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“Commentaries are thriving.”¹
—Christina Shuttleworth Kraus

Introductory Remarks on the Genology of Commentary²

A need for commenting arises whenever the content of a work is hidden from the addressee so that it has to be uncovered for the work to be received properly. It concerns mostly sacred texts whose comprehension is not possible without a proper guide to provide explanations. It is similar with philosophical schools, where teachings of the master must be read and interpreted strictly in the spirit of a given school.³ Hence what they need are explanatory and interpretative commentaries that prepare the student for absorbing the knowledge in the proper way. Laws need commenting insofar as they require constructive comments that explain the essence and purview of specific provisions. Literary works, too, occasion a need for commentary sometimes, because their proper understanding requires some level of philological knowledge and a proper guide to their twists and turns (i.e. a key for interpretation). Describing this process in terms of cultural memory as it is understood by Jan Assmann, we could say that canonical texts, either biblical or classical, that function as inalterable primary texts do need secondary texts that comment on them. Primary texts reveal their meaning only insofar as they are accompanied by both an interpreter and addressee.⁴

¹ Ch. Shuttleworth Kraus, “Introduction: Reading Commentaries/Commentaries as Reading,” in R.K. Gibson and Ch. Shuttleworth Kraus (eds), *The Classical Commentary. Histories, Practices, Theory* (Leiden and Köln, 2002), p. 23.

² The article is a part of the book *Średniowieczna literatura komentująca i izagogiczna* prepared by the author for print at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

³ See M. Mazza, “La scuola filosofica e il commento,” in G. Cambiano, L. Canfora, and D. Lanza (eds), *Lo spazio letterario della Grecia antica*, vol. 1/3 (Roma, 1994), pp. 587–611.

⁴ See J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München, 2005).

The polysemous term “commentary” needs to be defined carefully in order to refer to the genre of commenting literature, because the concept of commenting and commentary is broad and has multiple meanings that are not limited to literature alone but refer to nonverbal forms of communication and expression as well, so there is always a risk of conceptual confusion and inevitable lack of precision. It might well be impossible to give one universal definition that would cover all possible functions of the commentary and ways of commenting.⁵ Almost every statement regardless of its form (whether it be oral, written, or visual) entails an act of assuming a position, being thereby a kind of commentary on some other statement (text) or reality, natural phenomenon, behaviors, and so on. What such a broad and general understanding of commenting entails for someone who wants to capture the essence of commentary is the risk of taking it to extremes, since the name “commentary” and the act of “commenting” thus become dangerously indeterminate and may refer to virtually anything.⁶

Hereafter we will deal with “commentary” in a narrower sense of the word, which signifies the genre of commenting and isagogic literature, particularly of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Thus, the remarks to be found below are meant as an introductory reflection on the commentary as a form of commentarial literature. Most of all, however, we shall be looking for a definition, if only a very general one, of the commentary as a genre.

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In 1932 Johann Geffcken published an article that contributed to discovering new opportunities of research on the Antique philological commentary.⁷ Based on selected examples, Geffcken tracked the origins, forms, and ways of development of this genre of scholarly literature. He reaffirmed that the milieus in which commentaries had been produced were associated with the schools of Aristotle, Platonists, and Alexandrine scholars. As cursory as they might be, Geffcken’s remarks were mostly meant to draw attention to commentarial literature, an important topic hitherto neglected in the studies on Antiquity. As several historians of philosophy before him, Geffcken regarded

⁵ Such a definition would need to encompass as diverse forms of commentary as the footnote or picture. Cf. A.T. Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London, 1997); Ch. Schulze, “Das Bild als Kommentar – Zur Problematik von Pflanzendarstellungen in spätantiken und mittelalterlichen Handschriften,” in W. Geerlings and Ch. Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 335–354.

⁶ One of the first works to study the essence and functions of the commentary, from the stance of “the archeology of literary communication,” was J. Assmann and B. Gladigow (eds), *Text und Kommentar* (München, 1995).

⁷ J. Geffcken, “Zur Entstehung und zum Wesen des griechischen wissenschaftlichen Kommentars,” *Hermes*, 67 (1932), pp. 397–412.

writing an extensive history of the commentary to be a task of prime importance. He pointed out that one should first explore the scheme governing the commentary and then trace its later history. The research postulate to reconstruct the history of the commentary and commenting has not been fully realized yet. Although Antique and Late Antique commentaries became topics of numerous analyses, the last years have seen a real boom when it comes to studies on Medieval and modern commentaries. Research work on these commentaries, and on the methods of commenting in particular, is carried on to good results, but constructing a theory of the philological commentary as a genre and presenting it diachronically from the Alexandrine times until the fifteenth century, at which point a new kind of commentary emerged, breaking with the centuries-old tradition, has proved to be difficult and remains a postulate yet to be fulfilled.

For the last twenty years the topic of commenting and forms of commentary has gained interest of scholars of early cultures as well as of philologists, linguists, and historians of science, philosophy, theology, medicine, and so on.⁸ Possibly due to the popularity of New Philology, the wall separating the old and new philology has collapsed, thus making the “heavy” philology (consisting mostly in the study of ancient languages, texts, and manuscripts) more receptive to the contemporary literary theory and criticism.⁹ New questions have been posed about the nature of commenting and forms of commentary in Antiquity and the Middle Ages as well as about the commentary as a genre of literature. Numerous collective works that discuss the process of commenting and forms of commentary not only in the Greek and Roman, but also in the Arabic, Judaic, and Far-Eastern worlds—both in the past and in the present—have appeared.¹⁰ This basic form of scholarly discourse in Late Antiquity and

⁸ A concise, though a little outdated, discussion of the conception and functions of the commentary can be found in R. Lüdeke, “Kommentar,” in *Kompendium der Editionswissenschaften*, http://www.edkomp.uni-muenchen.de/CD1/frame_edkomp_RL2.html (accessed on November 1, 2016).

