



# 'Annexed merely to make clear the argument'? Some Thoughts on the Functions of Commentary

DAVID NISTERS

Leipzig University, Germany

---

The practice of commenting can be argued to stand in a complex, yet intimate relationship with matters of power and authority. This relationship is reflected both by the semantic qualities of the verb *to comment* and by historical evidence. As early specimens of a well-developed culture of commenting, medieval commentaries indicate the many different ways in which commentators can assume a position of power and authority simply by virtue of engaging in the act of commenting. In particular, the medieval commentary tradition illustrates how any act of commenting is generally informed by the commentators' assumption of a position of superior insight into the texts that they respond to. Nonetheless, modern as well as premodern commentary shows a tendency to discard its object. The practice of commenting can, thus, not exclusively be regarded as a means to textual explication or annotation. Instead, it often constitutes a type of response that is both self-referential and dismissive of its object. While contemporary comment sections online often exemplify this self-referential and dismissive form of commenting, its underlying mechanism is also apparent in the fictional context of the description of a college class on Rembrandt in Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty*. Hence, Zadie Smith's work provides a productive point of reference when trying to make sense of more contemporary forms of commentary. Before discussing the classroom scene in the novel as well as the characteristics of medieval commentary any further, however, a closer look needs to be given to the essential characteristics of the act of commenting as well as to the status and position of the commentator.

## **Commentary, Power and Authority**

On its most basic semantic level, the verb *to comment* connects an agent, the commentator, with an object of commentary, such as a newspaper article, a film or a tweet, to which the commentator responds. If, as is often the case, a commentary is made public, moreover, commenting can be considered an attempt by the commentator to communicate her thoughts to other persons. In this way, commenting generally



constitutes an act of communication that is grounded in a response to some already existing utterance or text. Consequently, the information brought forward about the object of commentary must be regarded as relevant by the commentator in order for this communication to make sense. If D writes a devastating review on the poor argumentative quality of an essay for an online journal, then she must take her thoughts about this essay to be worth sharing with others. For example, in pointing out some of the essay's gravest flaws, D may wish to make sure that none of her readers overlook these flaws. D's concern indicates an important reason for engaging in the communicative act of commenting, namely the commentator's assumption that the object of commentary is not entirely self-explanatory. If D considered it impossible that other readers might overlook the poor argumentative quality of the essay that she responds to, then she would not think it worthwhile or even necessary to comment on the text.

This analysis directly corresponds with a common understanding of the practice of commenting, reflected in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of commentary as "a set of explanatory or critical notes on a text etc." (Def. 1). One substantial implication of the *OED's* definition is that the very act of commenting attributes to the commentator a special insight into the meaning and value of the object of commentary. Commenting, thus understood, crucially resembles Susan Sontag's account of the practice of interpretation. In her essay "Against Interpretation", Sontag writes: "The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really – or, really means – A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?" (1966: 5). Interpretation, consequently, constitutes a specific type of commentary. Like the interpreter, the commentator assumes that her thoughts are relevant in that they shed better light on the object of commentary. To come back to the earlier example, by writing a review on an essay for an online journal, commentator D implicitly presents her thoughts as relevant, suggesting that her understanding of the text is worth to be communicated to others.

In fact, the idea of the superior insight of commentators into whatever they comment on has a longstanding history. One of the most striking examples can be found in St Bonaventure's influential thirteenth-century discussion of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Here, Bonaventure distinguishes four ways of 'making a book' and goes on to explain the respective roles of the different 'bookmakers':

[S]omeone writes the words of other men without adding or changing anything, and he is called the scribe (scriptor) pure and simple. Someone else writes the words of other men, putting together material, but not his own, and he is called the compiler (compiler). Someone else writes the words of other men and also his own, but with those of the other men comprising the principal part while his own are annexed merely to make clear the argument, and he is called the commentator



(commentator), not the author. Someone else writes the words of other men and also of his own, but with his own forming the principal part and those of others being annexed merely by way of confirmation, and such a person should be called the author (*auctor*). (2003: 229)

While the work of all of these different agents relies on the writings of other people, the commentator stands out from the group because of his special relationship with the source material. Similar in this regard to Sontag's interpreter, Bonaventure's commentator adds to the understanding of other people's texts, symbiotically highlighting their meaning and import. Following this account, any genuine commentary presumes that its object cannot or should not stand by itself.

