

## **PROCREATING MEANING: THE TEXT AND THE ARTIST'S IMAGINATION**

In 1979, Italian philosopher Umberto Eco published The Role of the Reader, an anthology of articles focused on theoretical issues in the interpretation of texts. In these articles, Eco develops a theory involving the relationships among the author, the text created by the author, and the reader of the text. In this paper I propose to use elements of Eco's theory to elucidate a complex of interpretive relationships surrounding biblical texts, artists who interpret them in their artworks, and later interpreters who "read" both the biblical texts and the artworks about them.

In Eco's view, once an author composes a text and releases it into the public, the text floats free from the author's ability to control its meaning. Each reader encounters the text from her own unique perspective. Each reader's engagement with the text involves a procreation of meaning which did not exist before the encounter. When I pick up the text of Genesis and read the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, my encounter with the text results in a derivation of meaning – I interpret the text. Epistemologically, this interpreting process involves my imagination. As I read the text, I imagine the scene in the Garden: God's voice, Adam and Eve's bodies, the flora and fauna. This imagining of the scene happens for every reader of the text.

Some "readers" of the Genesis text were and are artists. I place "readers" in quotes since I consider a "reader" anyone encountering a text, be it by actually reading it, hearing it read aloud, hearing a paraphrase of the text (for example, a mother telling her

children a bedtime story from the Bible), or even seeing a painting of it. When an artist encounters a text and chooses to portray the content of the text in a painting, the work of art is the result of the artist's imaginative recreation of the scene. While most reader-interpreters do not give visual manifestation to their imagined recreations of the biblical scene, an artist does. The painted canvas expresses the artist's imagination of the scene.

However, just as we needed to broaden our understanding of "reader" to go beyond the simple situation of a person sitting down and literally reading a text, we must also broaden our understanding of the meaning of the "text." Once composed, a text begins a life that we might better term a "tradition." A text's tradition incorporates all of the interpretations that have been ascribed to it over its lifetime. Many of the interpretations do not "stick" to the text. However, a few do adhere to the text and, like barnacles on a ship's hull, become part of the ship as it continues its cruise through the sea.

These accretions to the text are the focus of our attention. When an artist paints a scene from a biblical text, the painting becomes part of the text's tradition. The painting defines the text. This definition can result in one of two general effects: either the painting will confirm previous interpretations of the text and thereby have a narrowing effect, or the painting will offer a new interpretation of the text resulting in a broadening effect. Eco uses the language of "closing" and "opening" to refer to these two effects.

To illustrate these initial theoretical considerations, I have chosen three examples of biblical texts whose interpretations have been significantly influenced by artists'

renderings of them. The first example concerns Genesis 3:6b, which reads: “So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” (NAB) Notice that the text refers to “fruit.” The Hebrew word used here is “peri, a generic word that does not specify any particular kind of fruit.

In the purely hypothetical situation of a person who has never read this text, nor ever been influenced by any image or hearing of this text, one can imagine that such a reader would need to imagine some particular kind of fruit that Eve and Adam ate. Without any previous influence, a reader might imagine any type of fruit that could be picked from a tree. The biblical text does not specify the type of fruit.

Enter the interpreters, including the artists. At some point in the life-tradition of this text, storytellers and artists began to concretize the abstract noun “fruit.” In telling this story to their children, Israelite mothers and fathers may have referred to Eve eating a fig or pomegranate – types of fruit which grow on trees common in Israel that are referred to many times in other texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. At some point in history, artists began to represent this scene in their work. A painter cannot paint “fruit.” Only a particular kind of fruit can be painted. And so some artist, probably unknown to us, painted the fruit as an apple. What is also unknown and unknowable is whether the artist who first painted an apple creatively imagined the fruit as an apple, or whether the artist was simply expressing a previously established oral tradition that the fruit was an apple. What we do know is that subsequent artists followed in this tradition of portraying the fruit as an apple.

This artistic tradition of portraying the fruit as an apple has produced several effects. One effect has been the narrowing or closing of the interpretation of the fruit. Once the apple became the fruit-of-choice of the artistic community, the paintings visually portraying the apple had an enormous influence on subsequent readings and interpretations of the Genesis text. Today one need only ask someone what kind of fruit Eve and Adam ate and the almost universal response is a quick and confident: “an apple.” Even though the text of Genesis does not speak of an apple, the living text-tradition has acquired this accretion, due in no small measure to the artists who depicted the fruit as an apple.

A second effect of the artistic interpretation of the fruit as an apple involves the very act of reading the Genesis text today. Rather than encountering the text in a neutral way, today’s reader brings with her the tradition of the apple. In fact, some readers, when reading this text aloud will actually say “apple” when the printed word is “fruit.” This effect of the apple-interpretation is powerful indeed.

My second and third examples come from the Christian Scriptures. Matthew 2:14 states: “Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt.” The text makes no mention of the method of transportation. Yet, by the twelfth century we find this scene of the so-called “Flight into Egypt” depicted in church architectural decorations with Mary carrying the baby Jesus while riding on a donkey. A column capital at S. Benoit-sur-Loire, dating from roughly 1100, is an early example of an artistic

interpretation of this scene. Similar to the way in which the artistic rendering of the fruit-as-apple became fixed in the text-tradition, the donkey appears almost always in artistic portrayals of this scene.

