CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES OF MONITION AND GUILE: THE POLITICS OF INTERPRETATION

BY

ASMA AFSARUDDIN
University of Notre Dame

Introduction

Michel Foucault in his The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception, describes commentary as questioning “discourse as to what it says and intended to say; it tries to uncover that deeper meaning of speech . . .; in stating what has been said, one has to re-state what has never been said.” This unearthing of buried meanings from within a text, particularly within religious scripture, has been referred to as allegorical or esoteric (Ar. bāṭinī) interpretation as opposed to the literal or exoteric (Ar. zāhīrī). Foucault tends to regard all hermeneutic activity as allegorical interpretation or allegoresis, as it has been called, which, according to him, is an endless activity through which we are subject “to the patient construction of discourses about discourses, and to the task of hearing what has already been said.” Northrop Frye

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4 Birth of the Clinic, xvi.
comments simply, “All commentary is allegorical interpretation.” Thus, commentary has overwhelmingly been seen as resulting from the effort of the reader to retrieve the hidden meaning of the text or discourse; according to many, this hidden meaning is retrieved according to the reader’s prior conceptual and experiential knowledge that has been referred to as “preunderstanding.” Hans Herbert Kögel states that “hermeneutic’ is primarily the term for a consciousness which recognizes that interpretive understanding must proceed from one’s own preunderstanding.” This preunderstanding is equivalent to Foucault’s “archive” of prior knowledge which shapes our discourse, “its mode of appearance, its form of existence and coexistence, its system of accumulation, historicity, and disappearance,” and which he regarded as inescapable.

In Islamic hermeneutics, Sunnis tend to see each word or utterance, as Edward Said remarks, as “its own occasion,” which is “firmly anchored in the worldly context in which it is applied.” Sunni legislators are overwhelmingly concerned with “meaning which became manifest . . . publicly through the normal functioning of the lafz” (“word” or “expression”); the words of Revelation are inextricably bound to their surface particularity and circumstance of existence. The traditional dichotomy of al-tafsir bi-l-ra’y (“commentary according to [individual] opinion”) and tafsir bi-l-ma’turr/al-‘ilm (“commentary based on traditions/knowledge”) codifies orthodox Sunni attitude towards exegesis; the former was viewed with grave suspicion on account of its potentially protean nature, rendering it susceptible to ideological manipulation, while the latter came to be promoted as authoritative.

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6 The Power of Dialogue, tr. Paul Hendrickson (Cambridge, 1996), 196. Similarly, Hans Georg Gadamer has described hermeneutic understanding “as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter,” which “proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition;” see his Truth and Method (New York, 1975), 293.
7 The Archaeology of Knowledge, tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), 150.
8 The World, the Text, and the Critic (Cambridge, Ma., 1983), 38-39. Although Said is primarily describing the hermeneutics of the Zahiriyaa, the group most fervently attached to exoterism, this description broadly fits the general Sunni attitude toward interpretive reading of the Qur’an.