In effect, if something is genuinely commented upon, then the commentator can be assumed to imply (a) that the object of commentary is in need of further explanation or criticism in order to be understood appropriately; and (b) that the commentator herself is suited to fulfil this task. The football pundits to be seen on British television, accordingly, tend to be former footballers themselves since their previous occupation suggests that they are in a good position to talk about the specifics of a match. Their insight into the game is supposed to be superior to the insight of people with no such professional footballing background, which makes them well placed to comment on the events on the pitch. Conversely, commentators can capitalise on the implication that they have superior insight into the object of commentary simply by virtue of commenting on it. If the role of a commentator generally constitutes a superior position, then commenting on something is to assume a position of superior insight. By the same token, the act of commenting can be considered an act of exercising power in that the commentator assumes a position of authority.

This point is particularly apparent in the medieval commentary tradition, where the very act of commenting had the effect of assigning authoritative status to a text. Being originally a scholarly procedure, commentary became an indicator of authority in that it presented the text that was commented on as worth studying. Consequently, as Felicity Riddy remarks: "[A]n *auctor* (author) was endowed with *auctoritas* (authority) through the way the text was presented on the manuscript page [...]. [T]he scholarly commentaries and glosses that accrued to the 'set texts' used in grammar schools were the material means by which this kind of status was constituted" (2000: 1f). The practice of commenting can, therefore, not be reduced to its explanatory function. Instead, historical evidence suggests that commentary is instrumental in enhancing the cultural status of its object and, by extension, the status of the person producing the commentary. The commentator, thus, takes on the powerful role of an agent who can award or deny a text authoritative status simply by virtue of commenting on it, and this



notion helps to account for some of the most striking traits of the modern practice of commenting.

### Without a Text: Commentary, the Naked Text and Its Discontents

The second part of Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty*, first published in 2005, entails a classroom scene that centres on the discussion of two pictures by Rembrandt van Rijn. The novel is mainly set in the fictional East-Coast town of Wellington, where one of the main characters, Howard Belsey, teaches Art History at the local college. In class, Belsey and his moderately sized course reflect on Rembrandt's works *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1658) and *Woman on a Mound* (c.1631).<sup>1</sup> Narrated from the perspective of the young art-loving student Katie Armstrong, the scene displays how the participants of the course talk at length about the pictures without ever commenting on any of their visual characteristics. When Howard Belsey encourages a discussion about the images, he accordingly says: "What is it about these texts – these images as narration – that is implicitly applying for the quasi-mystical notion of genius? [...] Both these pictures speak of illumination. Why? That is to say, can we speak of *light* as a neutral concept? What is the *logos* of this light, this *spiritual* light, this supposed illumination? What are we signing up to when we speak of the 'beauty' of this 'light'?" (Smith 2005: 252).

Despite Katie's great effort to analyse and reflect on both works in preparing for the course, she finds no way to answer Howard Belsey's questions, even though she strongly wishes to contribute. As a result, the discussion evolves around what the other course participants have to say:

[I]t is the incredible-looking black girl, Victoria, who speaks, and as ever she has a way of monopolizing Dr Belsey's attention, even when Katie is almost certain that what she is saying is not terribly interesting.

'It is a painting of its own interior,' she says very slowly, looking down at her desk and then up again in that stupid, flirty way she has. 'Its subject *is* painting itself. It's a painting about painting. I mean, that's the desiring force here.'

Dr Belsey raps on his desk in an interested way, as if to say, *now we're getting to it*.

'OK,' he says. 'Expand.'

But before Victoria can speak again there is an interruption.

