I. Introduction: the hermeneutic Middle Ages

Perhaps no other era has been as ‘hermeneutic’ as the Middle Ages – although this has not been widely acknowledged. The thought of the period was full of exegeses and commentaries, appearing in a wide variety of forms, and the Holy Scriptures were a focus for constant interpretation and re-interpretation. There is thus much that the era can teach us about hermeneutic practice.

I shall consider the Middle Ages as divided into the High Middle Ages, the Mature Middle Ages, and the Late Middle Ages. The High Middle Ages will be seen as preparatory to Scholasticism – the core of medieval thinking – the Mature Middle Ages as corresponding to its maturity, and the Late Middle Ages to its decadence. Yet although the scholastics dominate the thought of the Mature and Late Middle Ages, the High Middle Ages are ruled by the monastic, and this makes, as we shall see, for a profound difference.

I. The High Middle Ages: interpretation and monasticism

Johannes Scotus Eriugena

Following the Barbarian invasions, the recovery of Classical Culture took some centuries to accomplish. Well into the ninth century, Ireland was still subject to invasion by Vikings and Danes, leading many monks to migrate to France and other parts of Europe. In France, there was some revival of letters under Charlemagne. His successor, Charles the Bald, continued to favour scholarly work, and to his court came a monk called Johannes Scotus Eriugena – so called on account of his Irish origin (Eriugena means ‘Ireland-born’, and since ‘Scottus’ meant, at that time, ‘Irish’ or ‘Gaelic’, his name may be translated as ‘John, the Irish-born Gael’). Eriugena translated Pseudo-Dionysus from Greek, commented on the Scriptures, and wrote a very complex work, called Periphyseon or De divisione naturae, circa 866. In the latter
work, and drawing from Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysus, Eriugena constructs an interpretation of reality – a reading of the Book of Nature – in which there is a confluence of hermeneutics and ontology.

Eriugena engaged in two forms of hermeneutic activity: first, as the translator of Pseudo-Dionysus; second as a Biblical commentator or exegete. As a commentator, he uses the allegoric interpretation of the Scripture. He distinguishes between an alegoria facti – an allegory of facts, in which facts reveal mysteries, as in the narrative of the Eucharistic celebration – and an alegoria dicti – an allegory of words, as in parables, of things which have never actually happened. Factual allegories are mysteries and verbal allegories are symbols (Eriugena 1865a, I, 2, 136C).

Just like Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysus, Eriugena says that both the Bible and the world are texts (Eriugena 1865b, V, 3, 865D). In his Commentary to the Prologue of the Gospel of John, hermeneutics is said to be a mystagogy, since interpretation serves as an initiation to the Divine Mysteries. Here Eriugena draws upon Pseudo-Dionysus’s negative theology, by which the interpretation of the Scriptures is developed in terms of the predominance of mystery over knowledge, and of the figurative over the literal.

Saint Anselm

Anselm was born in Aosta (circa 1033) and died in Canterbury (1109). He was a Benedictine monk, beginning his career in Bec, where he became abbot, and then going on to Canterbury as its bishop. He wrote philosophical works, such as the Monologion and the Proslogion, and also theological works. He developed his own version of Augustine’s dictum, credo ut intelligam – “I believe in order that I may understand” – turning it into “Fides quaerens intellectum” – “faith looks for understanding” (Anselm 1952a: 685–87). Anselm was committed to the use of reason, and to dialectics or logic. Although charged with an excessive rationalism, his thinking not only followed reason, but it also remained true to authority – especially that of Augustine.

Anselm accepted that the Bible is polysemic, claiming that there are various meanings, and more than one probable interpretation, to be found in Scripture (Anselm 1952b, l. I, c. 18: 791–99). Yet in spite of such plurality, Anselm held that there is always one meaning or interpretation that is more strongly supported by evidence and argument. Hence, his preference for dialectics as his method of interpretation as the means to arrive at ratio fidelis (in this, he went from monastic hermeneutics, based on rhetoric, to scholastic hermeneutics, based on logic). Yet Anselm extends the ratio to encompass many senses: ontological, logical, epistemological, and psychological. Moreover, he also admits joy as the proper aim of knowledge. Anselm’s commentary on scripture aims at literality, and he makes only scant use of allegory – in this, he is already the precursor of scholasticism.

