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Alexandre Leupin:

Fiction and Incarnation. Rhetoric, Theology, and Literature in the Middle Ages

(Translated by David Laatsch. Original title: *Fiction et incarnation: Littérature et théologie au moyen age*, Paris: Flammarion, 1993)

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How to explain breaks and continuities between writers and even whole cultures or eras? That is the subject of Alexandre Leupin's *Fiction and Incarnation. Rhetoric, Theology, and Literature in the Middle Ages*, an English translation of *Fiction et incarnation: Littérature et théologie au moyen age*. Leupin's critical tool is homonymy, a rhetorical and linguistic term referring to a single word which "designates different ideas and things in a conceptual reapportionment" (p. xv). He argues that the medieval era did not abandon classical thought and textuality but reformulated it in a homonymous structure of thought, which has nothing in common with its antecedents except sounds. Modern definitions are related to medieval ones in Leupin's text, among them one from the encyclopedist Isidore of Seville, according to whom homonymy – or *uninomia* – means "when one word has several meanings" (p. 100).

   Isidore's definition, however, plays a much smaller role in Leupin's general method than does another source which also inspired Leupin's psychoanalytic predecessors (such as Jacques Lacan), namely Alexandre Kojève's Hegelian philosophy of history and science, and in particular the theorem derived from Kojève's thought: "There is never any synonymy between a notion belonging to antiquity and a modern notion" (p. xv). In other words, if we find synonymy between particular notions, we have no means of superimposing different general labels – such as 'ancient', 'medieval', and 'modern' – on them. From the standpoint of psychoanalytic criticism Leupin applies the theorem in the tracing of changes of meaning of rhetorical and theological terms, which remain similar in appearance but change in meaning and signification. He focusses on the dis/continuities in the works of well-known masters of rhetoric (Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine, Isidore, Martianus Capella, and others); on vernacular French texts; and, ultimately, on whole periods of early Latin-speaking Western civilisation such as antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Rhetoric versus homonymy?
In Chapter 1, entitled "The Be-Seeming: Cicero and Quintilian", Leupin takes his point of departure in Cicero's *De oratore* and *Orator* as well as in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, and claims that one of the reasons for the survival of rhetoric in the Middle Ages and in the early modern period was its resistance to new words. Unlike literature and poetry, rhetorical thought "is the thought of absolute synonymy, where everything equals everything else. The things that are necessary for homonymy, for a real difference between concepts, cannot be established within this system" (p. 7). The fruitfully ambiguous framework of *virtutes* and *vitia*, for instance, provides Leupin with an interpretive tool as he proceeds to

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examine how later medieval writers both preserve and "homonymize" the words used by ancient rhetoricians. Medieval writers adopted and redefined the ancient idea of the perfect orator as the *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, the good man skilled in speech. In this respect Quintilian had gone further than his predecessor, Cicero, in placing everything – great writing as well as great thought – under the rule of rhetoric. For this reason, there is no distinction between the virtues and vices of discourse and those of manners: language and ethics are inseparable – an idea warmly welcomed and recycled during the Christian centuries following Quintilian's period.

This first chapter on Cicero and Quintilian reveals a strategy that recurs later in the work. At times Leupin's general interpretive scheme overrules the textual detail as he moves towards coherent interpretation. With reference to Quintilian's discussion of the *vir bonus* (*Inst. or.* 12) and the devices of rhetorical *simulatio* (i.e. figures of speech that involve pretence and artful design of emotion) Leupin draws the conclusion that, according to Quintilian, the good man and the dishonest man are not different in "either essence or act": they both falsify and draw on fiction in their oratorical endeavours. Consequently – and despite Quintilian's emphasis on the ethics of discourse – rhetoric must be defined as sophistry insofar as the effect produced on an audience is everything. Here, one has to draw a sharper line than Leupin does between essence and act. Despite the "impossible concession" that the best and worst of men may possess the same talent and the same amount of learning, Quintilian nevertheless underlines that the bad man and the perfect orator can never be identical (*Inst. or.* 12,1,9–10). Thus a (literally) essential difference emerges here between the good and the dishonest man: these two may well resemble each other in act, but they definitely differ in essence.

Chapter 2, "The Break: Tertullian", presents the ecclesiastical writer of the second and third centuries AD (*On the Flesh of Christ*; *On Spectacles*; *On the Apparel of Women*). Leupin examines the epistemological rupture revealed by Tertullian's redefinition of a series of core concepts, such as *praescriptio* ("an objection to an argument" in rhetoric; "a rule of art" in poetics and criticism). In Tertullian – Leupin argues – the term comes to mean a "pre-text" or something "previously written". The most notable example is the text of the New Testament, which, to the Christian, has the privilege of "true anteriority" and represents a system of proof. This idea of a "pre-text" imparts to writing a dignity that it did not possess in pagan antiquity: the *rhetorica christiana* is no longer fictional but realist. It relies on the truth of the incarnation "as the reference and signified of all fiction" (pp. 25ff.). Ancient rhetoric is not refuted but its usage becomes in itself a homonymy, which links discourse directly to the 'thingness' of scriptural reality.