---

<sup>1</sup> For digitised versions of the two pictures, please follow the links below:

<https://www.rembrandthuis.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/1b-Rembrandt-Woman-Mound-RHM.jpg>  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Rembrandt - Jacob Wrestling with the Angel - Google Art Project.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Rembrandt_-_Jacob_Wrestling_with_the_Angel_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)



‘Umm ... I don’t understand how you’re using ‘painting’ there? I don’t think you can simply just inscribe the history of painting, or even its logos, in that one word “painting”.’

The professor seems interested in this point too. It is made by the young man with the T-shirt that says BEING on the one side and TIME on the other [...]. His name is Mike.

‘But you’ve already privileged the term,’ says the professor’s daughter, whom Katie, who is not given easily to hatred, hates. ‘You’re already assuming the etching is merely “debased painting”. So there’s your problematic, right there.’ (Smith 2005: 252f)

The group’s approach is in stark contrast to Katherine Armstrong’s own interest in the aesthetic qualities of the two pieces and in the stories they tell. While she privately produces a very close reading of some of the paintings’ most striking features (cf. Smith 2005: 250ff), her ideas have no place in the in-class discussion because here, the commentators generally refrain from referring directly to the individual traits of Rembrandt’s works. Instead, they focus on the use of such terms as ‘logos’, ‘desiring force’ or ‘problematic,’ probably adhering to what they consider the rules of academic discourse.

Among other things, the passage from Zadie Smith’s novel illustrates the death not merely of the author, but also of the author’s work. The class’ abstract ideas about the nature and function of art are not grounded in any way in the direct analysis of Rembrandt’s pictures. In fact, the two works are rarely mentioned or directly referred to by the group. They are treated as points of departure for the contributions of the participants rather than points of reference in a debate about seventeenth-century art. In Howard Belsey’s classroom, neither Rembrandt nor his pictures act as authorities that the commentators try to make sense of. Instead, both works are all but irrelevant to the group’s discussion. The provisional title of Howard Belsey’s latest, unfinished work, *Against Rembrandt: Interrogating a Master*, ironically underlines this discontent with the limitations of close reading and detailed analysis, rejecting Bonaventure’s notion of the commentator as someone whose work mainly consists of ‘the words of other men.’

In Howard Belsey’s seminar, what counts most seems to be the various ways in which commentators can move away from any concrete discussion of a particular text. As a result, the students’ comments virtually avoid the texts that Katie Armstrong thinks are at the centre of their discussion, turning against Rembrandt by choosing not to talk about the specifics of his pictures at all. For them, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 1988: 171), so much so that they seem to forget completely about the images at hand. All authority rests with them as authors of their own ideas, and their reference to Rembrandt’s works merely constitutes an empty gesture, or a commentary that is in no need of relating to any concrete object. Consequently, their



discussion is lost on Katie Armstrong, who “used to dream about one day attending a college class about Rembrandt with other intelligent people who loved Rembrandt and weren’t ashamed to express this love” (Smith 2005: 250).

Read as a portrayal of the type of commentary that emancipates itself from its object, the classroom scene in *On Beauty* points to some of the most central aspects of contemporary forms of commenting. While responses to videos on YouTube or to articles in the online edition of national newspapers occasionally make careful reference to these texts, many others tend to ignore them as objects of commentary altogether. Rather, like Howard Belsey’s class, commentators often use the commentary section as a platform for utterances on a large variety of topics. True, a thorough understanding of the contemporary practice of commenting requires a much more detailed look into the different types of comments to begin with. However, with such popular formats as *The Daily Show* typically yielding between 1,000 and 3,000 comments per clip on their YouTube channel, or with the *Guardian*’s daily opinion cartoon getting several hundred comments on average at the very least, the sheer amount of online commentary together with the common tendency to dismiss the alleged object of commentary can be examined in terms of the links between commentary and authority.