⁹ This is how the opposition is presented concisely in J.M. Ziolkowski, “Metaphilology,” rev. *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* by H.U. Gumbrecht (Urbana and Chicago, 2003), *Error and Academic Self: The Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern* by S. Lerer (New York, 2002), *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 104/2 (2005), pp. 239–272. On the idea of New Philology, its postulates and practical results, see e.g. M.-D. Gleßgen, F. Lebsanft, “Von alter und neuer Philologie, oder: Neuer Streit über Prinzipien und Praxis der Textkritik,” in M.-D. Gleßgen and F. Lebsanft (eds), *Alte und neue Philologie* (Tübingen, 1997), pp. 1–14.

¹⁰ Let me mention just the largest collections of specific studies: G.W. Most (ed.), *Commentaries – Kommentare, Aporemata: Kritische Studien zur Philologiegeschichte*, Bd. 4 (Göttingen, 1999); M.-O. Goulet-Cazé et al. (eds), *Le commentaire entre tradition et innovation* (Paris, 2000); W. Geerlings and Ch. Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter* (Leiden, 2002); R.K. Gibson and Ch. Shuttleworth Kraus (eds), *The Classical Commentary. Histories, Practices, Theory* (Leiden and Köln, 2002); G. Fioravanti, C. Leonardi, and S. Perfetti (eds), *Il commento*

the Middle Ages attracts attention mostly for its hermeneutics and various methods applied to the acts of commenting. Moreover, the form of commentary is an unusually vigorous one, fitting right in with the digital version of hypertext of the twenty-first century as well.

A conference held in Heidelberg in 1997 bore fruit in the collective work edited by Glenn W. Most, *Commentaries – Kommentare*.¹¹ The book is fundamental for any research that sets out to grasp the essence of scholarly commentary both synchronically and diachronically, between the universe of writing and the realm of works of visual art. Much of its bulk is devoted to commentaries on religious texts: Babylonian, Hebrew, Christian (Greek), Buddhist, Taoist, and Islamic. The commentary literature explaining scholarly works (Babylonian and Hellenistic) and Late Antique commentaries on works of Galen are taken into account as well. Among the contributions focusing on the analysis of ancient commentaries there are two discussing other than philological commentarial forms, namely those dealing with modern painting and sculpture.¹² A visual representation can also be a form of commentary on some other work, and it can constitute an interpretation of a text, too. Two contributions explore the tradition and evolution of the commentary genre in the Middle Ages, and the conclusion includes remarks on the practice of contemporary editors who edit commentaries on ancient literary works.

The editor, with such a broad comparative overview of the material at his disposal, allocated some space to general reflection on what commentary is or may be.¹³ Without attempting to reach the crux of the matter—it would be, after all, rather difficult to come to final conclusions based on several, or even a dozen, examples referring to various cultural spheres, times, and cultural milieus—he nevertheless did offer a handful of remarks on commentarial forms. A reviewer of the book, James J. O’Donnell, a well-known classical philologist, has actually done the work for him and, drawing on Most’s remarks, defined all the various ways in which the

filosofico nell’Occidente latino (secoli XIII–XV): atti del colloquio Firenze-Pisa, 19–22 ottobre 2000 (Turnhout, 2002); M. Mejor, K. Jażdżewska, and A. Zajchowska (eds), *Glossae – scholia – commentarii. The Studies on Commenting Texts in Antiquity and Middle Ages* (Frankfurt, 2014); Ch. Shuttleworth Kraus and Ch. Stray (eds), *Classical Commentaries: Explorations in a Scholarly Genre* (Oxford, 2016). Cf. older ones: *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum: Medieval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries*, ed. P.O. Kristeller et al. (Washington, 1960); *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100–c. 1375. The Commentary Tradition*, ed. A.J. Minnis, A.B. Scott, and D. Wallace (Oxford, 1991).

¹¹ Most (ed.), *Commentaries*.

¹² K. Krause, “Kommentare zu Bildern: Die ‘Conférences de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture’ (1667),” in Most (ed.), *Commentaries*, pp. 245–281, B.E. Borg, “Allegorie der Kunst – Kunst der Allegorie. Winckelmanns *Kunstbeschreibungen* als archäologischer Kommentar,” in Most (ed.), *Commentaries*, pp. 282–295.

¹³ Most, “Some Reflections on Commentaries,” *Commentaries*, pp. xii–xiv.

term “commentary” can be understood.¹⁴ The remarks may be summed up in several points:¹⁵

1. Transcription of an oral exposition of a text read aloud to a public, for example, some Christian sermons;
2. Marginal notes and interlineations in an authoritative text (for this reason often later extracted and made the center of a separate text, with the primary text reduced to lemmas, e.g. Pelagius on St Paul);
3. Compilation of marginal notes, for example, the *Glossa Ordinaria* or the Talmud;
4. A “commentary” written deliberately to present the commentator’s own views.

These observations actually refer to varied functions of commentarial forms, so they do not comprise a consistent definition of “commentary.” On the contrary, they draw attention to the broad semantic field of the “commentary” lexeme and to the rich functional potential of this kind of literature in the past and, which might be surprising, in the present.

Another large international conference devoted to commentary was held in Paris in 1999. Its proceedings appeared in print a year later, published by an editorial team headed by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé.¹⁶ The book brought a very rich and broad body of material on commentaries dating from different epochs and referring to different fields of knowledge. It contains essays on the practice of commenting in Antiquity, in Byzantine times, and in the Latin Middle Ages. A separate part is devoted to biblical commentaries, as well as to scientific and philosophical ones. Essays by two renowned specialists on material aspects of early commentaries—surviving as papyrus rolls and medieval manuscripts—merit special attention.¹⁷

No less interesting and comprehensive in its approach to the subject matter is a volume published by a pair of scholars, Roy K. Gibson and Christina Shuttleworth Kraus, in 2002.¹⁸ Analogically to the books edited by Most

¹⁴ J.J. O’Donnell, Review of Most (ed.), *Commentaries*, <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2000/2000-05-19.html> (accessed on November 1, 2016).

