

Metaphysics and Translating: An *Exodus*-quotation in Medieval Vernacular Literature

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Abstract

The *Speculum maius*, encyclopaedia of Vincent of Beauvais – and in particular the section titled *Speculum historiale* – was one of the most popular objects of vernacular translations in the 14th century. The first chapter contains a metaphysical expository, with some relevant quotations on the divine substance, among which appears the biblical auto-definition of God (*Exodus* 3:15): ‘*Ego sum qui sum, hoc nomen mihi est in aeternum*’. The translation of Jean de Vignay (Paris, Antoine Verard, 1496) renders this sentence with an alternative meaning: ‘*Je suy ce que ie suy et ce nom est a moy en pardurablete*’. Another manuscript version produced by an anonymous translator in Metz (*Abrégé lorrain*, ms. fr. 9558 of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) chooses to transcribe the Latin, then the French version: ‘*Ego sum qui sum. Je suy qui suy. Cilz noms mest pardurables.*’ As a matter of fact, Gilson interprets the whole medieval philosophy as an amount of individual positions to the *Exodus*-manifestation of God.

How do these two vernacular accounts behave towards the metaphysics of the *Exodus*, which philosophical position do they adopt among other *Exodus*-adaptations? Is it possible to differentiate in this sentence a theological point of view from that of the translator? What’s the relationship generally between the two texts and their translators who consider their work of translation slightly differently?

This article highlights at the same time the use of quotations and the textual equivalence in translations. Questioning this particular case can evaluate the degree of philosophical consciousness and the work of translation in the Middle Ages, exemplified in two philological rarities.

Keywords:



The Middle Ages offer a unique point of view on texts in terms of grafting and transplanting: blamed as an epoch of plagiarism, of mediocrity or even of infinite and indefinite repetitions, the identity of the authors remained often veiled, denied or had doubt cast upon it. In this context, to question an essential point of the metaphysics, the *Exodus* self-

definition of God is to hold a mirror to the identity of the medieval authors, translators or other followers, for whom all, God was the creator of the universe.

To open the discussion, the following question: is metaphysics dependent on the language that articulates it? From the medieval point of view, there was no place for this question, since the domination of the Latin – *lingua franca* of the culture and the sciences – was so strong that the situation could not broaden so far. It is during the Late Middle Ages that the facts change, that the emergence of vernacular languages leads not to the consciousness of a problematic, but to something that from a modern point of view we could call a ‘problem’, which has to be questioned and analyzed. In any case, the debate on the language of the metaphysics is one century old and the positions are as multiple as they are various. Instead of enumerating them, I propose to approach directly the question from a specific point of view: from that of medieval metaphysics and its transposition into vernacular languages.

First of all, I intend to agree about the sense of metaphysics. The definition of metaphysics appears very condensed to Etienne Gilson, historian of medieval philosophy, of which he stated, it was the most original creation of the Middle Ages: ‘There is only one God, and this God is the being: this is the rough edged stone of the entire Christian philosophy, and not Plato, not even Aristotle, but Moses has set it down.’¹ Moses set down this supposed rough edged stone in questioning the divinity on his name. The answer is well known, however it remains no less vague and no less debated in whichever language it appears: ‘I am the one who is’ (*Exodus* 3.14). Even if the position of Gilson consisting in giving greater importance to being among medieval theological categories appears sometimes contentious, the importance of the divine self-definition is pointed out from earlier times: from the Church Fathers, the first self-definition of the Christian God is interpreted and explained. Following Augustine, the medieval thinking transposed in God the principle of intelligible determination and of stability through the being, a principle that the classical Greek philosophy expressed by the means of the substance (*ousia*). Even Thomas Aquinas did not deny this medieval tradition.² Nevertheless, he laid down the preeminence of the divine existence only with the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae*, although Exodus 3.14 had not had before the same significance for him. This ambiguity stands out in the whole medieval history of the Exodus-quotation: this is what I want to prove here.