One way to understand the current burgeoning of online commentary is to view these statements as an attempt to exercise power, for example by imposing a particular political reading on a text. This notion is in line with the idea that the act of commenting underlines the commentator’s outstanding position and superior insight into whatever she comments on. However, the assumption that commenting is a way to exercise power entails yet another idea that may add a significant perspective to understanding the cultural role of commentary. Already in the medieval tradition, the analysis and explanation of an author’s work were paradoxically connected with the tendency to draw attention away from the central authoritative writing by layers of supplementary annotation. This practice effectively hindered the transmission of a ‘naked’ text, to adopt Chaucer’s phrase from the revised, so-called ‘G-prologue’ to his *Legend of Good Women* (cf. line 86), and it is often witnessed on the pages of glossed medieval manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Here, the commentary typically enfolds around the central text in the margins of the page, creating a frame that both suggests a particular interpretation of the text and helps to assign to it the status of an eminent work fit for serious study. Instead of encouraging the detailed assessment of the central text, however, these framing annotations can also be seen as hindering the reading of a ‘naked text’ or even as excluding a certain group of readers altogether.

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example London, British Library MS Harley 2534, a thirteenth-century manuscript that contains different writings of Virgil. Folio 32<sup>r</sup> shows the beginning of the *Aeneid*, with Virgil’s text located at the centre of the page and annotations added in the margins as well as between the lines of the text, see: <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMINBig.ASP?size=big&illID=25135>.



Within a short time of its first reception, for example, Latin commentaries on Dante's *Divine Comedy* emerged, and these scholarly responses may have served to discourage unlearned readers without a proper education in Latin from getting in touch with the vernacular text: "Judging the poem to be too open and accessible for its own good, [learned writers] attempted to keep the illiterate at bay by 'classicizing' the text behind a high wall of Latin commentary" (Minnis/Scott 2003: 439). Similar, if less elaborate references to learned literary culture are apparent in several manuscript witnesses of the works of such influential Middle English poets as Chaucer and Gower. Commentary, as the medieval evidence shows, has the potential not only to determine the status of a text and settle its range of possible meanings, but also to restrict access to a text to a certain type of readership, effectively limits its reception to a group of selected readers. The medieval practice, thus, ties in with Foucault's idea that "none shall enter the order of discourse if he does not satisfy certain requirements or if he is, from the outset, qualified to do so" (1990: 61f).<sup>3</sup>

Generally, therefore, the act of commenting can have the effect of drawing the readers' attention away from its object. By telling readers what to make of a text or by altogether excluding them from reading it, the commentator assumes a position of power that involves much more than a claim to superior insight. If commentary draws attention away from its object, the object is ultimately discarded and any further reference to it is made redundant. Authority is withheld from the alleged object of commentary in that the commentary itself moves to the centre of attention, in turn inviting a response by other commentators. Not only is this practice typified by the self-referential tendencies in online comment-sections, but it is also at the heart of the contributions in Howard Belsey's class. Here, the readers' attention is drawn away from Rembrandt's pictures by virtue of placing the exchange of comments at the centre of the discussion, just as the bulk of self-referential online comments countermands the central position of the alleged object of commentary. Commentary, in these instances, directly opposes explication. Rather than evolving around a central text, self-referential commentary discards its object, undermining the idea that the act of commenting provides insight into another text.

Hence, any commentary that is self-centred and dismissive of its object cannot simply be seen as indicating the struggle among commentators for a position of superior insight since self-referential and dismissive commentaries do not usually offer a genuine analysis or interpretation of any particular object. As in Howard Belsey's class, they may

---

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Florian Cord for suggesting that Foucault's account of commentary as an instrument of controlling discourse adds a valuable perspective to the analysis of commenting and its relation to structures of power. Foucault's discussion of the potential of commentary to 'master' discourse is especially apparent in the third section of his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, "The Order of Discourse" (cf. 1990: 56ff).



rather be grounded in the urge not to let any utterance go unchallenged. When Victoria Kipps in the classroom scene suggests that the work under discussion is ‘a painting about painting’, her choice of words is swiftly contradicted by Mike, whose choice of words is, in turn, swiftly contradicted by Zora Belsey. Like self-referential and dismissive online comments, the group’s discussion moves further and further away from Rembrandt’s painting by constantly challenging each other’s contributions. Their comments are not directed towards producing an interpretation of a painting, nor even of another participant’s statement, but have the effect of impeding any concentrated effort to refer to an object other than the commentaries themselves. As a result, self-centred and dismissive commentary aims at assuming a powerful position while at the same time withholding any attribution of authoritative status to any text other than itself.

