

Origen and The Paradox of Literalist Reading

Abstract: Why Origen emasculated himself? There are two explanations for his action. The first explanation is that were several women among the students that attended the Catechetical School of Alexandria. It is said that his act was meant to emphasize in a radical manner the master's complete innocence, detachment and serenity. As second explanation for his gesture, it is said that the act was a paradoxal consequence of reading a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (19: 12), and interpreted it in a much too literally sense, applying exactly the urge to experience virginity through castration. This explanation is not enough. What does it mean to read something literally? And why did Origen read that passage literally, when he specifically recommends in *De principiis* the search for the allegorical, hidden meaning? But Origen, if we are to trust his words, could not read in a literal way the paragraph from the Gospel of Matthew (19: 12), because he relies almost entirely on the allegorical reading and on distancing himself entirely from "the bodily lie", where the meaning lies, figuratively. His hermeneutics denies any effect that is pure somatic. The act of reading doesn't lead to pleasure. I will explain this biographical incident (an incident related to reading) as following: above all, when alone, Origen relates to the literal meaning of the scripture. When he teaches, he hides it. He emphasizes particularly the mystical purpose of the reading. In Origen's case, if this is a direct result of the reading, his self-mutilation derives from his refusal of pleasure and, in the same time, from the helplessness of the refusal. The charm keeps the reader outside the truth. But charm has its own immediate truth.

Keywords: hermeneutics, Origen's self-castration, literal / allegorical reading, pleasure.

When it comes to the stories we read, what does it matter if they have a good or a bad ending? It depends, of course, on the historical context, the very moment of the reading, its function, and the intended purpose.

In Samuel Pepys' case, we've seen that the reading of a book (*L'ecolle des filles ou La philosophie des dames, divisée en deux dialogues, 1655*) arrives to an ambiguous ending, impossible to be clarified conclusively. It ends rather badly, I'd say. Consequently, it is unclear how to better interpret the episode recorded in the journal, in the Babel-like constructed phrase: "It did hayer my prick para stand all the while, and una vez to décharger". As an obscure footnote about an unforeseen and, so to speak, collateral effect of the

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reading or, as its meant, bodily fulfilment? (Gherghel 2005, 120-4; Wolfreys 2000, 7-10).

I'll endeavor to answer the question about Pepys, not before recalling an episode equally famous in the history and biography of reading (and readership as well). I'm thinking about Origen's self-castration. First let's go over some of his biographical data. Origen was born somewhere in Egypt, between 183 and 186. Within the Christian theology he is regarded as an inconsistent disciple and a follower of Clement of Alexandria's doctrine, whose name he never mentions (it is unlikely he attended any of his lectures). He may have briefly studied under the Neoplatonist thinker, Ammonius Saccas (who died in 243). Incidentally, Plotinus attended Saccas' lectures for 10 years. Additionally, Ammonius Saccas refused to put pen to paper when it came to his philosophy, but he did not necessarily regard the philosophical exercise as an initiation into mystery. Back to Origen, I'd add that, despite the attacks on his doctrine during the 5th Ecumenical Council in 553, he remains one of the most prolific and subtle theologians. After being imprisoned, tortured and persecuted under Emperor Decius (250-251) – similarly to the renowned thinker Boethius –, he died around 252-253.

Origen is the author of the *apokatastasis* doctrine: at the end of the world, God will not condemn anybody (the devil included). He will have thus reclaimed all of his creatures. Sheol's name will have lost meaning (it will no longer bear any reference)¹.

The theologian reiterates the pagan belief of the end coinciding with the beginning: the golden age of Vergilius succeeds the Iron Age; the world goes back to its origin. Origen was quite prolific (he employed the help of seven tachygraphers that he would dictate to). Epiphanius speaks of six thousand such writings! Naturally, he was exaggerating. Many of them have been lost or destroyed. Some endured in the Latin version only: *Contra Celsum* (in eight books), other forms in a polemic writing and Greek (For a general introduction to Origen's theology see *inter alia* Nautin 1977; Crouzel 1985; O'Leary 2011; Martens 2012; etc.).

An important theological treatise entitled *De Principiis* (in four books) survived only in the flawed Latin translation (or paraphrase) of Rufinus of Aquileia, who had a habit of intervening heavily in the text. In the fourth book of this work, the adamantine theologian, as his admirers called him (from *adamantios*, man of steel) establishes the theory of the triple meaning of the Scripture. First, he says, the Scripture has a literal meaning (somatic and historical), secondly a pneumatic sense (moral and tropological), and thirdly, a spiritual one (mystical and allegorical). From an analogical perspective, the Scripture is a live composition, a being. The truth of the Scripture resides (Origen rarely uses the notion of meaning) within it, much as the soul lies within the deceiving somatic and the intuitive intellect within the soul. Thus, the Scripture can be read and understood in three ways:

historical, moral and mystical. Sometimes the simple literal meaning of the sentences is enough. Often though, it must be accompanied by an investigation of the spiritual kind.