¹⁵ They were later used by Gibson and Kraus in the “Editors’ Preface,” *The Classical Commentary*, pp. ix–x.

¹⁶ M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, T. Dorandi, R. Goulet, et al. (eds), *Le commentaire entre tradition et innovation. Actes du colloque international de L’Institut des traditions Textuelles (Paris Villejuif, 22–25 Sept. 1999)* (Paris, 2000).

¹⁷ T. Dorandi, “Le commentaire dans la tradition papyrologique: quelques cas controversés,” in M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, T. Dorandi, R. Goulet, et al. (eds), *Le commentaire entre tradition*, pp. 15–27; L. Holtz, “Le rôle des commentaires d’auteurs classiques,” in M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, T. Dorandi, R. Goulet, et al. (eds), *Le commentaire entre tradition*, pp. 102–117.

¹⁸ Gibson and Shuttleworth Kraus (eds), *The Classical Commentary. Histories, Practices, Theory* (Leiden and Köln, 2002), p. 23.

and Goulet-Cazé, it too analyzes commentarial forms from different epochs, covering a wide range of topics. It compares, for instance, early commenting practice with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century methods of exegesis and commentaries on works of classical authors. The guiding principle of the volumes of conference proceedings published thus far, which consist of detailed analyses of commentaries from Antiquity through to the present times, has been to collect enough comparative material to answer some pertinent questions, though not always posed as explicitly as this: Does the practice of commenting employ some universal techniques; does the commentary possess its own structure, principles, and definite functions, and is it then warranted to claim the existence of the commentary as a separate literary genre? In her introduction to the volume, Kraus makes a number of penetrating remarks regarding the creation and interpretative possibilities of the commentary. It is thus a literary form that can be parasitic on the commented text as it relies on it for its content, but it can either complement the text commented on with new ideas and contexts or, on the contrary, ignore them, in which case the primary text, as viewed by the commentator, comes to the fore.¹⁹ Based on a rich trove of literature, the paper summarizes the contemporary debates on the philological and editorial commentary, and on its purview in particular. It posits the question of whether in the process of documenting the language and thematic motifs of the commented work, or cataloging more and more parallel loci, from allusions through quotations and *similia*—which is the lifeblood of philological commentary—one does not lose sight of the primary text. For it results in a situation where the primary text (the one commented on) cannot or should not be read without a commentary—it refers mostly to texts by ancient authors. And then there is a problem of what to comment on? The commentator–editor usually makes an authoritative choice of places to be commented upon, thus taking away some prerogatives from the reader by imposing his own choices and ways of understanding, on the one hand, and becoming the reader’s guide to the work, on the other. Through his or her actions, the editor makes the text accessible to the reader in all of its intertextual polyphony by making references to numerous other texts, not only to literary ones, but also to inscriptions, coins, works of art, and architecture. Thus a (broad) commentary sometimes becomes a true trove that encourages the reader to ask questions about the text and keep on reading (the commentary or the primary text, though?). There is also a riveting question about the relationship holding between the text read in this manner and the written text (commented on). Sometimes a detailed commentary may even be regarded as a kind of autobiography of the commentator, documenting his

¹⁹ Shuttleworth Kraus, “Introduction,” pp. 1–27.

or her knowledge, interests, and research skills.²⁰ The commentator's work is then individualized to a smaller or larger degree, which in turn enables other scholars to write their own commentaries that need not repeat everything after their predecessors.²¹ Another interesting topic worthy of further discussion is what loci of the primary text are susceptible of commentary and how they change from one epoch to another, or even from generation to generation. The summarizing article by Shuttleworth Kraus is one of the most significant contributions in this matter, bringing us closer to the essence of commenting as well as to a theory of how the commentary comes about and how it is received.

Kraus has continued her research on the contemporary scholarly commentary in the following years. She has recently teamed up with Christopher Stray, a historian specializing in the history of classical studies, and the two published a book about commentaries on the classics in the twentieth century: *Classical Commentaries: Explorations in a Scholarly Genre*.²² Based on the results of research by the invited contributors and the editors themselves, they have chosen to define their area of interest by starting with a dictionary definition and supplying it with their own comments:

By "commentary," we mean a very particular—though manifold—form of scholarly discourse, "a systematic series of comments or annotations on the text of a [literary] work; an expository treatise following the order of the work explained" (*Oxford English Dictionary* s.v. 3a, attested from the mid-sixteenth century). Part of what this collection attempts is a flexible definition not of what a commentary is, but of what it does: though the contributors are interested in different time periods and national traditions, and though their approaches vary considerably, all would, we think, agree that a commentary is less a thing—even a sequence of things—than a continually evolving organism, characterized by a remarkable self-consciousness about its tradition and form(s), and imbued with equal parts of a sense of duty, anxiety, and pleasure...²³

Acts of literature, then, seem immediately to invite commentary, whether that commentary is descriptive/interpretative or ameliorative/allegorical/interpretative.²⁴

What is important in the foregoing description, which does not purport to be a definition as such, is its emphasis on the sequentiality and flexibility in building up the content of commentary, which combines descriptive and

²⁰ e.g. the monumental 11-volume edition of Cyprian Kamil Norwid's collected works with rich commentary that some scholars find unsavory can be viewed as a scholarly autobiography of its somewhat eccentric editor Juliusz Wiktor Gomulicki.

²¹ See remarks on this subject in J.T. Vallance, "Galen, Proclus and Non-Submissive Commentary," in Most (ed.), *Commentaries*, pp. 223–244.