In the most fundamental sense, commentary presupposes that its object should not stand by itself. Yet, by drawing attention away from its supposed object, self-referential and dismissive commentary not only hinders the reception of a ‘naked text,’ but altogether discards it. It is against this background that the very last scene in Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* constitutes a reaction to the system of power and authority that informs the practice of commenting. In this last passage of the novel, Howard Belsey is supposed to give a talk on Rembrandt in front of an erudite audience at Wellington University. Noticing that he forgot his notes, however, he merely provides the listeners with the names of the pictures that are included in his power point presentation until he reaches a painting of 1654 that shows a partly naked woman wading in water. The painting is entitled *Hendrickje*,<sup>4</sup> and after having referred to its name, Howard Belsey begins to zoom in on it without providing any further commentary. This approach leaves his audience in a state of irritation: “Howard’s audience looked at her [that is, the bathing woman in the picture] and then at Howard and then at the woman once more, awaiting elucidation. [...] Howard said nothing. Another silent minute passed. The audience began to mutter perplexedly. Howard made the picture larger on the wall, as Smith had explained to him how to do.” (Smith 2005: 442f). Here, the picture is not merely placed at the centre of Howard Belsey’s presentation. It is everything that the audience is provided with, and they are left to approach it without his comments.

The perplexity of Howard Belsey’s audience in the face of an uncommented presentation of Rembrandt’s works is understandable insofar as scholarly papers usually involve a fair amount of commentary. Nonetheless, the scene emphasises an important consequence of the act of commenting: it virtually rules out the reception of a ‘naked text’, whether a poem, an etching or a journalistic article. More generally

---

<sup>4</sup> For viewing a digitised version of the picture, please see the link below:  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/Rembrandt\\_Hendrickje\\_Bathing\\_in\\_a\\_River.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/58/Rembrandt_Hendrickje_Bathing_in_a_River.jpg)



speaking, the uneasy reaction of the audience may point to a *horror vacui* of the 'naked text'. The anxiety of being left alone with a text can be seen as the urge to avoid what Susan Sontag's calls "an erotic of art" (1966: 14). Sontag presents this 'erotic' as the alternative to interpretive hermeneutics, stating that the task of criticism "is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art", but to "show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show what it means" (1966: 14). Yet, Howard Belsey's audience seems to feel uneasy about the uncommented presentation of Rembrandt's pictures. A comparable uneasiness might, in fact, have struck late medieval scholastics when they were first confronted with the uncommented, 'humanist' pure-text editions of Classical works by such printers as Aldus Manutius or Nicolas Jenson. Still, the psychological and cultural foundations of this fear of the naked text must remain purely speculative.

By way of pure speculation, however, a moralisation of a beast fable that was produced in the twelfth century by the English scholar Alexander Neckam may figuratively hint at the wider cultural implications of the fear of the 'naked text'. Referring to the fable of the tortoise and the eagle by the late Classical writer Avianus, Neckam recounts that the tortoise's death is brought about by her desire to have the eagle carry her through the air because she is dissatisfied with moving at a slow pace. Her wish comes true, but the bird accidentally kills her with his claws whilst carrying her. Having stated this outcome, Neckam then moralises the fable and underlines that his readers should try to avoid the tortoise's fatal urge for speed. Instead, they ought to learn to embrace a quiet life. What is more, Neckam states that many despise such a quiet life (*contempnunt [sic] plures tranquillam ducere uitam*) because tranquillity is annoying to those who are miserable (*ipsa quies miseris esse molesta solet*) (cf. II.31f). In a related way, the metaphorical silence surrounding the 'naked text' can be regarded as culturally undesirable and even threatening. In this case, the practice of commenting would be a means to prevent individual readers from engaging with a text more intimately and by themselves. After all, doing so might lead to unforeseen and potentially unsettling consequences. The self-reliable reading of uncommented texts can be appreciated only if readers are trusted to make good sense of whatever it is that they are reading. As the Latin commentaries on Dante's *Divine Comedy* show, commenting is ultimately an exercise of power because it prescribes that texts are to be read and understood in a way that adheres to a particular set of discursive rules.