The episode I've alluded to happened during Origen's youth when he first started his career as a headmaster in Alexandria, succeeding Clement as the head of the school. He also taught Julia Mamaea, better known as Alexander Severus' mother. There is no secrecy surrounding this event, it is a well known, much talked about fact. I am, of course, referring to Origen's self-castration, a subject he was silent about for a long time. The incident is also mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea in *Historia Ecclesiastica, Ecclesiastical History* (VI: 8, 1-5) although the historian isn't shedding too much light on it and attributes it to an excessive ascetic gesture and a somewhat untamed spirit. We can only wonder.

What pushed him to resort to such a hasty act? I'll interpret his act from a strictly hermeneutical perspective. I think it derives from an ambiguous way of understanding the act of reading and its function (For further discussion of Origen's castration see: Hanson 1966; Dinshaw 1988; Stevenson 1995; Caner 1997; Moreschini & Norelli 2001, 299; Kuefler 2001).

Within this interval, the books itself seems to be an ambiguous reality. In what way though? I'll elaborate on its ambiguity later on. For now I'll go back to the instructive passages from *De principiis* (IV: 1-3). For the most part, Origen doesn't deny the importance of the literal meaning (the somatic and historical). Nevertheless he doesn't regard the literal meaning as the main principal by which the proper reading of a text should be understood. Moreover, only he who is capable of grasping the hidden meaning of the spiritual kind seeking its "flight" towards a higher destination (the flight analogy proposed by Origen might be in reference to the theory of the soul from Plato's dialogue, *Phaedrus*), where the soul aspires towards the super-heavenly place of the Forms), proves that he has accurately identified the true and unsurpassed function of any given passage from The Scripture. Origen doesn't believe that the act of reading (interpretation of the written word) ends with one meaning, it wouldn't suffice. In truth, it changes the reader, getting him closer to the understanding of the Divine Principle.

The effect of the reading is thusly of an ontological nature. It's main function is to commence a path towards God. Origen doesn't dispute the literal meaning and it's more often than not contradictory side. Any first-rate contradiction is meant to test our vigilance. If we cannot understand the literal meaning of the biblical verses and we come upon (seeming) contradictions (since all contradictions are traps) is because The Holy Spirit is forever testing our alertness.

This is the hermeneutical rule that Origen proposes in *De Principiis*: reading is an act of rising towards the mystical significance; the ascension

begins though from the literal meaning. Consequently, let's find out how the exegete puts it into practice.

There are two explanations for his action (vide Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI: 8). The first explanation is that were several women among the students that attended the Catechetical School of Alexandria. It is said that his act was meant to emphasize in a radical manner the master's complete innocence, detachment and serenity. He took precautions, so to speak, against malevolent gossip. Eusebius' explanation is rather simplistic. Here's the first reason: it is not just Origen's lectures that are attended at that time by women.

Around the same time, in Rome, Plotinus resides in the home of some ladies of high social standing. Some of their names are mentioned in some of Plotinus' biography written by Porphyrios: a certain Gemina whose daughter shares the same name, a Amphikleia etc. (cf. *Life of Plotinus*, 9). The author of *Enneads* did not discriminate between the members of his audience: gnostics and Christians, platonists and stoics were equally welcomed. His way of living did not incite rumours.

Second reason: more than a century later, in Origen's Alexandria, the future Christian Bishop, Synesius of Cyrene attends Hypatia's lectures, a scholar who taught metaphysics, mathematics and astronomy (Synesius and Hypatia will exchange letters till the end of his life). This period in time seems to be quite tolerant with scholars of both sexes. At this point in time, both society and church are very tolerant of women teaching in schools and Academies. For now, they seem to ignore the harsh warnings coming from the former pharisee, Paul of Tars. Before long, the woman's standing in society will drastically change. Theophylus, the Patriarch of Alexandria (the same one that ordained Synesios but caused trouble for John Chrysostom (golden mouthed) will urge his supporters to kill Hypatia (her murder occurred around 415).

As second explanation for his gesture, it is said that the act was a consequence of reading a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (19: 12: "and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven") and interpreted it in a much too literally sense, applying exactly the urge to experience virginity through castration. It's a known fact that this way of reading ends up badly. This explanation is not enough.