From the ninth to the twelfth centuries

The glosses on Scripture started to appear from the ninth century onwards, but they proliferated mainly in the twelfth. Little by little, this became the Glossa Ordinaria.
Glosses could be interlinear, marginal, or continuous. The *glosulae* or small glosses referred to a specific point, and they gradually became independent exegeses. Although without proper grounds, marginal glosses were attributed to Walahfrid Strabos (circa 808–49), and the interlinear glosses to Anselm of Laon (died 1117). There were others by Lanfranc, Berengario, and Drogo, and some were anonymous. Strabo summarized only those of his master, Rabano Mauro. Some used those of Saint Isidore (Beuchot 2002: 69–72).

Anselm of Laon intended to gloss the whole of Scripture, but was not able to accomplish this. Nonetheless, he wrote the gloss to Saint Paul and the Book of Psalms, and perhaps that of the Fourth Gospel. His brother Ralph compiled the gloss to Mathew, and Ralph’s disciple Gilbert compiled that of the Pentateuch and the Major Prophets. The authorship of the gloss of the Minor Prophets remains doubtful. A disciple of Anselm of Laon, Gilbert de la Porrée, expanded his master’s work, and this became known as the *Media Glosatura*. Peter Lombard expanded it even further, and it became the *Major or Magna Glosatura* (composed between 1135 and 1143). Peter used these glosses in his *Sentences*, written in 1152. This same Glosa was later commented upon by Peter Comestor, in his lectures on the Gospels (some time before 1168).

**Hugh of Saint Victor**

Born around 1097 and dying in 1141, Hugh of Saint Victor belonged to the School of Saint Victor, which privileged the allegoric and anagogic (mystical) exegesis over other forms. Literal interpretation was a support for spiritual interpretation. The aim of such an approach was to conjoin reason and passion with Neo-Platonic and Augustinian instruments. Following Augustine, the Victorines saw an excess in language – an allegory that surpassed literality. Influenced, through Eriugena, by Pseudo-Dionysus, theirs was a school hermeneutics, not only an individual one. It took the form of a dialectics of innovation and conservation.

The *lectio* (“reading”) of the monks and canons precedes the *lectio* of the Scholastics. The former is *lectio divina* – sacred reading – including *meditatio* (meditation) and *oratio* (prayer); the latter takes the form of a scholarly lesson, with the *quaestio* and the *disputatio*. For the monks and canons of the *lectio divina*, the Scripture is conceived as a miraculous tree that is infinitely fruitful, and their primary focus was on the soul’s relationship with God – which is why they commented so much on the *Song of Songs*. One of the best schools of exegesis was that of Saint Victor. The Victorines made use of allegorical meaning, but they also defended the literal, since without the latter, the former runs the risk of becoming arbitrary. Allegory itself was to be interpreted only in the light of doctrine.

In some of his *Annotations of the Scriptures and Sacred Writers*, Hugh speaks about the Bible having a triple sense (*triplex intelligentia*): it is both historical and allegorical, and he divides the allegorical into the proper and the anagogical (mystical). The historical sense is “that in which one considers the primary meaning of words in relation to the things in themselves to which they refer” (Hugh of Saint Victor, 1854a, 11D–12A). He says that Holy Scripture differs from other writings specifically in that it means some things that then become signs for other things. Allegorical sense
occurs when the text “means something different, done in the past, the present, or the future” (Hugh of Saint Victor 1854a, 12AB), and this he subdivides into simple allegory and anagogy: “There is a simple allegory when a visible fact means an invisible one. Anagogy, that is, an uplifting, [occurs] when, through a visible fact, an invisible one is declared” (Hugh of Saint Victor 1854a, 12B). The anagogical corresponds to the higher, endless life – that of Heaven.