The bulk of contemporary commentary, consequently, not only suggests a culture that does not trust individual readers to make good sense of a text on their own terms, but it also bespeaks a cultural fear of the absence of discursive rules. Insofar as any commentary potentially restricts a text's interpretation, the widespread practice of commenting hints at an anxiety over a lack of orientation when it comes to making sense



of a text. Yet, if the members of a culture are not trusted to make sense of a text on their own terms and without the limits imposed by commentary, then this culture ultimately distrusts its own members. By the same token, a culture that is prone to massive commenting can be said to lack confidence in the strength of its own values. Otherwise, these values would be seen as a self-evident frame of reference for its individual members, who would in turn be considered empowered and autonomous readers without any particular need for further assistance through commentary. With respect to commentary as a cultural practice, then, Neckam's moralisation of the fable about the tortoise and the eagle could, accordingly, be modified along the following lines: many despise the silence that surrounds a naked text; the uncommented text seems to be annoying to a culture that distrusts itself.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the various functions of the act of commenting show commentary to be an exercise of power in a variety of ways. Even if a commentary merely seeks to explain its object in order to make better sense of it, the commentator assumes the authoritative status of superior insight simply by virtue of claiming the position of someone who can make sense of the object of commentary. What is more, in case of explanatory commentary, the commentator also assigns a considerable degree of value to whatever she comments on in that this object is implicitly deemed worthy of attention. Self-referential and dismissive commentary, by contrast, draws attention away from its object. In doing so, this type of commentary indicates an urge to assume the authoritative position of the commentator without engaging with any object whatsoever in much detail. Thus, self-referential and dismissive commentary suggests a lack of interest in, or even a fear of engaging closely with a poem, a picture or a video clip, whether in terms of Bonaventure's elucidation, Sontag's erotic encounter or Katie Armstrong's love for the object of commentary. Instead, it can be seen as the commentator's attempt to consolidate her own powerful position. The popular practice of commenting, consequently, helps to reproduce the idea that delimitating the meaning of a text is necessary. The need for prescribed limits of reading is, thus, implicitly confirmed by contemporary commentary in spite of the alleged cultural consensus on such values as individuality, autonomy and freedom of choice.

## Works Cited

Barthes, Roland (1988). "The Death of the Author." *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 167-72.



- St Bonaventure (2003). "Commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*: Extracts from Exposition of the Prologue." *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary-Tradition*. Ed. A.J. Minnis and A.B. Scott, revised ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 223-30.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey (1988). *The Legend of Good Women. The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Oxford: OUP, 587-630.
- "Commentary." *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Order of Discourse." *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. Robert Young. London: Routledge, 48-78.
- Minnis, A.J., and A.B. Scott, ed. (2003). *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary-Tradition*, revised ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Neckam, Alexander (1998). *Nouus Auianus*. Ed. Thomas A.-P. Klein. Genova (Genoa): D.AR.FI.CL.ET., 99-136. Favolisti Latini Medievali e Umanistici 7.
- Riddy, Felicity (2000). Introduction. *Prestige, Authority and Power in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*. Ed. Felicity Riddy. Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 1-5.
- Smith, Zadie (2005). *On Beauty*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Sontag, Susan (1966). *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador.