difference between the ancient and modern ways is a matter of degree, not of essence. As regards history, the main teaching of the Bible is probably more a historiographic than a historical one. The Holy Spirit does not seem to be as interested in setting up any chronological sequence of positive (past) facts as in teaching the hearer (and eventually the reader) how to receive actual (future) events. Here ought to be mentioned recent attempts at rereading some of the texts that have been the most disputed for the past two centuries in historical perspectives.³²

Given the results of historical science about the so-called biblical history of the last two centuries, I would propose to distinguish between different degrees of “historicity” or, to put it better, to distinguish different ways of referring to historical events. Obviously, the oral tradition factor does not function exactly the same way in the case of patriarchal legends, fixed centuries after things happened, as in that of the memory of Jesus’ ministry, written down not later than fifty years after the fact. On one hand, we deal with popular sayings, folkloric tales, epic cycles, with probably real facts grounding them, but definitely escaping any “scientific” grasp; on the other hand, with testimonies—and even eyewitness accounts, as regards their oldest “layers”—clearly brought about as such. Curiously enough, recent books with historical bases, such as Maccabees or Sirach, were eventually pushed out of the Jewish canon of the Scriptures, as if it were necessary to keep God far away from human contingencies, or as if God’s presence in history had only to be celebrated in the

of Siegfried Schulz, *Komposition und Herkunft der Johanneischen Reden* [Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 1960], RB, t. LXIX, 1962, 421–24, here 422) present a rather unified theory of word and theology of Word in the earliest apostolic traditions.

³² Cf. J.-L. Ska, *Les énigmes du passé, Histoire d’Israël et récit biblique*, trans. E. Di Pede (Assise: Cittadella Editrice, 1999), no. 14 of *Le livre et le rouleau* (Brussels: Lessius, 2001); or the well-known M. Quesnel and Ph. Gruson, dir., *La Bible et sa culture*, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclées de Brouwer, 2000).

past or hoped for in the future—but could in no case become a matter of actual, present experience.

Many of the Old Testament “stories” appear to represent as much a reservoir of narrative tools, plot situations, stylistic framings, and character types aimed at allowing an ongoing prophetic and spiritual creativity in scribal schools or oral literary circles, as an account of what really happened “in those times.” As much as historical facts, “the wars and actions of Israel” are historical texts. And no doubt the patristic idea that the deeds of Israel share prophetically and metaphysically in the ontological reality of the Word coming into flesh, suffering, dying, and rising up again remains for modern minds a theological thesis. What is difficult to deny is that the very texts (re)telling these deeds—and sometimes forging them, one might say—share in the linguistic competence of Christ: his manner of speaking and teaching, his quite refined relationship to the Scriptures before him, his organizing the word about himself and, so to speak, foreseeing the way it should be spread.

Here we come to the second point. Not the least interesting of the consequences of oral practices is the fact that the biblical Tradition often presents a reversal of the common, daily order that we usually establish between reality and texts. For example, as Gary Anderson tells it in his book, the editorial decision to close the canon of the Torah “with Israel poised to enter the Promised Land but not yet there” has had great theological consequences.³³ “It meant that every subsequent generation would place themselves in that wilderness moment”³⁴ and go on praying for the end of Exile and the liberation of Israel. Historically speaking, the Jews did enter the Holy Land indeed, but the literary (textual) fact was of heavier weight, in the Jewish (religious) destiny, than the historical (“real”) one. This is only one example of a constant fact in Judaism: The logic of text seems stronger than that of reality. Such a “reversal” may be found in the early Christian literature: For example, in the famous passages about Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews is indeed more interested to comment on the fact that no genealogy of the priest is to be found in the text, than to imagine what kind of real parents he (obviously) had. Even more, for the sake of his theological disputation, he

³³ Gary A. Anderson, “Adam and Eve in Judaism and Christianity,” the last chapter of *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). Anderson’s study in the present volume, “Afterword: Adam, Eve, and Us,” is a slightly modified version of this chapter.

³⁴ Gary A. Anderson, “Afterword: Adam, Eve, and Us,” in this volume, quoted on preliminary draft, 2–3.

projects the ontology of the text (the lack of genealogy) onto that of reality, concluding that Melchizedek *in fact* had no parents!³⁵ One could find other appearances of this reversal between text and reality in the Byzantine invention of some holy places: When one drives from Jerusalem down to the Dead Sea, one can still be shown the place where the compassionate Samaritan found the wounded man in Jesus' parable.³⁶ The rocks on each side of the road are still reddish from blood!

Scripture was eventually conceived of as being not so much in the world, as the world itself was understood as a component of the Scriptures. There is an old rabbinic saying claiming that God at first created the Torah—and the world only after it. At the end of the fourth Gospel, John hints at something similar when he explains: “[T]here are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn 21:25). In other words, an exhaustive account of all the deeds of Jesus would constitute a library bigger than the cosmos. Here, Jesus' story clearly shares in the same privilege as the Torah! The point is that such a sentence is not a mere hyperbole; the text deals here with a precise, actual experience (that of the composition and transmission of the sacred text), as well as with an implicit theological confession (that of the identity of Jesus with the divine *Logos*). The world is in the Bible because the *kosmos* actually (efficiently) depends on the *Logos*.

Passages such as these bring to light the special status given to the text in the inspired literature: With its words and sentences, it seems to knit a specific “world” more real than the real one! Two questions arise then: How and why is such a reversal achieved?

To answer the question *how*, one could remember the midrashic accounts of creation as having begun with the Torah: It is not only the text as such, but the very book of Torah that came before the cosmos. Now, everything did not begin with the Torah, but with the alphabet: The Jewish mythographic imagination tends to describe a special relationship between God and the Hebrew language as such.³⁷ Nevertheless, nowadays no serious Jewish thinker would be satisfied with those old narratives.³⁸

³⁵ Cf. Heb 5:10–11, 7:1–17.

³⁶ Cf. Lk 10:30.

³⁷ Cf. the cabalist idea of a special relationship between God and the Hebrew language: Isaiah Halévi Horovitz (“Shla”), *Shné Louh’ot Habrit* (Amsterdam, 1651), commented on in Banon, *La lecture infinie*, 181–82.

³⁸ For example, see Banon, “Structure commune des langues,” in idem, *La lecture infinie*, 179–87, esp. the conclusion, 187. (Nevertheless, the next chapter of this book is titled “Spécificité de l’hébreu.”)

Hebrew is a particular language indeed, very much imbued with the impressive progresses of revelation in the People who spoke and wrote it, but it shares the peculiarities and limits of all human languages.

Here the question *why* may be addressed. Why is the reversal of text and reality possible in inspired books? My opinion is that these imaginary stories were coined and continuously retold in order to fill the gap one feels between God's absolute and the quite relativistic essence of human words. Phenomenologically speaking, this gap is a fact. And this fact is the first problem that has to be addressed in modern times, if we really intend to go on contending that we know God's intentions, insofar as we are better aware of the linguistic condition of thinking: How is a semantic and phonetic community between God and human beings possible?³⁹

Certainly, many early Christian texts and liturgies plainly took over the Jewish understanding of time and space induced by Torah and projected it on the events of the life of Christ. "Just as Torah giving is not a one-time event, so the passion is not a singular moment, limited to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth;" furthermore, "at baptism the entire cosmic cycle of redemption is compressed within the individual life of the catechumen."⁴⁰ Eventually some of the Christian traditions seem even to have been constructed by taking seriously fictional/poetic developments of scriptural narratives in the same way as the Jewish *midrashim* or *haggadoth*.⁴¹ It is not surprising that many rabbinic legends about Torah were applied by early Christians to Christ. Gary Anderson provides us with a beautiful example: "Torah study, the rabbis say, is both the way to the Tree of Life and the enjoyment of the Tree itself."⁴² Jesus declares that he is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6); could not all this be read

³⁹ Cf. L. Brunschvicg, *Le progrès de la conscience dans la philosophie occidentale* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1953). I elaborate on that in the whole third part of *La langue de l'ineffable, le fondement théologique de la métaphysique*, vol. 2 of *Thomas d'Aquin, poète-théologien* (Geneva: Ad solem, 2004).

⁴⁰ Cf. G. Anderson, "Afterword: Adam, Eve, and Us," quoted on preliminary draft, 6; what is reenacted is the very drama of origins (the devil's envy and tricks against human beings; cf. *ibid.*, 7–8).

⁴¹ To say nothing about the part played by apocryphal works in the liturgical cycles, one could evoke here the case of the Orthodox canonization of the icon of *Anastasis*: In this classic picture, promoted by tradition to the status of a witness to the work of Christ, Jesus is depicted stretching a saving hand to Adam and Eve who are quite in the bottom of Hades. "What the Gospels passed over in silence, the iconographer filled in. But this story of Adam and Eve was never narrated as a simple objective account of human beginnings, as though the story could take its place alongside modern theories of the 'Big Bang' or evolution." *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 5.

as a narrative expansion of the realistic (and indeed holistic) ontology of linguistic sign, Jesus (or the Torah) being considered as the signifier, the meaning, and the referent itself?⁴³

Now there is a question that we are bound to ask as Christian theologians: Even if Christianity takes its ontology of text from Judaism—a thesis I believe is true, but still has to be firmly established by an exhaustive account of the approaches of speaking, writing, and text in the very canon of the New Testament—should not its confidence in biblical texts be better grounded than in narratives such as those developed by the rabbinic tradition, which are obviously questioned by historical knowledge, linguistic analysis, and philosophical deconstruction? For reasons we do not have to recall here, Judaism is satisfied with haggadic/midrashic fictional filling in of the (logical, verisimilar, historical) gaps of the biblical narratives,⁴⁴ but Christianity believes in the historical effectiveness of God's Incarnation. Its faith is first of all a belief in the *actual* embodiment of God who became a single man in a precise country, in a specific culture, and at a certain time. To make this even more clear, one could remark that with the historical coming of Christ, many phrases or locutions that were understood beforehand in a purely metaphorical way came to be endowed with a proper meaning—in Jesus, yes, God does have arms and legs, for example.⁴⁵

Before indicating some tracks that could be followed to try to answer such questions, let us enlarge a little bit upon the “postmodern” challenge: Rather than looking immediately for metaphysical or theological solutions,⁴⁶ one should elaborate on the problem in the very area in which it is raised, namely the linguistic one.

⁴³ Cf. my *Theorie du langage et théologie du Verbe dans le quatrième évangile*, to come. Some insights will be available in my *Pages sacrées: de l'écriture sainte à l'écriture théologique*, vol. 3 of *Thomas d'Aquin, poète-théologien*, forthcoming (Geneva: Ad solem, 2006).

⁴⁴ It is a striking fact that even David Banon, a Jewish thinker really interested in the relationship between text and history, goes on speaking about Moses in a “psychologizing” way, from inside the biblical narrative, without questioning his yet highly questionable historicity! Cf. Banon, *La lecture infinie*, 30: “Tout se passe comme si Moïse craignait qu'avec lui,” etc.

⁴⁵ To the point that theologians like Thomas Aquinas could only understand a literal Christological meaning in some Old Testament passages: cf. *Quodlibet*, VII, q. 6, a. 2; *Comm. in Psalmis*, Ps 29, v. 4. I comment a little bit on this, after J.-P. Torrell and G. Dahan in “Croire en savant, saint Thomas bibliste,” in *Thomistes ou de l'actualité de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, ed. S.-T. Bonino (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2003), 37–47, esp. 41–42.

⁴⁶ Anderson looks for a first answer in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (“In the liturgy, God's creative task is never at an end”; “Afterword: Adam, Eve, and Us,” 9).

4. The Postmodern Challenge and the Traditional Reply to It

Some contemporary thinkers seem to reduce revelation to a sort of mental effect produced by (written) language as such, so that most of the midrashic stories are opened to any “deconstructivist” enterprise. As a matter of fact, the “linguistic turn” of western philosophy has often been associated with a materialistic vision of things. Apparently, defending the place and function of language (and more generally, of culture) in the very process of conceptualization was only one way to enhance the material conditioning of our thinking—making immaterial, spiritual truths relative to physical elements, at a time when intellectuals wished to recover a humble way of dealing with great issues, after the modern ideals of pure reason had prepared for the worst of the twentieth century’s atrocities. Every proposition, straight from the instant it is uttered, is limited by the human, all too human, language and cannot pretend to free itself from its particular cultural and material setting: For reasons of that sort, the belief in religious absolute truths seems to have become as impossible as the rationalist ideals.

Yes, one would observe, the religious tradition of Israel has undoubtedly deepened its reflection about the text to the point of seeing in it an astounding symbol of God’s presence among his People. An episode such as that of the burning bush and the paradoxical revelation of God’s Name to Moses (Ex 3:14) has been brilliantly construed as a narrative way to construct a theology of text.⁴⁷ The permanent presence of meaning in the text, as in a sealed spring flowing out each time one begins to read,

He then evokes the rabbinic angelology, according to which Israel—humankind when it is taken over by Christianity—is preferred by God to the angels and thus arises their envy, an envy never at an end as long as the present *aevum* goes on. But these solutions are theological, whereas the problem to solve is first and foremost a literary one—namely that of the true correspondence between words and things, language and reality.

⁴⁷ Cf. M.-A. Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie, lire c’est guérir* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1994): “Trois voyages au coeur du nom,” 94–98; “éclats de lire,” 223 ff. It is about this that Gary Anderson writes beautifully: “[W]hen one treads the path of Torah-study, one embarks not so much on a trip to the past but enters the dwelling of an eternal and sacramental present” (“Afterword: Adam, Eve, and Us,” 4). In the same respect, F. Martin pointed out on the first day of our meeting the beautiful feminine form of the complement pronoun in Gn 2:15 (“wayyiqqach yhwh ‘elohim ‘et-ha-’adam wayyannichehu be-gan-’eden le-’obdah u-le-shomrah”), when God sets man in the Garden so that he would cultivate *her*. This apparent mistake—garden (*gan*) is typically masculine—obviously means, according to rabbinic reading, *the Torah*: as if the sacred text were not so much concerned in telling history as in presenting itself as a place to live in.

eventually appeared not only as a symbol of God's everlasting presence-absence, but also—as far as it is taken over by God's Word in revelation—as a real place to *experience* it. But this present, postmodern philosophers would say, is not so much a mysterious, sacramental one—even less a metaphysical one—as the very present of enunciation, or of re-enunciation through the reading, inherent in the text as text.

Such an ambiguous interpretation may be given the intriguing Pauline sentence usually translated as follows: “All Scripture is *divinely inspired*, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16; emphasis added). As Denis Farkarsfalvy notices in his study, the Greek word translated “divinely inspired,” *theopneustos*, which is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament, indeed has an ambiguous meaning, either a passive (“inspired by God”) or an active one (“spiring God”). The first one envisages an action of God on Scripture (God inspired his Scriptures, that is, he breathed into them his Holy Spirit), whereas the second one refers more to the effect the Scriptures have on their hearers (in whose souls Scripture breathes God's Spirit). According to the second line of interpretation, which is usually despised, the sentence could be understood in two ways. On one hand, all Scripture *as Scripture* is quite appropriate to symbolize God, because of its ability to suspend the stream of time as well as to transcend the limits of space. On the other hand, there is congruence between the social handing over of writings—depending upon the transmission of language itself—and the filial vocation of every human being displayed by Christian Revelation.⁴⁸ However, these features themselves might be construed either in a believing way (do they not convey a sort of presacramentality of the very writing? One begins to wonder if the passage through *writing* was not part of the historical conditions thanks to which the Word of God eventually

⁴⁸ Cf. amazing passages in François Martin, *Pour une théologie de la lettre*, L'inspiration des Écritures, “Cogitatio fidei,” no. 196 (Paris: Cerf, 1996), such as the following, coming after very detailed psycho-socio-linguistic analyses: “[Le Texte] est bien l'œuvre d'écrivains historiquement constitués mais, plus fondamentalement, il transmet depuis son commencement ce qui institue ce sujet dont chaque auteur particulier témoigne: le sujet humain de l'énonciation. Soutenir que le Texte est inspiré, c'est donc soutenir que le Texte renvoie à cette instance originelle dont dépend la capacité humaine de parler et dont aucun auteur, auditeur ou lecteur ne peut occuper le lieu. Les sciences humaines qui soulèvent une telle problématique remplissent cette instance par la fonction symbolique. La Révélation lui donne une autre consistance, elle y dévoile plus qu'une fonction, plus aussi que le seul fondement symbolique: l'être parlant, Père, Fils et Esprit, de qui tout humain tient d'être et de parler” (445).

appeared in human words)⁴⁹ or in the skeptical one mentioned in the previous paragraph!