In his magnum opus, the Didascalicon, whose subtitle is De studio legend – “about the study, effort, or dedication to reading” – Hugh lists three points of focus in the approach of a text: littera, sensus, sentential (Hugh of Saint Victor, 1854b, VI, 4, 804). First, the letter (littera) or word, as it occurs at both the grammatical and the syntactic levels; second, the sense (sensus), that is, the things that are meant by the words, in the logic of discourse, or semantics; and finally, the content (sententia), which is the hidden lesson that should be extracted from word and sense, on a pragmatic level corresponding to the hermeneutical. Hugh invokes the idea of the double book – the Bible and the world – that is, Creation as a text, mirroring the text of Scripture (Hugh of Saint Victor 1854b, VIII, 2, 814). Hence, man, as a microcosmos, is a compendium of the world, a précis of the grand text of the Universe.

William of Saint-Thierry

Born in Liège, William of Saint-Thierry was a Benedictine monk who, in search of a greater rigour, went on, in Signy, to became a Cistercian. He was the abbot, from 1119 to 1135, of the monastery from which he takes his name. He died in 1148. Around 1145, William wrote an Epistle to the Brethren of Mont-Dieu – a veritable treatise on monastic life. In that work, he gave important indications on the interpretation of the Holy Scripture. He speaks of the lectio divina in terms of a hermeneutics of co-naturality developed by progressive sanctification (de Saint-Thierry 1940: 105), and admits allegorical or spiritual interpretation. He argues that one has to interpret through love, in a way that goes beyond knowledge. His commentary on the Song of Songs (The Book of Solomon), which he composed at the request of his friend Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, employs the spiritual or mystical interpretation that he favoured. Of the work, he wrote that it was for him “a sweet labour” interrupted by his fight with Peter Abelard in 1138.

William said that that his aim was to focus on the moral sense, which is common to everyone, without aspiring to the mystical one (de Saint-Thierry 1979: 26). Yet he also acknowledges the literal or historical sense, according to which the narrative is taken as a fable or parable, and even reaches towards the anagogical or mystical. William often resorted to etymologies – some of them forced – but always with the goal of turning the word towards the spirit, as the means to give it life.

Thierry of Chartres

Thierry, or Theodoric the Breton, belonged to the School of Chartres, of which he was the head from 1121 to 1134. He then taught in Paris until 1140, but he returned to Chartres the next year and succeeded Gilbert de la Porrée as its Chancellor. He taught Abelard, and then fought him, denouncing his theses as heretical. Among
other works, Thierry composed the *Eptateucon*, written before 1156, a text of encyclopaedic dimensions, which became, on account of its good pedagogy, a book used in teaching during the twelfth century. He also commented on Cicero and Boecchio. He died some time between 1150 and 1155.

This school had a humanist and Platonizing tendency, which can be seen both in Thierry and in his disciple John of Salisbury. Thierry left, among his commentaries on Cicero, one on *De inventione* and another on a piece falsely attributed to this Latin orator, the *Rethorica ad Herennium*. The most striking feature in these two works is that they contain, side by side with rhetoric doctrines, hermeneutic teachings. In the former, he speaks of doubts about the author’s intention and intended meaning – raising what is a highly hermeneutic question (de Chartres 1988: 82).

Meaning as derived from such authorial intention is seen as differing from and adding to the literal meaning, but as having to be proven by means of dialectic argumentation (de Chartres 1988: 202). He allows that one may appeal to custom in interpreting, since custom compels use, and provides a pragmatic definition of terms. One may also appeal to authority, both of the classics and of the person. Thierry thus offers a psychological hermeneutics of intentions. In the case of interpretations that contradict a law, one is bound to show that one’s own interpretation is more useful than the other – and the written text must be used, not only to show what is in it, but also what derives from it. Here Thierry shows himself as taking a stand against ambiguity.

**Joachim of Flora (Gioacchino da Fiore)**

Joachim was born between 1130 and 1135 in Celico, Calabria, and died in 1202. He was at the service of the Kingdom of Sicily and, circa 1160, he entered the Benedictine monastery of Corazzo, where he was professed and ordained as a priest. In 1177 he became its abbot. Towards 1182, he retired to the Casamari Abbey and dedicated himself to writing. His main works are grouped in his grand trilogy, initiated in 1183, which comprises the *Liber Concordie novi ac veteris Testamenti*, the *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, and the *Psalterium decem chordarum*. Although three pontiffs (Lucius III, Urbanus III, and Clement III) had his writings examined, they encouraged him to proceed with them. In 1189, Joachim founded the first community of his new Florenz order in San Giovanni in Fiore. The Cistercian order declared him to be a fugitive, but Pope Celestine III granted his approval of his new order. When he died, in 1202, Joachim was preparing a new work – *Tractatus super quatuor Evangelia* – which remained unfinished. In 1215, the IV Council of LeTrán condemned his doctrines on the Trinity, for being tri-theistic; in 1263, the Provincial Council of Arles condemned all his works. He was well-meaning, but fell into heresy.

Joachim acknowledges traditional exegesis, in its four senses: literal, allegorical, typological, and anagogical. His innovation was to apply biblical exegesis to historical evolution. He developed a theology of history. His exegetic method is based on the spiritual or allegorical intelligence and on the typical or typological intelligence, which have various degrees. Using allegory, he builds his conception of the history of the world, with three ages that correspond to the three Divine Persons. His most original interpretation is that of the mission of the Holy Ghost. He did not only see
Him as the fuller of Christ’s teachings, but as someone who would bring about, before the end of time, the final form of interpretation and contemplative worship. He uses numerical, geometrical, zoological, and botanical symbols in order to explain and support this exegesis.

He considers anagogy to be a resemblance of the temporal and earthly with the mystical and heavenly (de Fiore, 1983, l. 2, p. 1, c. 3: 65). For him, there are three fundamental eras: that of the Father, that of the Son, and that of the Holy Ghost. For Joachim, literal interpretation, which belonged to the Old Testament, was that of the Father; allegorical interpretation, from the New Testament, was that of the Son; and anagogical or fully spiritual interpretation, from the era of monasticism, was that of the Holy Ghost.

II. The Mature Middle Ages: interpretation and scholasticism

The transition from the twelfth to the thirteenth century: glosses and sums

Up to the twelfth century there was of predominance of allegorical, symbolic, and spiritual hermeneutics, which was that of monks, monastic schools, and cathedral schools. With the emergence of universities and scholastics, hermeneutics becomes literal and historical. First there was a hermeneutics of sense, and then came another hermeneutics of reference; the former rejoiced in the multiple – practically infinite – connotations found by the monks, and the latter disciplined itself to find the proper denotation. Hermeneutics now became mainly literal, but without abandoning the allegorical. In the thirteenth century, the age of the University, there was a passage from rhetoric to dialectics or logic. There was an admixture of gloss (spiritual) and dispute (academic) (Beuchot 2002: 129 ff).

In this manner, some scholastic thinkers could write commentaries on the Song of Solomon while at the same time composing a Summa Theologica – as in the case of Thomas of Vercelli or Giles of Rome (Aegidius Romanus). Giles was a disciple of Thomas Aquinas, and combined rhetoric with dialectics, commentary with questioning. Quaestio itself has its origin in rhetoric. The many problems that emerged from the lectio determined the passage to the disputatio. In monastic and cathedral schools there was grammar and rhetoric for monks and canons; in the stadium generale and the university, dialectics or logic was added. There was a balance between glosses and sums. This was the Mature Middle Ages.

Saint Bonaventure

A good example of the balance between literal and allegorical meanings, commentary and dispute, is to be found in Bonaventure. He was a Franciscan, Professor at the University and, hence, a scholastic, but he was also a follower of Hugh of Saint Victor in the matter of symbolic reading. He was born Giovanni di Fidanza, near Viterbo, circa 1217–18. He studied in the University of Paris, from 1236 to 1242, the year in which he entered the Franciscan Order. He taught in this same University – although somewhat discontinuously on account of the opposition of certain secular teachers – but in 1257 was finally admitted as Master in Theology. That very same
year he was elected Minister General of his order. In 1273, he was made Cardinal-Bishop, and as such he participated in the preparations and the discussions of the Second Council of Lyon, but died in 1274, before the Council concluded.