²² Ch. Shuttleworth Kraus and Ch. Stray (eds), *Classical Commentaries: Explorations in a Scholarly Genre* (Oxford, 2016).

²³ Shuttleworth Kraus and Stray (eds), *Classical Commentaries*, p. 1.

²⁴ Shuttleworth Kraus and Stray (eds), *Classical Commentaries*, p. 2.

interpretative functions. It is equally important to stress the influence of tradition on the shape of commentary.

No less inspiring, though following from an entirely different set of premises, is an article by Wolfgang Raible, "Arten des Kommentierens – Arten der Sinnbildung – Arten des Verstehens. Spielarten der generischen Intertextualität."²⁵ Referring to semiotic theories of Algirdas Julien Greimas and an intertext model, the author claims that decoding and paraphrasing lies at the very heart of every kind of commenting. Moreover, he points out the vitality of this form of discourse and cites two examples supporting his thesis: commentaries on the work of Aristotle (two thick volumes of the philosopher's oeuvre as published by Immanuel Bekker versus more than forty volumes of commentaries by ancient authors) and one section of the German Civil Code (*Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*) versus a commentary on it that takes up a whole volume.²⁶ In both cases, the commentary literature has outgrown the respective primary texts considerably.

The article appeared in a volume bringing together papers devoted to multifaceted analyses of the essence and functions of the commentary, *Text und Kommentar*, edited by Jan Assmann and Burkhard Gladigow. The book was not taken into account in the volume edited by Shuttleworth Kraus, possibly due to its deeply historical topic. The project of the "archeology of literary communication" initiated in the 1970s, which has contributed so much to the broadening and deepening of the debate in literary and cultural studies, focuses on issues of information (text) and communication, on capabilities of encoding a message in writing or storing it in cultural memory in order to retrieve it after hundreds, or even thousands, of years. Retrieval of messages stored in written form refers to canonical and classical texts most of all, as they do not yield to change but need to be interpreted instead.²⁷ This is the origin of what Assmann calls "the culture of interpreting" (*Auslegungskultur*) that characterized most of early written civilizations. Therefore, the issue of text and commentary lies at the intersection of two lines of cultural development:

- history of commenting, or more generally, hermeneutics, the actions of *homo interpretans* and the emergence and development of interpretative skills;
- history of production of texts and of the cultural memory that expands along with the written texts that it stores, of intertextuality, of

²⁵ W. Raible, "Arten des Kommentierens – Arten der Sinnbildung – Arten des Verstehens. Spielarten der generischen Intertextualität," in Assmann and Gladigow (eds), *Text und Kommentar*, pp. 51–73.

²⁶ Raible, "Arten," p. 54.

²⁷ For some significant observations on the subject, see W. Raible, "Vom Text und seinen vielen Vätern oder: Hermeneutik als Korrelat der Schriftkultur," in A. Assmann, J. Assmann, and Ch. Hardmeier (eds), *Schrift und Gedächtnis* (München, 1983), pp. 20–23.

living with and growing accustomed to texts, of origins and development of knowledge on text.²⁸

So the point at which the commentary emerged is a confluence of knowledge on text and specific knowledge that enables text interpretation. Attempts at defining this form of commentary, understood in terms of “commentary culture,” will, therefore, tend to bear either on methods of interpreting and exegesis or on linguistic aspects of how text is produced and how it functions.

A research program called “Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter,” run for many years by the late Wilhelm Geerlings at the University of Bochum, initiated the book series *Clavis commentariorum antiquitatis et medii aevi*. The goal was to analyze commentarial forms and their history and to take stock of the principles of commenting within a wide array of topics: from medicine, through biblical commentaries, to Hebrew liturgical poetry. Two volumes, related to study into commenting more closely than others, contain several dozen specific articles in total: *Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter. Beiträge zu seiner Erforschung* (2002)²⁹ and *Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter, vol. 2: Neue Beiträge zu seiner Erforschung* (2004).³⁰ Volume one comprises sixteen contributions that examine commentaries from various epochs, from Greek dramas that had survived as papyruses, through to Late Antique illustrated herbaria. A large part consists of analyses of scholarly commentaries on the philosophical writings of Aristotle, medical writings by Galen and Hippocrates (combining Greek and Arabic literatures) as well as of essays focused on Hebrew commentaries on the Scripture. An article by Ilsetraut Hadot on the structure and character of Greek commentaries on philosophical writings and Hildegund Müller’s study on the patristic commentary are especially noteworthy as contributing significantly to establishing the structural principles of the Late Antique commentary.³¹ The next volume continued the search for the essence of commenting, this time

²⁸ *Text und Kommentar*, p. 12: “Geschichte des Kommentierens, oder allgemeiner formuliert: die Geschichte der Hermeneutik, des *homo interpretis*, der Entstehung und Entfaltung von Deutungswissenschaft, und – der Geschichte der Textproduktion und des sich mit geschriebenen Texten anreichernden kulturellen Gedächtnisses, der Intertextualität, des Lebens und des Umgangs mit Texten, der Entstehung und Entfaltung von Textwissenschaft.”

²⁹ W. Geerlings and Ch. Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter. Beiträge zu seiner Erforschung*, CCAM 2 (Leiden, 2002). For a review see M. Mejer <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2004/2004-03-24.html> (accessed on November 1, 2016).

³⁰ W. Geerlings and Ch. Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike und Mittelalter, vol. 2: Neue Beiträge zu seiner Erforschung*, CCAM 3 (Leiden, 2004.) Reviewed by I. Sluiter, *The Classical Review*, 55/2 (2005), pp. 699–700.