Likewise, postmodern deconstructivism may diagnose in the sociolinguistic structures and speaking practices induced by oral civilization that were described above a mere self-conditioning, and denounce them as an illusion (even if it were to qualify that statement afterward in a positive way, inspired by the Hegelian “cunning of reason”). As if to give weight to these objections, the defenders of objective inspiration, to promote their point of view, allude very often to purely immanent processes such as the juridical approach of the legislator’s intention, which is an a posteriori fiction rather than a realistic rendering of what the actual people in charge of producing the laws had in mind as they produced this precise one. (Incidentally, I wonder if the theological reaction against the present-day focus of biblical scholars on objective inspiration is not triggered, among other motives, by a hidden fear of this relativist argument.)

After all, could not all the theological ideas about the Word be construed as mere amplifications of the material conditions of the speakers? In fact, what Jews and Christians believe to be “supernatural,” “divine” revelation could well be reduced to purely immanent effects of cultural phenomena. For example, just a few years ago, Jacques Derrida noticed a sort of “messianic” appeal inherent in the word and wondered, in a Heideggerian way, whether “revelability” (*Offenbarkeit* conceived of as a property of language) was not more originary than revelation (*Offenbarung*) and hence than religion.⁵⁰

When one reads carefully the texts proposing these linguistic-materialist reductions of religion, one is nonetheless struck by the permanence of theological metaphors or patterns in them. Moreover, even if it is in denials, the Judaeo-Christian theology seems to be *necessary* to the development of the theories, one tries to oppose to it.⁵¹ And if they succeed in persuading

⁴⁹ In that respect, might not pseudepigraphic attributions of books to one single symbolical hero despite their complex literary genesis through several stages of writing that tend to blur or to forget the identities of the first speakers and put their words in other characters’ mouths (thus, “Moses said” . . . the whole Torah!), be understood as signs of a deep prophetic desire for the incarnation of the Word inherent in the very writing, rather than as naive belief in psychological inspiration?

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Foi et savoir,” in *La religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996), 26.

⁵¹ Incidentally, this should probably be interpreted as a particular case of all relativisms: You may say that “no truth is really true”—you cannot really *think* it, unless with an “idea from behind your head.” Cf. B. Pascal, *Pensées*, V: *La justice et la Raison des Effets*, fragment 336 (231): “idée de derrière la tête.”

people that they are right, they are exactly like an ivy boasting about its size and majesty while it holds all its beautiful qualities from the oak whose sap it is drawing. To give only one example, let us remark that the Jewish Kabbalah (George Steiner), the biblical messianism (Pierre Gardeil), as well as the Valentinian gnosis (Milbank) have already been detected behind the work of Derrida.⁵² The most accurate among those thinkers were eventually bound to recognize the (a)theological dimension of their undertaking. Derrida, to continue with him, did not hesitate to write that God and the signifying sign were born at the same time and in the same place.⁵³ If I may use a rough analogy, the glove is inside out; you need only reverse it to find yourself in possession of a wonderful theological project; yes, Christian dogmas are closely linked to a theory of language, but no, they are not identifiable with mere effects derived from language by itself. Rather, they may endow human reason with the deepest grounds for understanding the existence and functioning of language. As Francis Martin put it in a recent study, “by positing a Divine Person within the limits of historical existence, Christianity necessarily claims that all history ultimately finds its meaning in relation to him.”⁵⁴ As a constitutive element of history (and perhaps its very foundation), language should also be related to Christ.

Before briefly discussing this last point, let us remind ourselves of the traditional response to relativist attempts like the one just evoked. It would probably address the postmodern criticisms in a threefold way, namely a metaphysical, theological, and aesthetic one.

Metaphysically speaking, indeed, one should recall here for our contemporaries a more correct view on the organization of causes: God, as the first “Cause” is in no case in competition with any kind of “secondary cause”: As some philosophers have put it, never (or seldom) do God and the creature play on the same stage! Miracles are always possible indeed, but to be miraculous, they must be precisely distinguished from a more

⁵² Cf. G. Steiner, *Réelles présences, les arts du sens*, trans. M. R. de Pauw (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 271–72 (in English, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* [London: Faber and Faber, 1989]); P. Gardeil, *Quinze regards sur le corps livré*, (Geneva: Ad solem, 1997), 25 note 2; John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (London: Blackwell, 1997), 61. One may also find analyses of the biblical intertext of some of Roland Barthes’s “Essais critiques,” in my *Littérature et théologie, une saison en enfer*, vol. 1 of *Thomas d’Aquin, poète-théologien* (Geneva: Ad solem, 2003).