Bonaventure left many philosophical and theological works, but it is in his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* that one can most clearly see the spirit of his reading. The work takes the form of an itinerary of the mind by creatures that are seeking the Divine Mind. That is, taking its point of departure from the creatures in their different grades (minerals, vegetables, animals, and man), the intellect seeks the vestiges of God. Bonaventure’s hermeneutics is ontological, as well as poetical. All created things correspond to ideas in the Mind of the Creator. Interpretation demands some virtues from man. God expresses Himself and communicates through His creation. That is why one reads or interprets in search of Him. All things are the vestiges of God, His traces. They are signs in the grand Book of the World (Bonaventure, 1945a, cap. II, nn. 11–12: 588). They are words of the Word of God. Thus, in interpreting the world, one also uncovers its intentionality.

Saint Bonaventure expounds his hermeneutic scaffolding of the Bible in various writings, including the *Breviloquium* and the *Collationes in Hexameron*. Besides the literal meaning, he talks of allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings (Bonaventure 1945b, pról., 4, 1: 183). Here he also refers to the idea of Creation as a book. Bonaventure privileges the figurative exposition of Scripture, which offers infinite readings (Bonaventure 1947, n. 2: 409). Yet although this means that Scripture allows an infinity of interpretations, such an infinity can only be encompassed by God – man is inadequate in the face of such infinity, and aided by the community in which, and for which, he interprets, his interpretive efforts must at some point simply come to a halt.

Bonaventure has two methodological procedures: reductio and proportio. *Reductio* is a logical method, already used by Plato and perfected by Eriugena. It is one of the parts of dialectics, which goes from the concrete to the abstract, as opposed to division, which goes from the abstract to the concrete. The *reductio in medio* tries to mediate between extremes, in a manner that resembles dialectics. But *reductio* is based on similarity or analogy. That is why he also uses *proportio*, since analogy is proportion. But this is not an analogy like that used in Thomism, but one which is more on the anagogic line, more dynamic and lively.

**Saint Thomas Aquinas**

Born in the castle of Roccasecca, near Aquino, Italy, in 1225, Thomas studied in Naples, where he entered the Dominican Order. He continued his studies in Paris and Cologne; he taught in Paris on two occasions (a rare privilege), as well as in the papal court. Thomas died in 1274, on his way to the Second Council of Lyon. He wrote commentaries on Aristotle, the Holy Scripture, Peter Lombard, and others. Thomas also produced some most remarkable works of his own, including the *Summa contra gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*.

In a prayer that is attributed to him, Thomas asks God to grant him skill in interpretation (*interpretandi subtilitas*), which is the hermeneut’s virtue. In his own approach to interpretation, Aquinas looks first to the literal sense of the text, to
which he devotes considerable labour, and then passes onto the other hidden or figurative senses. In his commentaries on Aristotle, he draws upon the literal sense, through the idea of the author’s intention, the *intentio auctoris*, and in his reading of the Holy Scripture adds to this the figurative or spiritual sense.

Already in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas asks himself whether theology may use metaphors, and if a word may have several senses (Aquinas 1951, I, q. I, a a. 9 & 10). Since they speak about the spiritual through its similarity with the corporeal, Thomas argues that metaphor is acceptable, and he also acknowledges the existence of various meanings in Scripture, on the grounds that God, as its divine author, can make things, and not only voices, signify (Aquinas 1951, I, q. I, a. 10, c). Thomas then divides the spiritual sense in three: (i) *allegorical*, according to which what appears in the Old Testament are figures for the New; (ii) *moral*, according to which what Christ does is a sign of what we should do; and (iii) *anagogical*, according to which what appears in the New Testament are figures for those that occur in the Eternal Glory. These spiritual senses, taken together with the literal, make up the four senses to be found in Scripture.