³¹ I. Hadot, “Der fortlaufende philosophische Kommentar in der Antike,” in Geerlings and Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike*, vol. 2, pp. 183–189; H. Müller, “Zur Struktur des patristischen Kommentars. Drei Beispiele aus Augustins *Enarrationes in Psalmos*,” in Geerlings and Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike*, vol. 2, pp. 15–31.

broadening the scope of research to encompass issues that had been largely overlooked so far. This most of all refers to visual representations as “visual commentaries” (*bildliche Kommentare*),³² to the commentary functioning as interpreting and explaining political events, as well as to Christian Schulze’s reflections on not commenting on masterpieces as being a special kind of commentary through negligence.³³ Geerlings set out with an interesting methodological assumption that the need for commenting arises when the primary text has ossified and become canonical, thus requiring commentary as a form of debate with the established authority.³⁴ His approach, then, echoes Assmann’s “canonical texts,” which are inalterable and perfect, and makes use of the contemporary sense of “commentary” that entails criticism or debate over someone else’s views.

Brill has published five volumes of the series until 2016.³⁵ The most recent one, *Exegese und Lebensform: Die Proömien der antiken griechischen Bibelkommentare*, addresses yet another issue concerning the tradition of commenting: the link between the commentary and isagogic literature, or introductory prolegomena to the commentary.³⁶ This specific kind of literature may be called either propaedeutic or isagogic.³⁷ The term encompasses numerous kinds of forewords, introductions, and preliminary commentaries (cf. *prologus*, *proemium*, *introductio*, *exordium*, *accessus*, etc.), or in other words, texts that are meant to prepare the reader and introduce him or her to the work proper. What is characteristic for such prolegomena is the hermeneutic scheme, *schema isagogiké*, consisting of questions that need to be answered before proceeding to the commentary in the strict sense of the word.³⁸ The ques-

³² e.g. R. Krumeich, “Bildliche Kommentar zu griechischen Dramen? Theaterbilder auf Attischen und Unteritalienischen Symposiongefäßen spätarchaischer und klassischer Zeit,” in Geerlings and Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike*, vol. 2, pp. 41–66; N. Valenzuela Montenegro, “Die ‘Tabulae Iliacae’ als Kommentar in Bild und Text: zur frühkaiserlichen Rezeption des trojanischen Sagenkreises,” in Geerlings and Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike*, vol. 2, pp. 67–98; S. Wittekind, “Die Illustrationen von Augustinustexten im Mittelalter,” in Geerlings and Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike*, vol. 2, pp. 101–127.

³³ Ch. Schulze, “Das Phänomen der ‘Nichtkommentierung’ bedeutender Werke,” in Geerlings and Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike*, vol. 2, pp. 21–34.

³⁴ Geerlings and Schulze (eds), *Der Kommentar in Antike*, p. 2.

³⁵ See <http://www.brill.com/publications/clavis-commentariorum-antiquitatis-et-medii-aevi> (accessed on November 1, 2016).

³⁶ M. Skeb, *Exegese und Lebensform: Die Proömien der antiken griechischen Bibelkommentare. Die Proömien der antiken griechischen Bibelkommentare*, Clavis Commentariorum Antiquitatis et Medii Aevi, 5 (Leiden, 2006); Cf. J. Mansfeld, *Prolegomena, Questions to be Settled before the Study of an Author, or a Text*, Philosophia Antiqua, 61 (Leiden and Köln, 1994).

³⁷ The term “isagogic literature” comes from German scholarship; see M. Fuhrmann, “Isagogische Literatur,” in *Der kleine Pauly-Wissowa*, vol. 2 (München, 1967), col. 1435–1456; G. Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 4 (Tübingen, 1998), col. 633–640; *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed., n (Oxford, 2012), p. 745.

³⁸ See e.g. M. Plezia, *De commentariis isagogicis* (Kraków, 1949); A.J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (London, 1984), pp. 16ff.

tionnaire, in Late Antique commentaries and prolegomena to philosophical or scientific works by Aristotle, Plato, and Galen, containing as many as a dozen or more questions, was being gradually reduced, even to the point of doing away with them completely, in biblical commentaries and later, medieval prolegomena. Matthias Skeb has studied the relationship between the tradition of commentaries on the Scripture and isagogic literature thoroughly and concluded that biblical commentaries generally did not adopt the hermeneutical scheme known from the pagan isagogic literature.

Another conference, held at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, in 2002 focused on the commenting in modernity. The proceedings were finally published in 2006 as *Der Kommentar in der frühen Neuzeit*.³⁹ As the title suggests, the volume is devoted to the commenting and commentarial forms in modern times, so it shows a continuation of medieval traditions, on the one hand, and the process of working out new principles that would be in line with the new medium of print. Several of the papers merit special attention: Thomas Leinkauf's contribution about the commentarial technique of Marsilio Ficino, a translator into Latin and interpreter of Platonic thought; Ann Blair's interesting remarks about the collective commentary; and Martin Muslov's paper about anti-commentaries, the parodies written in the eighteenth century.⁴⁰

The newest studies analyzing commentarial forms in legal literature also arduously search for the definition we are after. David Kästle-Lamparter, a contemporary scholar interested in the commentarial form of legal commentary, encounters numerous difficulties when trying to define what it actually is. He cites attempts of numerous other authors who have tried various figurative descriptions, including quite surprising ones, to pinpoint the essence of legal commentary.⁴¹ They have talked, for instance, about "the text's accomplice,"⁴² "hypothec,"⁴³ "the shadow of the legal provision,"⁴⁴ "a computer for the transfer of data,"⁴⁵ "a legal steam

³⁹ R. Häfner and M. Völkel (eds), *Der Kommentar in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen, 2006).

⁴⁰ Th. Leinkauf, "Marsilio Ficinos Platon-Kommentar," in Häfner and Völkel (eds), *Der Kommentar*, pp. 79–112; A. Blair, "The Collective Commentary as Reference Genre," *ibid.*, pp. 115–132; M. Muslov, "Subversive Kommentierung – Burleske Kommentarparodien, Gegenkommentare und Libertinismus in der frühen Neuzeit," *ibid.*, pp. 133–160.