⁵³ J. Derrida, quoted in Steiner, *Réelles présences*, 148–49.

⁵⁴ I am grateful to F. Martin for having let me read his forthcoming study “The Influence of Biblical Studies on Ecclesial Self-Awareness since Vatican II: A Contribution of *Dei Verbum*,” draft, 12.

usual divine guiding of things. Here one has to show one's "esprit de finesse," as well as one's "esprit de géométrie,"⁵⁵ and envisage the analogy of causality to think of both the divine *cause* of inspiration of authors and Scriptures, and the human, cultural *opportunity* in which the former is (so to speak) "cast."

Obviously, this metaphysical view is rendered possible only by the Christian⁵⁶ revelation of the true transcendence of God; here we come to the theological perspective. Before the Incarnation of the Word, human minds could only think of God's transcendence in terms of "alterity," conceived of as the greatest degree of otherness as we know it in this world: From this view sprang probably most of the beautiful names of God praising him as the Most High, the Almighty, and so forth. But once God became flesh, human minds who agreed to believe in that mystery were given a glimpse of a much deeper sense of divine "alterity." God is not simply "other" than man; he is in fact other *in another way*: So *other* indeed, that he can be the "same." To put it in paradoxical (and also patristic) words, God is *divine enough* to be able to be human. That is to say that the Incarnation of God has permitted a unique deepening of the concept of otherness, transcending any kind of earthly, natural dialectics between "the same" and "the other."

The perception of such a progress is utterly dependent on one's faith in the mystery of Christ! Believing opens up the opportunity of being given a sixth sense for dealing with divine actions, a sense eventually reshaping our very ability to perceive beings.⁵⁷ Here intervenes the third dimension I mentioned above, namely the *aesthetic* one (the reader may have understood that I use this word in a rather Balthasarian way): Without an experience of the mystery, you cannot reach the deepest concept of "alterity" or transcendence. As we know, faith is both a divine grace (principally a proposal coming from God) and a human work (one's answer to it). So that—let us note this in passing—there is no contradiction in saying that divine inspiration could be both a grace and a study, the result of a human, cultural process, even that of the acquisition of intellectual skills to study the Scriptures.

⁵⁵ Cf. Pascal, *Pensées*, fragments 305–8.

⁵⁶ Muslim authors of the *falsafa*, in contrast, were not able to escape fully from the occasionalist accounts of the connection between the Creator and his creatures. See nuances in Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Occasionalism and Its Critique by Averroes and Aquinas* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1958).

⁵⁷ Cf. P. Blond, "Theology and Perception," *Modern Theology* 14 (1999): 523–35; idem, *The Eyes of Faith* (London/New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

5. The Exegetical and Theological Task of Building a “Christography”

Jerome said that “ignoratio scripturarum est ignoratio Christi.”⁵⁸ To address the challenge of postmodern deconstruction—which is the new face of the old positivist challenge—theologians should try to substitute a “Christography” for all kinds of former mythographies, including the clever Jewish narrative accounts of what speaking or writing means.

To synthesize this undertaking, I would like to evoke here what Francis Martin has proposed to call “economic participation”: “[J]ust as transcendental participation is an ontological reality now seen because of the revelation of creation, so economic participation is an ontological reality because of the Incarnation.”⁵⁹ So for Christian thought, the relative and the absolute do meet one another in the Christological economy, as much as time and eternity, human speaking and divine Word. To the alliance between matter and spirit (signifier and signified), the text adds one between duration and word (which is only transient in its oral condition). All these themes were deeply treated in the first four centuries of Christianity; Providence decreed that the first giant among Christian Latin theologians, St. Augustine, was the greatest rhetorician of the Empire in his time: Indeed, he knew what it meant to speak and to write! Though I come from a (neo-)Thomist background, I would insist on the appropriateness to our time of an Augustinian revival such as the one proposed by Matthew Lamb in this volume.⁶⁰ Even “metaphysical” participation rests upon an experience of B/being, in the building of which (biblical) *texts*, as much as *things* one can perceive, play a great part.⁶¹ The only difference is perhaps that in the case of ontological participation, a few pre-Christian (pagan) philosophers were assumed for a long time to have had at least a foretaste of the truth; but even this may be a “retrospective illusion,” as recent non-Christian interpretations of Aristotle in the light of the Sophists could show.⁶²

⁵⁸ Jerome, *Commentarii in Isaia*m, “Prologus,” CCL 73, 1, or PL 24, 17.