Although Aquinas holds to the idea of literal sense, which he takes to correspond to the author’s intention, he also holds that Scripture contains a variety of meanings and does so without falling into mere equivocation (Aquinas 1951, I, q. I, a. 10, AD 1m.) – this is because God, who understands everything by means of the divine intellect, is himself the author of Scripture (Aquinas 1951, I, q. I, a. 10, AD 1m.).

Thomas was bound to deal with the already established distinction between historical, aetiological, analogical, and allegorical meaning. For him, the historical, etiological, and analogical senses all belong to the same literal sense, since history is the simple narrating of events, aetiology is assigning a cause to events, and analogy enables us to see how the truth of one passage of Scripture does not, appearances to the contrary, undermine the truth of another (Aquinas 1951, I, q. I, a. 10, AD 2m.). What we call the parabolic sense is understood by Thomas to be contained in the literal (Aquinas 1951, I, q. I, a. 10, AD 3m.).

Following the custom of the University of Paris, Thomas’s method in interpreting is first to make a *division* of the text, and then to make a declaration of its *sense* – the literal first and then the spiritual – according to authority, but also critically. He strives to find a central and guiding idea in the text in question – an idea or theme that he refers to as the *intentio libri*. The literal sense at issue here may be indeterminate and so compatible with more than one interpretation, and to it is added the spiritual sense.

In his commentaries to the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the great manual of theology, Thomas first makes the *divisio textus* and then the *expositio textus*, being fully conscious that dividing or classifying are already interpreting, while exposition is even more so. Although his commentaries on Aristotle look to the literal sense of the text, Thomas was no mere literalist – what he sought was the *intentio Aristotelis* beyond the *verba Aristotelis*. In order to achieve this, Thomas resorted to textual research and comparison, and undertook a painstaking form of exegesis which proceeded word by word. Studying not only the words of the Aristotelian text, but also their context, Thomas based his interpretive investigation on the *principia Aristotelis*, according to which each one of the Stagirite’s texts must be related to the entire
Aristotelian corpus. Moreover, Thomas engages in a critical dialogue with Aristotle’s commentators, writers such as Averroes, as well as with Aristotle himself, thereby going beyond them. In this way, Thomas combined criticism with Aristotelian exegesis – dubia circa litteram (doubts about the text) and Aristoteles sui interpretaes. Thomas lets the author speak, recovers the author’s intention, and then adds observations or reflections of his own, though always with much discretion.

Thomas followed the conventional medieval method according to which reading (lectio) came first, then meditation (meditatio), and finally questioning (quaestio). Questions were treated as glosses (interlinear or marginal) or as exposition. Exposition could be brief and in passing (cursoria) or more leisurely (ordinaria). One started with the letter of the text (littera), passed over to the sense (sensus), and ended in the content or opinion (sententia). The content was the deep meaning, enabling the true comprehension of the text. Questions were born from an ambiguous word, from two contrasting commentaries, or from the opposition of two authorities. The quaestio opened the way for the disputatio, the quaestiones disputatae, that is, controversy. This is why Thomas divides the Aristotelian text in lectiones, and then reserves the problems for the quaestiones, above all for the quaestiones disputatae. In everything, moreover, he paid attention to the context (circumstantia litterae), and frequently made use of distinction (distinctio) in order to clarify the meaning of texts.

Meister Eckhart

Born in Hochheim (Thuringia, Germany), circa 1260, Eckhart entered the Dominican Order of Friars Preachers, in Erfurt, around 1276. He studied in Strasbourg, was ordained in 1285, and then perfected his studies in theology in Cologne, from 1286 to 1288. In 1299 or 1300 he explained Peter Lombard’s Sentences at the University of Paris. In 1302 Eckhart received the degree of Master in Holy Theology (Magister in theologia), and hence came to be known as Meister (“Master”). After holding some posts in his order, he went back to Paris to teach, in 1311. He then went to Strasbourg, in 1314, and there began his fame as a preacher. In 1320 Eckhart taught in Cologne, where he preached again, but being accused of heresy and processed, he publicly recanted. He went to Avignon, which was the seat of the pontiff’s court at the time, in order for a papal commission to examine his works. Eckhart died before the final verdict was announced, and his death is placed, rather imprecisely, between 1327 and 1328. In accordance with the outcome of the commission, in 1329, Pope John XXII condemned twenty-eight of Eckhart’s propositions. Recent criticism has shown, however, that rather than being heretical, they are simply ambiguous and unusual in their form.