What does it mean to read something literally? And why did Origen read that passage literally, when in *De principiis* he specifically recommends the search for the allegorical, hidden meaning: *ta kekrymmena*? Sure, he does not reject the literal (the literal meaning comes at a price), nor does he fall into the literalism of gnostics. His act was associated with the "somatic" effect of too much of a literal reading: whenever he remains in literal, the interpretation mutilates (which is perfectly true, at least regarded from the

point of view of the exegetical practice proposed by Origen himself, in *De principiis*, IV).

But Origen, if we are to trust his words, could not read in a literal way the paragraph in Matthew (19, 12), he who relies almost entirely on the allegorical reading and on distancing himself entirely from “the bodily lie“, where the meaning lies, figuratively.

His hermeneutics denies any effect that is pure somatic. The act of reading doesn't lead to pleasure, nor does it embody the “erotic“ (as per Susan Sontag's meaning of the term in opposition with allegorism). This is only accomplished through the complete transfiguration of the reader. The conversion itself is the decisive sign of a reading done right. Some believe however that in Origen's case, the reading of the pericope from only through the believe that in Origen's case the reading of the passage (fragment, pericope) from the Gospel of Mathew, ended badly. The theologian's self-mutilation happened because he stayed within the literal interpretation.

Could this be Origen's understanding? Probably not. The author of *Peri Archon, De principiis*, is the first one to warn against the dangers of a literal interpretation. Why should you rather pluck out your right eye, and not the left one, if it makes you to stumble, he asks, quite rightly, referring to a statement of the same Matthew (5: 29: „And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee...“). It would be absurd to take this exhortation *au pied de la lettre*. Literalism is not a reasonable exegetic solution. For this very word, not a few have accused Origen of excessive allegorism, and even of a deliberate depreciation of the literal meaning, and of exegetical subjectivism: among them, the renowned J. Tixeront himself (Tixeront 1927, 120-121; Dawson 2000, 102).

Moreover, in a scholium on Mathew (19: 12) written in his old age, a scholium that survived (sic!), Origen demonstrates that he accurately understands the true significance of Jesus' assertion on eunuchs. Virginity is not the attribute of flesh but is primarily a possession of the soul. Those who resort to such practices, Origen writes, exaggerate. Is more information needed? Most definitely. To explain his act, this will not suffice. After all, the literal reading of the exhortation in Matthew, the theologian is clearly put into an equivocal situation. On the one hand, he fiercely rejected literalism; on the other he practiced it. This is by no means the only ambiguity we are confronted with when reflecting upon his fate.

I'd interpret this biographical incident (an incident related to reading) thusly: above all, when alone, Origen relates to the literal meaning of the scripture. When he teaches to others, he hides it. Particularly he emphasizes the mystical purpose of the reading. As with Pepys' phrase, his silence is suspicious.

Essentially, what is it that the theologian is not admitting to? I'll use the following quotation as my answer: "But if in every part of the Scriptures the superhuman element of thought does not seem to present itself to the uninstructed, that is not at all wonderful for, with respect to the works of that providence which embraces the whole world, some show with the utmost clearness that they are works of providence, while others are so concealed as to seem to furnish ground for unbelief with respect to that God who orders all things with unspeakable skill and power... But as (the doctrine of) providence is not at all weakened (on account of those things which are not understood) in the eyes of those who have once honestly accepted it, so neither is the divinity of Scripture, which extends to the whole of it, (lost) on account of the inability of our weakness to discover in every expression *the hidden splendour* of the doctrines veiled in common and unattractive phraseology" (*De principiis*, IV: 2, 7-9; my italics in the passage).

Let's sum this up. The scripture provides in the first place, the literal sense which has two main properties: it awakens the spirit of the reader by means of contradictions, who is deceived by the unsurpassed charm of the discourse (and thus gives into pleasure), and, secondly, it denies (by means of the same charm) the access of most to the esoteric sense. As it is mostly the case, Origen regards pleasure with suspicion. To read something literally, means to read for the pleasure of reading. To read for the pleasure of reading though, means to go against the very meaning of the Scripture. Origen the reader is torn, much like Pepys was later, between truth and pleasure, between the charm of the letter and its hidden meaning, between somatic and spiritual.

In Origen's case, if this a direct result of the reading, his self-mutilation derives from his refusal of pleasure and at the same time from the helplessness of the refusal. The charm keeps the reader outside the truth. But charm has its own immediate truth. The history of the Christian reading starts maybe with a castration and ends in auto-f(r)iction (Paradoxically, this term is used here in the proper sense). Pepys reads it one way, Origen, another. In each case though, the ending has a somatic finality.