⁴¹ D. Kästle-Lamparter, *Welt der Kommentare: Struktur, Funktion und Stellenwert juristischer Kommentare in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen, 2016), p. 9. For the quotes, see p. 9, nn. 61–66.

⁴² C. Vismann, Benjamin als Kommentator, in B. Menke, Ch. Menke, and E. Horn (eds), *Literatur als Philosophie – Philosophie als Literatur* (München, 2006), p. 349.

⁴³ Cf. B. Gladigow, "Der Kommentar als Hypothek des Textes: Systematische Erwägungen und historische Analysen," in J. Assmann and B. Gladigow (eds), *Text und Kommentar. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation IV* (München, 1995), pp. 35–49.

⁴⁴ G.-P. Calliess, *Kommentar und Dogmatik im Recht. Funktionwandel im Angesicht von Europäisierung und Globalisierung* (Tübingen, 2014), p. 386.

⁴⁵ G. Kegel, "Handwerkliche Notizen zu Wenglers neuem Werk," *Praxis des Internationalen Privat- und Verfahrensrechts* (1981), p. 186.

engine,”⁴⁶ or even “a cookbook for lawyers.”⁴⁷ Kästle-Lamparter himself remains skeptical about defining the commentary precisely, seeing neither a need nor the possibility for heuristically distinguishing it from other genres.⁴⁸ In his opinion, the extent of textual forms that may be taken into account as commentarial forms is too large, and their subject matter is too variegated. And as for the studies that look for the essence of the thing in the etymology of either “commentarius” or “commentarii,” they offer nothing in the way of bringing order to the variety and confusion of the word’s meanings. For the purposes of his work, the author has therefore fashioned the following practical definition of (legal) commentary:

Kommentar ist demnach jeder Text, der sich strukturell an einen anderen Text anlehnt (Primärtext, Basistext, Referenztext) und diesen fortlaufend erläutert.⁴⁹

Thus, the author conceives of the commentarial form as being predicated on its relationship with the commented text (it is a causal relationship, a prerequisite for the emergence of the commentary). Needless to say, the relation does not necessarily mean that the commented text is superior to the commentary; on the contrary, in law a commentary is often more important than the provision itself. It is the commentary that either restricts or extends the scope of the law, making its meaning clearer, explaining its construal and application. Without a proper interpretation in the commentary, a law is little more than a dead letter.

In Poland, the topic of the commentary as a form of commenting on another text has rarely been discussed. Some scattered remarks on medieval commentaries can be found mostly in the editions and discussions of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century commentaries by scholars from the Jagiellonian University and the University of Prague.⁵⁰ Scholars have also taken interest in

⁴⁶ J.W. Hedemann, “Staudingers Kommentar zum Bürgerlichen Gesetzbuch, 10. Aufl. Bd. 3,” *Deutsche Juristen Zeitung*, 40 (1935), p. 3.

⁴⁷ Th. Rasehorn, “Eine Alternative für die Rechtspraxis,” *Recht und Politik* (1980), p. 228.

⁴⁸ For a similar position see L. Fladerer and D. Börner-Klein, “Kommentar,” in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 21 (Stuttgart, 2006), p. 275; cf. E.J. Schnabel, “On Commentary Writing,” in S.E. Porter and E.J. Schnabel (eds), *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries. Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 3–31.

⁴⁹ Kästle-Lamparter, *Welt der Kommentare*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ See e.g. M. Markowski, “Komentarz Benedykta Hessego z Krakowa do *Isagogi* Porfirusza,” *Ruch Filozoficzny*, 26 (1968), pp. 222–224; J. Rebeta, *Komentarz Pawła z Worcestera do “Etyki Nikomachejskiej” Arystotelesa z 1424 roku. Zarys problematyki filozoficzno-społecznej* (Wrocław, 1970); Radulphus de Longo Campo, *In Anticlaudianum Alani commentum: editio princeps ex codice Scorialensi necnon sex aliis extantibus introductione et notis adiectis*, ed. J. Sulowski (Wrocław, 1972); *Repertorium commentariorum Medii Aevi in Aristotelem Latinorum quae in Bibliotheca Iagellonica Cracoviae asservantur*, ed. M. Markowski and S. Włodek (Wrocław, 1974), S. Wielgus, *Benedykta Hessego “Quaestiones super octo libros «Physicorum» Aristotelis”* (Lublin, 1983), B. Hesse, *Commentum in Evangelium s. Matthaei*, ed. W. Bucichowski (Warszawa, 1979–1990); C. Mielczarski, *Między gramatyką scholastyczną a humanistyczną: komentarz Jana Sommerfelda Starszego do traktatu*

the commentary of Jan of Dąbrówka on the *Chronicle* by Master Kadłubek.⁵¹ Teresa Michałowska in her monograph on medieval literary theory has recently devoted some attention to the commentaries and their role in text exegesis.⁵² What can, however, signal a beginning of studies into commentarial literature are the papers presented at the 2014 *Glossae—Scholia—Commentarii* conference that I organized at the Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw.⁵³ The only book in Polish written so far about the commenting and commentary is a study by Monika Bogdanowska.⁵⁴ Its author, however, does not focus on the commentary in the context of early literature, but instead investigates the functions of the commentarial form in the belles-lettres of more modern times.

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Navigating through the thicket of linguistic and narratological theories, Bogdanowska is aware of just how confusing the name “commentary” can be, so she cautions the reader: “For commentary is something different as a hermeneutic, linguistic, semantic, or psychological category; it is different yet as a category in literary studies and literature.”⁵⁵ In a previously published article, Bogdanowska points to the degree of complexity involved in attempts to identify constitutive characteristics of commenting in literature:

A title can be a commentary on a piece of writing; a piece of writing can be a commentary on its title. A musical piece may be deemed to be a commentary, whenever the message it conveys goes beyond music; but the same can be said about a musical piece consisting of variations on a musical theme. A compilation of several texts may be a commentary, and so can be just one text published for a second time.⁵⁶

Limiting herself to the domain of the written word, Bogdanowska then goes on to say that from the point of view of text theory, the commentarial

gramatycznego Eberharda Hiszpańskiego (Strasburg 1499) (Warszawa, 2003); K. Krauze-Błachowicz, *Jan z Głogowa i tradycja gramatyki spekulatywnej* (Warszawa, 2008).

⁵¹ M. Zwiercan, *Komentarz Jana z Dąbrówki do kroniki mistrza Wincentego zwanego Kadłubkiem* (Wrocław, 1969); M. Mejor, “Prolegomena Komentarza Jana z Dąbrówki do *Kroniki Wincentego Kadłubka*,” in M. Olszewski and A. Dąbrówka (eds), *Komentarz Jana z Dąbrówki do Kroniki biskupa Wincentego* (Warszawa, 2015), pp. 135–140; a number of remarks can be found in J. Kujawiński, “Komentowanie historiografii w średniowiecznej Europie. Próba charakterystyki zjawiska na podstawie wybranych zabytków z obszaru romańskiego (XI–XV w.),” in Olszewski and Dąbrówka (eds), *Komentarz Jana z Dąbrówki*, pp. 105–134.

⁵² T. Michałowska, *Średniowieczna teoria literatury w Polsce. Rekoniesans* (Wrocław, 2007), pp. 62–85.

⁵³ M. Mejor, K. Jażdżewska, and A. Zajchowska (eds), *Glossae—Scholia—Commentarii. The Studies on Commenting Texts in Antiquity and Middle Ages* (Frankfurt, 2014).

⁵⁴ M. Bogdanowska, *Komentarze i komentowanie: zagadnienia konstrukcji tekstu* (Katowice, 2003).

⁵⁵ Bogdanowska, *Komentarze*, p. 10.

⁵⁶ M. Bogdanowska, “Komentarz jako forma podawcza, gatunek mowy, tekst,” *Ruch Literacki*, 43/4–5 (2002), p. 338.

expression as such is just a part of the text's structure, influencing the text's meaning by interpreting its local senses. While reflecting on the commentary in literature, one can point to different functions performed by commentarial forms in epic, lyric, and drama. As Bogdanowska states, there are only two criteria they all share: "explicitness, which enables us to talk about the commentary that is either explicit or implicit; and scope, depending on whether the commentary encompasses the whole text or just a part of it."⁵⁷ In a literary work, then, the functions of commentary are reserved only to the commenting utterance (interpretation) of the speaker in an explicit commentary in epic, and to the implicit commentary of the lyrical "I" in lyric. The commentary as an authorial expression in epic is characterized by Michał Głowiński in *Słownik terminów literackich* as follows:

Authorial commentary is related to the omniscient narrator, who has the authority to evaluate and interpret each element of the narrative (this is an essential element of the classical realist novel); it might refer to situations in the story, to behaviors of the characters, to objects described; it most often manifests itself in explaining singular facts through reference to general laws.⁵⁸

Let us leave aside the reflection on the role of commentary in the literary work, because the issues it involves, complicated as they are, do not pertain to the main subject of our discussion, and besides, Bogdanowska has discussed them in detail in the work already cited.⁵⁹

In the "Komentarz" [Commentary] entry of the abovementioned *Słownik terminów literackich*, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa describes the form in a different way, more in line with the practice of literary historians and critical editors, without associating it with theories of text, narratology, speech acts, and the like. Because reading some literary texts, for example novels by Umberto Eco or even *The Discovery of Heaven* by Harry Mulisch, requires a kind of expertise possessed only by thoroughly educated individuals well versed in Antiquity, the traditions of Roman Catholic rite, art history, philosophy, the Kabbalah, physics, astronomy, and so on. Proper reception of such literary works can therefore be supported by a set of carefully selected notes and commentaries prepared by the editor or author, which is why Kostkiewiczowa reduces the functions of the commentary to an element of critical editing. From this point of view, it comprises semantic, exegetic, and other explanatory notes that make it easier for the reader to comprehend a literary work in a proper manner.⁶⁰ The scope of the commentary, whether

⁵⁷ Bogdanowska, "Komentarz jako forma," p. 350.

⁵⁸ J. Sławiński (ed.), *Słownik terminów literackich*, 3rd rev. edn (Wrocław, 2000), p. 251.

⁵⁹ See Bogdanowska, "Komentarz jako forma," nn. 17 and 19, with reference to further bibliography in Polish and other languages.

⁶⁰ See Sławiński (ed.), *Słownik*, p. 251.

it should be detailed or limited to selected loci or problems, whether its style should be as succinct as possible or maybe a little freer, and whether, generally speaking, there is any need for text explanation in critical editions—all these and other issues are topics for discussion about the goals and methods of scholarly editing. Depending on different presuppositions and practices prevalent in a given milieu of scholars or editors, various schools and practices of commenting have developed when it comes to editing both early and contemporary literature.⁶¹

As a result, the definition of commentary in a newer *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich* recognizes connotations of the word “commentary” that refer to editing as well as to the history of literature, and to general usage. Hence it distinguishes three meanings: 1) explanatory notes as part of critical editing; 2) expression of opinions about a situation or event; 3) authorial commentary in a literary work.⁶²

Semantic and etymological exploration of the term does not lead to a more comprehensive view of the functions of commentarial forms, nor does it bring us any closer to establishing what “commenting” means in the sphere of the written word. Newer dictionaries make the meaning of “commentary” and “commenting” even more obscure than what literary theory and criticism compendia say. For instance, a popular *Słownik języka polskiego PWN* establishes the hierarchy of meanings of *komentarz* [commentary] in contemporary Polish as follows:

1. “a remark, especially a critical or vicious one, about someone or something”;
2. “an article of opinion or a statement giving an account of current political, economic, or cultural events”;
3. “explanation or interpretation of a text, painting, scientific research, etc., added by the author, editor, exhibitor, director, or publisher”;
4. “a descriptive spoken account of events as they happen, esp. on a radio or TV broadcast.”⁶³

Characteristically, the meaning that we have been focusing on is listed only as the third one, and the whole entry is dominated by “commentary” understood as a journalistic kind of discourse. This is due to the fact that a very important sense of “commentary” has appeared lately; it signifies

⁶¹ See M. Mathijsen, “Die ‘sieben Todsünde’ des Kommentars,” in R. Nutt-Kofoth et al. (eds), *Text und Edition. Positionen und Perspektiven* (Berlin, 2000), pp. 245–261.