Besides his commentary on the Sentences and his Disputed Questions, Eckhart has an Opus Tripartitum, with biblical exegeses and theological musings. But these are to be more properly found in his Discourses on Distinction, The Book of the Divine Consolation, and his sermons.

Eckhart’s theology is highly influenced by Neo-Platonism, through Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena, and centres on the idea of the descent of creatures away from God and their ascent towards Him, most especially in the case of man, whose soul, in its ascent, moves towards union with the Holy Trinity. God is understood as absolutely transcendent from the world – which is why Eckhart sometimes adopts the
language of negative theology, although he also uses the analogical discourse of affirmative theology. He uses the analogy of attribution, sometimes in a highly metaphorical manner, as, for instance, when he says that God is like the substance and creatures are like accidents—a claim that gave rise to the charge of pantheism. Eckhart took his use of analogy from the work of Aquinas (whom he called Frater Thomas). The main emphasis in Eckhart’s thought is on the absolute distinction or difference between God and His creatures. God was understood as the Totally Other, only to be approached through the practice of self-annihilation and perfect humility.

When writing his commentary on the Gospel of John, Eckhart speaks of a double intentionality: the intentio auctoris, which is the author’s, and the intentio operis, which is the text’s (and which relates to the meanings of words in their correspondence to natural things and in their moral interpretation—Eckhart 1989, n. 3), as if they were two concordant intentions (as in Umberto Eco’s intentio operis—Eco 1992: 29). He also identified an intentio operantis, which is that of the interpreter, combining all three in the intentio operati, which is the textual action carried out by interpretation (Eckhart 1989, n. 2). In addition, Eckhart makes use of metaphor and, hence, analogy, as well as the allegoric and the anagogic senses. Going beyond the idea of the world as a book, and Creation as a text, Eckhart claimed that all things are books, “since every creature is filled with God and is a book”, and above all, every man is a book, which he himself writes in front of God, who allows him to write, to build, and to care for himself.

Raymond Lully (Ramon Lull or Raimundus Lullius)

Born in Palma of Mallorca in 1233, Lully died in 1316 while on his way from Bougie, in North Africa, to the Majorcan beaches. He died as a martyr, preaching in Muslim lands. In his approach to textual interpretation, Lully used a combinatory art which he claimed to have received through revelation when he was a hermit on Mount Randa in Mallorca. Nonetheless, various Arabic and Jewish precursors to this art have been identified. A combinatory reading method which Lully applied to the task of interpretation, Lully’s Ars Magna contained a set of general rules concerning the relation between ideas that aimed at completeness and comprehensiveness. Taking from Eastern thought the device of the teaching story or parable, Lully deployed this, not only as a pedagogic resource, but also as an interpretative tool. It is a form of parabolic, symbolic, and allegorical interpretation.

In Lully’s novel The Book of Evast and Blanquerna, one of the main characters, Blanquerna, who in the story becomes Pope, uses the Lullian method in order to meditate on the mysteries of Christianity and to interpret Holy Scripture. In another book, Felix of the marvels, Lully applies his combinatory method in exposition through parables. His main character, Felix, travels around the world marvelling at the prodigious things he meets, expressing himself in apologues, and thereby reading the Divine Order from the Book of Creatures. Reality itself appears to Felix as a grand parable of God, which he, Felix, has to interpret. Lully’s method of combinatory exegesis provides a means to read both things and texts, and especially Holy Scripture. He finds the order of God in the reality of the world, and in the midst of intricate Cabalistic-like combinations.
III. The Late Middle Ages: reconciling monasticism and scholasticism