This reading relies consistently on the premises established in the previous chapters. However, if one were to question Leupin's interpretation of, e.g., Quintilianist ethics as a play of sophistic *simulatio*, the claimed dialectic between 'fictional' Roman rhetoric versus realist Christian rhetoric likewise becomes somewhat vague. This is clearly a consequence of the fact that Leupin nowhere endeavours to define the word 'fiction', the key concept in the title of the book. Depending on the part of the work, it is related to terms such as *fictio* ("lie", "made-up fiction", pp. 18–19), *plasma* ("man-made fiction", "image", "form", "divine creation", cf. pp. 43, 78, 108), and *adumbratio* (fiction as "falsehood", "shadowing", "out-line", p. 142). Since the texts examined in Leupin's book range from theology to poetry, and from liturgical texts to rhetorical pedagogy, a general definition of (the English word) 'fiction' would have clarified what, according to Leupin, is included in and what is excluded from its realm.

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Method and truth
What has been said above already reveals Leupin's dualist method. On the one hand he is a close-reader of individual texts who restrains himself from direct references to the historical framework. On the other hand, Leupin dovetails the individual readings with the broad theoretical scheme built of elements of *Begriffsgeschichte*, the history of ideas, and literary criticism. But what role does his psychoanalytic paradigm play in the execution of this method?

For the reader who is well versed in the history of rhetoric but not an aficionado of psychoanalysis, Leupin's approach opens thought-provoking vistas to well known authors, for instance in Chapter 3, "Fornication: Saint Augustine". According to Leupin, the *Confessions* presents an autobiographical theory of Christian and pagan fiction, offering a means to distinguish between these. Augustine is seen as struggling with the separation of maternal language/speech of Christian faith and paternal discourse/writing of unbelief. For Augustine, fiction "is always a seduction of the senses" (p. 60). Thus, the sinner of the *Confessions* – struggling with the temptations and fictions of sexuality, rhetoric, and literature – is neither a *vir bonus* in terms of ancient rhetoric, nor "the Christian" in general (as implied by Tertullian and other early Christian writers), but should rather be seen as the autobiographical subject in the process of individuation. Leupin reads the *Confessions* as Augustine's attempt at exorcising the ghost of antiquity (e.g., the Ciceronian father figure), which arises on every page of the text.

In this chapter the connection of "Incarnation" – one of Leupin's keywords – to the formation of the confessing subject is very loose indeed (e.g., p. 46: "The Incarnation is the model that the *Confessions* take at the beginning in posing the questions 'Quis ego? Qualis ego?' (I who? Which I?). Like the Incarnation, such questions represent a discursive individuation of the subject."). Although the parallel between the incarnation and the individuation of the subject remains somewhat vague, Leupin nevertheless makes interesting remarks on the discursive devices in the creation of the autobiographical subject and on the limits of language in the expression of divine speech. In this context he touches upon issues that have been recently examined – outside the psychoanalytic paradigm – for example in the useful anthology *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time* (edited by W. Jost and M. J. Hyde, Yale University Press, 1997). There, in their contributions on Augustine, David Tracy and Donald G. Marshall discuss Christian rhetoric as well as Augustine's defence of obscurity in the search for the limits and goals of rhetoric and understanding.

Pagan versus Christian encyclopedism
The line between pagan and Christian cultures is not drawn by a clear landmark or a precise year, but by a complex network of relations. As a consequence, Leupin allows his writing to move in a zigzag process or, more explicitly, as a dialectic between thesis, antithesis, and synthesis: between Christian and non-Christian writers. The increasing influence of Christianity did not mean that all old terms were automatically homonymised. Concepts on one or another side of a break readily and most often keep to the same terminology, but, so Leupin argues, if an old term comes to designate a new notion, then there is homonymy. This is a demanding claim since it challenges the reader to be suspicious of all generalisations with regard to all texts.

While both Tertullian and Augustine were converted pagans, the fourth chapter, entitled "Knowledge and Lacunae: Martianus Capella", features an immensely influential 'pagan' text from the fifth century AD, namely *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology*. This text allows Leupin to study the "resistance to homonymy" (p. 77) in medieval literature, i.e. the ways in which ancient rhetoric was transmitted but *not* translated into the discourse of

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Christian truth. Isidore of Seville's seventh-century *Etymologies* is the topic of Leupin's fifth chapter, "A Divine Harmony: Isidore of Seville". The allegorical and satirising pagan fiction of Martianus Capella is here surpassed by a writer who "is everywhere hostile to the poetics and mythology of antiquity" (p. 103). Leupin maintains that while Isidore's strategy of seeking the origins of truth is based on etymology, it simultaneously reveals the limits of any such strategy in the ultimate ineffability of God. The etymological method thus proves itself useless in attempts to describe (the origins of) God and His creation.