Interestingly, the artist Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875) offers a striking sketch of the “Flight into Egypt” in which Mary, carrying the baby Jesus, walks alongside Joseph in the dark of night. It would seem naïve to assume that Millet had never seen any paintings depicting Mary riding a donkey on her journey. Why does Millet depart from the tradition? Perhaps as a reader of Matthew’s Gospel he recognized that the text makes no reference to a donkey. He imagines this scene differently, and sketches it accordingly. In this case Millet’s sketch defines the text differently from the way the apple defined Genesis 3:6. Millet’s work has a broadening or opening effect on the tradition. Someone of Millet’s own time (or today) who had been formed by the numerous artworks portraying Mary riding on a donkey will be challenged by Millet’s sketch to imagine the biblical text in a manner different from the traditional way. Millet’s sketch functions as a “minority report” within the text-tradition of the “Flight into Egypt.”

My third example comes from the Acts of the Apostles. In three different places within the text of Acts we read the story of what tradition has called “the conversion of St. Paul.” Acts 9:3-4 reads: “On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” When asked to describe this scene, most people speak of Saul (soon to be renamed “Paul”) being knocked off of his horse.

Neither this text of Acts nor any other mentions a horse. As you have already expected, the horse has come into the text-tradition from artistic portrayals of this scene.

As a young man, I had the opportunity to view Caravaggio's *Conversion on the Way to Damascus* in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome. Caravaggio's painting depicts Saul already on the ground with his horse looking on. I initially assumed that Caravaggio's work (1601-02) was original in portraying the scene in this manner. Subsequently, I have discovered that Caravaggio was himself already influenced by a tradition that predated him by at least a century. A German book, dated 1477, contains a sketch of Paul riding, ironically, a donkey. The depiction captures the moment of the light shining on Paul. His head is tilted to look up at the sky, but he is still mounted. By 1525, we have a painting attributed to Francesco Xanto Avelli showing Paul on the ground with his horse in a rearing posture. Avelli's interpretation is followed by Michelangelo's fresco in the Cappella Paolina at the Vatican Palace, dated 1542-45. Jacopo Tintoretto (c. 1545) and Niccolo dell'Abbate (c.1552) also portray Paul having been thrown from his horse.

Caravaggio is not original in his work. In fact, his rendition of the scene exists within a well-established interpretive tradition. Yet, even though his work is not original in its interpretation, the beauty of his depiction has exerted an enormous influence on the text-tradition. Most people will not have the opportunity to view the original painting. Yet, there have been numerous reproductions of this work in encyclopedias and other texts about art and the Bible. Many people have seen a reproduction of this painting. As

such, Caravaggio's work has done much to define Acts 9:3-4 in a narrowing, closing way. Most people read this text and imagine Paul falling from a horse, despite the fact that the biblical text makes no mention of one.

Our study of these three examples invites further inquiry. Each example provokes a parallel question: why an apple? why a donkey? why a horse? Though parallel in form, each question will have a distinctive answer. Here, however, responses to these questions can only be suggested. Perhaps the apple is a symbol of fertility, but did it become a symbol of fertility because of its presence in the paintings? The reference to fig leaves in Genesis 3:7 has been used to argue that Eve and Adam ate a fig. A fig, however, is small and its color does not contrast sharply with the leaves surrounding it. Perhaps a fig was not visually distinctive enough to be a good artistic choice to paint.

The Christian tradition shows evidence that already in its initial decades there was a reverentializing tendency at work. Later gospel texts such as Matthew and Luke portray both Jesus and the apostles in a more elevated fashion than does the early gospel of Mark. While Mark describes several of Jesus' emotions, Matthew and Luke tend to omit these references in their gospels. Similarly, Matthew and Luke soften the often harsh depiction of the apostles in Mark. For example, Mark 9 speaks of James and John asking Jesus a question that indicates their ignorance of Jesus' teaching. Matthew's parallel text ( ) has the mother of James and John ask the question. Scholars suggest that these are examples of the early church's efforts to portray its heroes in a clearly positive light. That is, the church reverentializes Jesus, James and John.

The tradition of having Mary riding a donkey on the flight into Egypt may well be another example of this reverentializing tendency. In the early centuries of the Christian tradition, respect for the role of Mary as Jesus' mother steadily grew. It is reasonable to assume that this increasing respect for Mary took visible form in artistic portrayals of her. It would be less burdensome for her to make the flight into Egypt riding rather than walking. In addition, one can also see in the architectural representations at S. Benoit-sur-Loire and Autun that Mary is seated on the donkey almost as on a throne. Jesus is on her lap holding a scepter. At S. Benoit, Mary not only is seated on the donkey, but has a footstool beneath her feet. This is certainly odd for a journey on a donkey, but reasonable for sitting on a throne.

We may see the reverentializing tendency at work in the imagining of Paul as riding a horse on his way to Damascus. There may also be some measure of truth in the suggestion that Saul held some type of position of authority even before his conversion and that persons in authority would have ridden rather than walked.

Whatever the reasons for the apple, the donkey, and the horse, it is clear that these interpretive choices – whenever and wherever they began – have exerted a powerful influence on the way in which each of these three texts has been, and continues to be, read and understood.

There is one final question I wish to pose. As we have seen, artists have contributed to the defining of biblical texts through their artworks. Does this contribution entitle

them to be considered, to some degree, as authors of the texts that they have helped to define? Should the artists who have so shaped our understanding of biblical texts share in the attribution of authorship? If one responds affirmatively, then the theological question of inspiration arises. Christianity argues that the authors of the Bible wrote under divine inspiration. The traditional narrow view limited inspiration to the author actually writing the text. A broader view, based on twentieth-century research, suggests that an author is always the product of her community. This perspective argues that inspiration is better located in the community that produced the author of the text. Perhaps this broader notion of community-inspiration can be extended to include the contributions of artists whose works have certainly had a visually, if not verbally, formative influence on our understanding of biblical texts.

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