Jean Gerson

The fourteenth century corresponds to the Late Middle Ages, with the emergence of the nominalism of Ockham and his followers. Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363–1429) was known as Chancellor Gerson, because he occupied this position at the University of Paris for a considerable time (1395–1429). Gerson is usually considered to be a nominalist, but this not quite accurate. He did revere his nominalist teachers, even Ockham, and he defended some of the theses that are attributed to this school, but he also followed Aquinas and, above all, Bonaventure, both of whom were realists. Gerson was, more than anything else, a mystical-ascetic writer, but also a good logico-semantic philosopher. He was critical of realists, especially the Scotists, as well as the nominalists – the latter on account of their logicism – and sometimes he tried to reconcile them. Thus, Gerson mingled diverse currents of thought, and the result is complex. Following a certain disenchantment with, and even scepticism towards, the logicism of the nominalists, he sought refuge in a mystical attitude – a path not unlike that of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In one of his mystical works, *De elucidatione scholastica theologiae mysticae* – a work that stands out from his others – Gerson tells us of his wish to conjoin mysticism and scholasticism. Among his exegetical works, most striking is his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, in which he appears as a scholastic who still keeps to the tradition of monastic exegesis. Gerson belongs to the mystical current of the *devotio moderna*, a renovative movement which was a forerunner of the Reformation. His hermeneutics can be seen in his commentary to *On the Celestial Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius, to which he adds some exegetic notes. In that work he draws upon allegorical and analogical readings, and even considers the nature of symbolism. Showing a great appreciation for Richard of Saint Victor, Gerson draws together the monastic and the scholastic commentaries. Thus, when interpreting the notion of the divine idea, he follows Ockham, and distances himself from Saint Albert (Gerson 1940: 201–2).

Using allegory, Gerson compares the grades of Heaven with the grades of intelligence. The three heavens correspond to the grades of contemplation. Here, once again, he combines the scholastic with the monastic. Belonging to the University Gerson is scholastic, but he nevertheless recovers the symbolic hermeneutics of the monks. He even includes the analogical sense in his interpretive approach, and reconciles intellect with affect (Gerson 1940: 266–67). Gerson touches on negative theology, but accepts the positive knowledge of God, even though not as He is in Himself – divine things are known through analogy (Gerson 1940: 326). In this manner, Gerson draws together all the senses displayed within medieval exegesis, thereby conjoining monastic hermeneutics with the scholastic.

V. Conclusion: towards analogism

The Middle Ages were hyper-textual, looking not only to the text of the Bible, but also to the text of the world. These two books, the Bible and the world, are both the creations of God, who is the author of both. God Himself is not a part of either text,
since it was He who wrote each of them – and they are both His. Man, on the other hand, is a part of the text, but he is also, at one and the same time, its reader, and so is placed in a privileged position. Man’s access to the divine text is by reading, and such reading relies upon four senses: the literal, the allegorical, the ethical or analogical, and the mystical or anagogic. In Christ, something very strange and special happens because, inasmuch as He is God, Christ is the author of the texts of the world and the Bible, but, inasmuch as he is a man, he is a part of the text and its reader. Christ is thus the conjunction of writing and reading; He is hermeneutics in itself, in its complete cycle; He the true microcosm. Both the image of God, but also the image of man – Christ is the ideal, the model.

As we have seen, in the High-Medieval or Patristic era, monastic hermeneutics, with its strongly allegorical orientation, predominated; on the other hand, in the Mature and Late Medieval period, scholastic hermeneutics took precedence, and so also did a literalist approach to interpretation. But many thinkers also strove to combine them, often arriving at a balance between the two. In this reconciliatory endeavour, analogy played an active part, and with it a mode of analogical interpretation – an analogical hermeneutics. Throughout the medieval trajectory, such an analogical hermeneutics, based on analogy and iconicity, appears at certain moments. Here Augustine, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart stand out as paradigmatic figures. All are part of an effort to go beyond the opposition between univocity and equivocity – an effort directed towards the achievement of analogism.

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**Further reading**