Vernacular literary projects
In the last four chapters of *Fiction and Incarnation*, Leupin expands the perspective of his investigation by including a group of French texts. The liturgical literary domain is examined in Chapter 6: "'Sancta Simplicitas': The Old French *Sequence of Saint Eulalia*". Leupin sees this ninth-century text as a giant leap in vernacular culture as invoked by the decree of the Council of Tours (of AD 813), which encouraged clerics to translate Latin sermons into the vernacular and thus to give people access to the discourses of power. From the collisions of Latinising and Romanising forces in the language of the *Sequence*, the reader is led to Chapter 7, entitled "Axiomatic Fiction; or, Of Books and Heresies: Alain of Lille". In the strange poem against heresy, *Rhythmus de incarnatione Christi*, Alain/the narrator states that the seven liberal arts – including grammar, logic, and rhetoric – cannot comprehend the paradox of the incarnation (pp. 131ff.). The last two chapters of Leupin's book bring these themes beautifully into an interpretive closure. The "sexual secrets of writing" are elucidated in Chapter 8, "The Counterfeit: The *Roman de Renart*", and the volume concludes with a chapter called "Disincarnation: Guillaume de Machaut." Thus the last chapters deal with Leupin's third key concept – in addition to rhetoric and theology – namely 'literature'. Its relation to homonymy is radical: Leupin claims that in producing names and words that have never been heard before, literature resists the general processes of homonymy.

The teleology of psychoanalytic reading
The pitfalls and strengths of Leupin's approach stem from the same source: the strict teleology of psychoanalytic reading. While producing intriguing, self-consistent, and novel interpretations of important ancient and medieval authors, the volume in no way surprises the reader in reappraising the authority of the sources chosen. In arguing for a "veritable schizophrenia in medieval culture", which both preserves and radically re-interprets the ancient heritage (p. xxii), Leupin tunes in on the most celebrated voices of pre-modern rhetoric, theology, and literature. This peak-to-peak approach in the choice of texts ensures that the canons are in no way shattered. By contrast, the role of anonymous texts in the transmission of homonymies (such as the development of the Christianised systems of *vitia and virtutes* in the mainly anonymous rhetorical and poetological commentary tradition of the Middle Ages) is beyond the scope and cognizance of this study. Therefore it may not be the ideal reading for that student of Ciceronian, Augustinian, Alanian, or any '-ian' tradition who expects to find novel textual revelations and previously unstudied sources. *Fiction and Incarnation* nevertheless teaches and delights the reader while constantly reminding her or him of its own (post)modern theoretical presuppositions and of the inevitable historical stratification of any analysis. Hence the never-ending urge for new readings of seemingly well-researched subjects.

   Although *Fiction and Incarnation* does not convince in every detail, with its grand narrative and general interpretive scheme Leupin's book is a thought-provoking contribution, also for those interested in the history of rhetoric and poetics. Although the

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conclusions sometimes seem to stem from the (psychoanalytic) method itself rather than the texts under examination, one of the charms of the book is the combination of themes that are simultaneously historical and topical. Contemporary literary study is involved with questions not unlike those addressed by medieval writers: rhetoric of the ineffable; negative theology (languages of mysticism and their continuing influence); and so forth. In fact, Leupin's themes (encyclopedism, mysticism, figures of speech/body/writing) also bring to mind another psychoanalytic critic: Michel de Certeau (especially *La Fable Mystique*, Gallimard 1982; English translation *The Mystic Fable*, trans. M. B. Smith, The University of Chicago Press 1992). However, whereas de Certeau focussed on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors, Leupin – who does not refer to de Certeau but still may have been influenced by this famous predecessor – does original work in re-reading medieval texts.

One could end by pondering the significance of the term 'rhetoric' in the title of this recent English translation of Leupin's book. The word does not appear in the original French title of the 1993 edition. Has the scope of rhetoric genuinely expanded during the last ten years or has it simply become a buzzword of literary study, similar to the vogue of 'poetics' on the critical scene of the 1980s and 1990s? In the present case, I tend to favour the latter option. And yet, although the putative model reader of this volume is a medievalist interested in literary criticism and theology (rather than in the history of rhetoric), *Fiction and Incarnation* also encourages new ways of transcending disciplinary borders in search of fresh and even polemical perspectives.

Päivi Mehtonen
Department of Literature and the Arts
Comparative Literature
SF-33014 University of Tampere
Finland
paivi.mehtonen@uta.fi

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