⁶² G. Gazda and S. Tynecka-Makowska, *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich*, (Kraków, 2006), p. 357.

⁶³ See <http://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/komentarz;2472578.html> (accessed on November 1, 2016).

a basic form of expressing opinions in the modern media.⁶⁴ It does not necessarily involve explaining or making complicated matters more accessible to the general public; more often, it is an exposition of someone's opinions or position. Sometimes even a journalist's commentary is a kind of statement meant as a polemic discrediting the contrary opinion, so it comes close to manipulation and may even be a tool of propaganda. This kind of commentary certainly does not fall within the scope of our study.

Comparing it with the classical Greek, where *scholion* means "interpretation, comment," and "short note" most of all, shows just how far from its original meaning the current sense of the word "commentary" can get.⁶⁵ Although a different sense of the word can also be noted: "tedious speech, lecture," which is related to the noun *scholē*, meaning "boredom" and "inactivity."

A lexicon enjoying worldwide popularity among scholars specializing in medieval studies, *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, defines commentary by looking at its formal characteristics, which are also relevant for its functions. This definition, however, narrows the meaning to the commentarial forms of different kinds: to explanations related to the interpreted text either directly (i.e. as glosses or scholia) or indirectly as a separate commentary referring to the text commented upon through a system of quotes or references:

Unter Kommentar versteht man die durchgehende Erläuterung eines Textganzen im Unterschied zur Glosse (Interpretament eines Einzelwortes) und zum Scholion (ausführliche Erklärung eines Wortes oder einer Stelle). Der Kommentar kann der äusseren Form nach als eigenständige, mit dem Grundtext nur durch Verweiszeichen oder Lemmazitate verbundene Schrift auftreten oder – seit dem Übergang von der Buchrolle zum Codex – dem Grundtext beigegeben werden.⁶⁶

The attempts at defining the commentary cited above lead us to the conclusion that the term "commentary" usually refers to a certain way of interpreting other written texts, that is: to texts explaining, and commenting on, other statements. As a group, they share one distinguishing and constitutive feature: they are all statements made because of and based on some other statement. The commentary is thus a subservient genre, a consequence of the need to explain some other text.

Basic forms of the written commentary are characterized by co-referentiality, a built-in connection with the text commented upon. This category of expression entails the acts of interpreting, elucidating, evaluating, explaining, discussing, and so on that can be performed in numerous ways

⁶⁴ B. Osvaldová (ed.), *O komentáři, o komentátorech (kolektivní monografie k žánru)* (Praha, 2013).

⁶⁵ H.G. Liddel and R. Scott (eds), *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1983), p. 1748.

⁶⁶ K. Bitterling, "Kommentar," in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 5 (Stuttgart, 1999), col. 1279. See also "Commentum," in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 3, col. 82.

according to various hermeneutical schemes. The commentary on which we focus here is, therefore, a written form of expression that explains or makes clear a literary or scholarly work and has an established form (of *glossa*, *scholion*, *lectio*, etc.) of varied dimensions and providing a varied degree of detail. For this reason, when we talk about the commentary, we generally mean the written expression as well as the hermeneutics it involves. The form of commentary is predicated on the methodology of commenting, which is in turn determined by convention and a centuries-old tradition which, having developed and flourished in the Middle Ages as a part of the scholastic method, deteriorated in subsequent centuries and has then reemerged in a new form.

Let the following description enumerating the functions (although the list is not complete) and forms of the commentary serve as a working definition of it as a literary genre that encompasses all of its different variants that along with introductions to commentaries comprise the commenting and isagogic literature. Let us just point out that due to its subservient role and practical character, the literature in question belongs to the domain of pragmatic literature. Literary scholars are not particularly fond of this term, borrowed from German medieval studies, but it adequately expresses the practical aspects of writing as a medium of communication and as a repository of information.⁶⁷

Let us conclude these preliminary remarks with the words of Christina Shuttleworth Kraus:

Commentaries are thriving. The vigorous debate in the review periodicals, grant-funding bodies, and publishing houses about their value and place in modern education has shown how robust a genre they are, both as a scholarly and as a didactic medium; they are even still being used as training grounds for new scholars (i.e., as dissertation topics). New volumes on a monumental scale are being produced by important academic presses; relatively obscure texts continue to be catapulted into the mainstream by receiving a commentary; dedicated commentary series are thriving. In addition, the commentary's natural affinity with the "non-sequential writing" of hypertext seems to be guaranteeing this ancient genre a prime place in twenty-first-century scholarly discourse.⁶⁸

Translated by Jan Hensel

⁶⁷ See e.g. H. Keller, K. Grubmüller, and N. Staubach (eds), *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter. Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungsstufen. Akten des Internationalen Kolloquiums, 17.–19. Mai 1989*, (München, 1992). In Poland the term has been successfully introduced by historian Edward Potkowski.

⁶⁸ Shuttleworth Kraus, "Introduction: Reading Commentaries/Commentaries as Reading," in Gibson and Shuttleworth Kraus (eds), *The Classical Commentary*, p. 23.