⁵⁹ Martin, “The Influence of Biblical Studies,” 12.

⁶⁰ Lamb, “Reflections from St. Augustine and Bernard Lonergan,” 815–50 in this issue.

⁶¹ Cf. my *La langue de l'ineffable, essai sur le fondement théologique de la métaphysique*, vol. 2 of *Thomas d'Aquin, poète-théologien* (Geneva: Ad solem, 2004).

⁶² Cf. R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman, and Kindred Evidence Also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1954). Cf also, more recently, B. Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, “Nrf Essais” (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Aristotle, *La décision du sens: le livre Gamma de la Métaphysique d'Aristote*, trans. B. Cassin and M. Narcy (Paris: Vrin, 1998); B. Cassin, *Aristote et le logos: contes de la phénoménologie ordinaire* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997).

Now, what do I mean by the name “Christography”? I intend—or dream of—a theory of language as a gift of God to humankind, fully unified by the figure of Jesus Christ. A clue leading up to this is the rather early designation of Jesus, his words and deeds, as well as the words telling them, as *Logos*⁶³—thus concentrating on Jesus the entire devotion to the Word characteristic of the Old Testament. We may infer from this an extension of “sacramentality” to language. Here I define *sacramentality* as the power of relative, sensible things to signify and provide absolute, spiritual ones, a power rooted in the very incarnation of the Word. At the same time, Jesus delivered a new, supernatural message; he unveiled the deepest (namely divine) reasons for which usual, natural language works as it does.

An implicit theology of language is present in the (confession and celebration of the) Incarnation of the Word, in the Passion, death, and resurrection of the Word made flesh. In the very hearing of the Gospel, there is a *practical* foundation of language: Together with Jesus Christ, the aptitude for words to receive full meaning has risen again (for example, the narrative strategy displayed by the “messianic secret” in Mark aims at postponing the revelation of meaning until the effective resurrection of Christ). This foundation is, so to speak, staged and performed in the liturgical life of the Church.⁶⁴

As regards enunciation itself, the figure is quite interesting. On the diegetic level, Jesus is *narrated* by the evangelists, who on the meta-diegetic level claim to have been endowed by Jesus not only with a story to tell (both teachings and deeds), but also with the ability to tell it (thinking about his word as a seed, Jesus somehow planned its very reception).⁶⁵ In John as well as in the Synoptic Gospels, the enunciative frame of the narration is bent like a Möbius strip.⁶⁶ What is told is indeed what

⁶³ For Christ’s words, see Mk 2:2; 4:14, 33; Mt 13:19, 21–23; Lk 5:1; 9:28; Acts 10:36; for words about Christ’s words and deeds, see Mk 16:20; Acts 4:29, 31; 6:2, 4, 7; 8:4, 14, 25; 10:36, 44; 11:1, 19; 13:5–7, 49; 16:6, 32; 19:20; for both these first two meanings, see Mk 8:32; 1 Tm 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tm 2:2; Ti 3:8; for Jesus himself, see Jn 1:14, 17; Lk 1:2.

⁶⁴ For example, it has been brilliantly proposed, in recent years, that one may attend the very foundation of language in the celebration of Eucharist. See C. Pickstock, “Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist,” *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 159–80.

⁶⁵ Cf. explicit statements in Mk 14:9, Jn 16:4, 17:20, 20:29; and the narrative theology of the Word implied in Mt 13 and parallels.

⁶⁶ Whereas an ordinary sheet of paper has two sides, a Möbius strip is a one-sided surface: Something moving on its surface could reach all points of the surface without crossing over any edge.

permits to tell at all, because actually, in the unique case of Jesus, the person with whom the book deals comes to be identified as God's Word!