To better emphasize the disparity between the two readers I shall use a small mental experiment. Suppose Apuleius (the author of *Metamorphoses*), Origen and Samuel Pepys, find themselves in the monastery from the novel *The Name of the rose*, more precisely in the *scriptorium*, and they all have in front of them the same book, offered to them by none other than the old librarian, Jorge de Burgos.

The book he chooses is Solomon's *Song of Songs*. How will each of the readers react upon reading it? Apuleius will go over it with an aesthetic eye. He will stay within the literal and somatic. He has already read *Satyricon* and written *The Metamorphoses*. Apuleius is not afraid of pleasure. He accepts it explicitly. He is a reader that remained at the aesthetic stage. As far as

Samuel Pepys goes, he will yet again be torn between temptation and rejection. He is warned that the somatic is deceiving, yet he cannot deny its charm. Finally he'll give into temptation. He'll burn the book afterwards. He reads for the pleasure of reading, in a literal manner but would like to perceive it allegorically. Samuel Pepys is a reader stationed at the moral stage. Origen will understand the text literally but will interpret the poem in a spiritual way. He'll note the literal beauty of the poem but will deny it in a mystical reading. He is the reader situated at the religious stage.

To conclude, Apuleius will give into the vice, as for him and all the other non-Christian readers, the act of reading doesn't count as an explicit vice. Origen will deny it because he knows with certainty that the act of reading in itself can overcome vice, and he can rise above it. In contrast, Pepys will follow Origen's exegetic instructions. He wants to overcome the vice but he stumbles and sins. Pepys' reading of the book ends in sorrow. The three characters in this experiment confirm as many attitudes towards the "sin" of reading.

As it is well known, the theory regarding the different stages of life and their characteristics belong to Soeren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher.

Notes

¹ Anyway, we may not neglect or reject the idea of *apokatastasis* (restitutio in pristinum statum). It presents biblical fundamentals: Acts 3: 20-21 (the unique occurrence of „apokatastasis” in The New Testament) and, in a specific manner, 1 Corinthians 15: 23-28: „But every man in his own order: Christ the first fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all”: „ta panta en pasin”. Psalm seems to be dedicated to apokatastasis, too: „Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers” (Ps124: 7). Apokatastasis is invoked by Origen in a special fragment from *De principiis*, III: 6: 5, where the theologian comments the verses from 1 Corinthians 15: 23-28. Rufinus pretends that Origen used the name of the devil to designate “the ultimate enemy” mentioned in Saint Paul's Epistle. We mention that many theologians were and are Universalist. The objection of an anti-Universalist, Emperor Justinian (in the pages of the „epistle” dedicated to Patriarch Mennas, a text from 544) is the following: if God gives a maximum reward (eternal life), He also gives a maximum punishment (eternal suffering). The judge uses the same measure for good deeds and for sins. It is certain that Jerome was nervous every time he had to pronounce or write the word “apokatastasis”. St. Augustine (*De civitate Dei*, XXI: 17) was kinder, he considered that the exulted high tone of the Alexandrine interpreter discusses on the theme of apokatastasis is based on Origen's mercy and empathy. Origen himself deserves to be the subject of compassion for his kindness. Still, the following seemed to be Universalist (more or less): Clement of Alexandria, Ephrem the Syrian, Dydimus the Blind, Origen, Gregory of Nissa, Gregory of Naziansus

(he comments this topic without any conclusion), Eusebius of Caesarea, Theodor of Mopsuestia (350-428), John Chrysostom, Rufinus, Saint Augustine (in the beginning), Dyonisius the Areopagite, Saint Maximus the Confessor, John Scotus Eriugena. Evagrius Ponticus lead the Origenism to extreme. Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his work *Short discourse on Hell*, admits (at least) an Origenist tendency. Jean Daniélou declared that the apokatastasis in Jesus Christ is a very Orthodox doctrine. Ilaria Ramelli agrees to Cardinal Daniélou. She wrote on this theme *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (2013). Ramelli also makes a linguistic / semantic investigation. The adjective *aionios* is not to be translated with “eternal, forever”, instead “for a long time, for a long period” is recommended. *Aionios* was confounded (especially by the Latin translators) with another adjective, *aidios* (eternal, forever, perpetual). Only God is *aidios*. And so is the afterlife, in paradise. Both adjectives were translated in Latin with *aeternum*, causing equivoques and facilitating the idea of recuperation. Ilaria Ramelli studied the occurrences of both terms in the writings of several Holy Fathers. E.g., John Chrysostom was not a *sensu stricto* Origenist; he uses *aidios* strictly to characterise the life into God, but never to characterise the punishment of hell, while *aionos* is used next to life and also to punishment. Origen never really admitted that he believes that the devil will receive divine absolution.

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