Detached from the context, the Exodus-revelation is in fact difficult to understand, since real parallels in the Ancient Testament or even in Hebrew literature are scarce. As a

¹ Etienne Gilson, *L’Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: Vrin, 1998), p. 51. My translation.

² Emilie Zum Brunn, ‘La “métaphysique de l’Exode” selon Thomas d’Aquin’, in *Dieu et l’être*, ed. by Paul Vignaux (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1978), p. 252.

consequence of this, in particular in Antiquity, authors choose to transcribe the Hebrew instead of translating it.³ Although the Latin version appears unanimous – *Ego sum qui sum* – the situation will be different with the vernacular languages. It is fastidious for them to remain as compact as the Latin: there was no let-out, the sentence had to be translated, positions adopted, choices made. In order to extract the various visions of medieval metaphysics from this sentence of *Exodus*, I will examine a very popular encyclopedia in monastic environment, which I will follow in its translations in Old French addressed to various social classes.

1. The ‘first’ Exodus

Vincent of Beauvais, an author of the 13th century, composed a huge encyclopedia, the biggest of his time, divided into three parts: *Speculum Naturale*, *Speculum Doctrinale* and *Speculum Historiale*. The historical part, the ‘Mirror of History’ was the most popular of the three pieces: it is this one, which crossed the doorway of the monasteries and opened the encyclopedia from the Latin to the Ancient French and its dialects.

The first chapter of *Speculum Historiale* entitled ‘*Epilogus de Unitate Divinae Substantiae*’ [Epilogue on the Unity of the Divine Substance], a chapter of transition between quotations on the utility of history and the beginning of the historical narrative, contains a consideration of the essence of God. As an encyclopaedist, Vincent had no obligation to give an exhaustive account of theology: this was henceforth the task of the *summae*. Moreover, his work offers a huge repertory of quotations: in our chapter, it is possible to establish the origin and the reference of each sentence. Both qualities are joined together in an affirmation of the author in the Prologue of his work: ‘[...] I am not writing a treatise, I am only doing compilation.’⁴

The ‘initial presence of God’, recorded in medieval encyclopedias as a necessity,⁵ could not avoid the quotation of the Exodus, it is the only excerpt from the Bible in the chapter, while other quotations are ascribed to Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, etc. When one compares this section with the corresponding chapter of the *Speculum Naturale*, similarities between the references to this ‘divine presence’ are even more obvious. Chapter Four of *Speculum Naturale*, entitled ‘*Quid sit Deus*’ [What is God], presents the same dogmas through almost the same quotations as are in the first chapter of *Speculum Historiale*. Nevertheless, the Exodus quotation is missing in *Speculum Naturale*, though it appears in first position in *Speculum Historiale*. This difference can be explained by the

³ André Caquot, ‘Les énigmes d’un hémistiche biblique’, in *Dieu et l’être*, ed. by Paul Vignaux, p. 19.

⁴ Marie-Christine Duchenne and Monique Paulmier-Foucart, *Vincent de Beauvais et le Grand Miroir du Monde* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), p. 42. My translation.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

dissimilarity the underlying emphases of each book: the ‘Mirror of Nature’ gives a description of the living world comprehending the spiritual one, while the ‘Mirror of History’ replaces the beginning of human history with the divine one into its temporality. In this perspective the self-definition of God appears as the beginning of a presentation on his substance: the *Exodus*-revelation speaks in fact about the subject’s identity. The position of Vincent of Beauvais on the metaphysics expressed in the sentence is highly explicit, thanks to the sentences that introduce the biblical verse:

hoc solum videlicet esse de ipso propriissime dici videtur quoniam omnia caetera ipsius essentiae comparata merito non esse dicuntur: unde ego sum ait, qui sum; hoc nomen mihi est in eternum: Itaque dicere, quid est Deus secundum substantiam, est impossibile, meliusque innotescere poterit ex omnium rerum ablatione.⁶

[it seems that only being can be said of him [God] properly, because any other thing is said, by means of a comparison to his essence, not to be: therefore, I am the one, he says, who is; this is my name for the eternity: thus to say, what God is as a substance, is impossible, he can better be known from the removal of all things (my translation)].⁷