Even at the natural level, one cannot think about the word without using it, so that no thinking about language can be fully demonstrative (insofar as it will necessarily make use of what it claims to explain). If Jesus is the Word made flesh par excellence, if he is the very Word in which any created ability to think/speak participates, then one can definitely not speak about him "from the outside." As much as—and even more than—any other word about the word, the word about Jesus is always preceded by its Object—far from being the cause of its being brought forward. The whole poetics of the New Testament is imbued with this ability of the embodied Word to be both outside and inside any word or thought about him.⁶⁷ Therefore, in Jesus' words, the commonplace dialectics between the same and the other is overwhelmed by a theological experience of Presence, which transcends all usual standards of identity.

For these theological, philosophical, and historical reasons, the relationship between Jesus and the books telling his story is not that of an exterior referent to a purely representative word. Through several devices, words themselves *share in* Jesus' identity. These devices (all of them sharing in the meta-literary dimension of the New Testament) could provide the coming generation of exegetes with an amazing field of research, if only they agree in wisely combining historical-critical, rhetorical, semiotic, ethnological, and theological approaches to the text.

6. Conclusion: The "Linguistic Turn" of Thought as an Opportunity to Restore Biblical Ways of Thinking

From a mere rational viewpoint, there is something tautological in our proposal. But since the very first time God agreed to unveil his Name precisely by using a tautology ("I am Who I am," Ex 3:14), this might have stopped being a decisive objection. Since the "linguistic turn" of philosophy, everyone should be more aware that every act of referring to a reality starts from a tautology (and in fact includes it): An implicit act of faith is intrinsic in every word purporting to be true.⁶⁸ To be *telling* at all, language cannot but refer to reality, and paradoxically, the best way to make people

⁶⁷ For example, *quiproquos* (misunderstandings) and other ironical devices in John spring often from the fact that Jesus knows what is in man's heart and responds not to the very question he is asked, but to the motives for which one is asking such a question.

⁶⁸ Cf. the deep insights on this in Steiner, *Réelles présences*, 116, 127; and my *Littérature et théologie*, ch. 12, "De la Bible à la littérature et retour," 373–96.

perform this act of reference within their very uttering or hearing is to bring about a verbal “short circuit” such as a tautology.⁶⁹ Every being, like *the* Being, asks to be met, experienced, more than named. Thus, obviously, one shall not attain to demonstrated certainties. There will nonetheless be nothing fideistic in the undertaking: As far as faith is presupposed, one shall find reasons, a posteriori reasons *de convenientia* (appropriatenesses). Now, should one reasonably expect something like demonstrations? If divine revelation did take place in the human world—a proposition scholars must admit at least as a methodological hypothesis, inasmuch as the Bible tells us nothing, if not about this!—it is quite reasonable to foresee that a purely human logic is inadequate. The object to be thought is both necessary (as far as it is decided by God’s will) and contingent (as far as it happened in the unpredictable weft of human things). At the intersection of the divine intelligence and the human mind, discourse about God can only try to manifest a posteriori an intelligible light that precedes it, which is given to man at the same time as the event to decipher. As Balthasar puts it, all along the historical manifestations of God, there is no definite border between the event and the vision.⁷⁰

Such a character should not frighten thinkers of “postmodern” times. First, because a similar “softening” of epistemology has already taken place in the “exact” sciences, where one has learned to think simultaneously of the object and the observer. After all, biblical sciences find themselves in the same situation as all other sciences: The “observer” interacts with the object he purposes to study. Second, because present-day philosophers are fond of a narrative way of knowing, of a *penser* that would never pretend to be more than a *phraser* (Jean-François Lyotard).⁷¹ In other words, such an epistemological approach takes into account the fact that any acquisition of knowledge by human beings includes a rhetorical aspect. The contention of Christianity is that it knows the very reason for such a necessity of rhetoric in any scientific knowledge: The *Logos* is not an anonymous, abstract principle of intelligibility—He is a loving Person. N V

⁶⁹ On all these points, cf. my *La langue de l'ineffable*, ch. 6: “Irréductibilité du langage.”

⁷⁰ H. U. von Balthasar, “Révélation et beauté,” trans. a team of the “Faculté de théologie de Lille,” *Mélanges de science religieuse* (Lille: Université Catholique de Lille) 55 (1998): 23 (in German, “Offenbarung und Schönheit,” in *Verbum Caro. Skizzen zur Theologie I* [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960], 100–34).

⁷¹ See J.-F. Lyotard, “Discussions, ou: phraser ‘après Auschwitz,’” in Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.-L. Nancy, dir., *Les fins de l'homme, à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).