Vincent takes position on the side of those who preach in favour of a God, whose essence is being and of whom no other qualification appears possible – a position, which is not only an option for God as being, but also a refusal of the capacity to assert anything else about his essence: this remains veiled by the negative theology stated by the author in the rest of the chapter, and emphasized through many quotations from Pseudo-Dionysius. As I mentioned above, the Latin version of the biblical verse *Exodus* 3.14 was unanimous: it only had to be comprehended by the authors as stating the being as the substance, as the name of God – which was the situation assumed by Vincent of Beauvais. Nevertheless, this simple vision of God as being is among those that will not exactly be adopted by his avatars.

⁶ Vincent of Beauvais, ‘*Speculum historiale*’, in *Speculum quadruplex* (Douai: Belleri, 1624), II, 4.

⁷ I chose a word by word translation through this article for a better reflection of the differences between the texts.

2. The translation by Jean de Vignay

Jean de Vignay is a well-known prolific translator of his time. In fact, he translated eleven works, which are sometimes quite voluminous: the *De re Militari* of Vegetius, the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacques de Voragine, the ‘*Speculum Historiale*’ of Vincent and the *Speculum Ecclesiae* of Hugues de Saint-Cher, etc., but he is nowadays almost debated. According to specialists his translations, especially from the ‘first period’ – of which the translation in question constitutes a part – are of a mediocre quality, either because he would only have had a scanty knowledge of Latin, or he would not have been an erudite person, or his readings would have remained limited.⁸ I think that the situation is in reality different and I will attempt to elaborate on this fact the episode of the Exodus.

The translation of Jean de Vignay is a word-for-word translation. However, his work on the first chapter of the ‘*Speculum Historiale*’ contains a number of simplifications, which are conceived to shorten sentences that are too long — I will avoid giving examples —, and some mistakes or omissions. He translates for example *insopitus oculus*, ‘indelible eye’ by *oeil sans clignier* [eye without twinkling], or ‘*omnia [...] movens ipsaque mutu predicta sempiterno*’ by ‘*mouuvent toutes choses par luymesmes par signe pardurable*’, which means ‘everything is moved by him by the means of an eternal sign’, instead of ‘moving everything while he also is moved by an eternal movement.’ His translation of the Exodus-quotation reveals a specific diversion; Jean de Vignay seems to give another sense not only to the biblical verse but also to all the sentences that accompany the divine self-definition. His translation is as follows:

Et tres proprement l’en peut dire de luy que toutes les autres choses generally qui sont ne sont nulle chose a accompagner a son essence. Et pour ce dist il. Je suis ce que ie suys et ce nom est a moy en pardurablete. Et pour ce a dire que dieu est autre chose selon sa substance ce est impossible.⁹

[And very properly we can state of him that all the things which generally exist are nothing to accompany his essence. And for this he says: I am what I am and this is my name for the eternity. And for this, to say that God is another thing according to his substance, is impossible (my translation).]

On a first reading of the text, we could be misled by a bad translator, but at a careful looking the logic sustaining the section becomes specific. Several basic ideas of the original text are transformed. They can be revealed from one sentence to another: first, what is stated ‘very properly’ about God is not that, apart from being, nothing else can be asserted about his substance, but that every other thing appears as secondary comparatively to his substance. The degree of the denial changed: instead of a categorical refusal of other characterizations as being,

⁸ Christine Knowles, ‘Jean de Vignay’, in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises* (Paris: Fayard, 1964), pp. 432-433.

⁹ Vincent of Beauvais, *Miroir historial*, trans. by Jean de Vignay (Paris: Vêrard, 1496), I, 1.

we have an ambiguous one. Also, the assertion of being of God is partly omitted, transformed.¹⁰ Secondly, the divine self-definition is not concerned with being, it is no longer ‘I am the one who *is*’, but ‘I am *what* I am.’ Indeed, in the two cases we have a refusal to assert anything openly: either God is simply the being – which must have been a quite obscure metaphysical statement to the reader –, or he is something, that he [God] refuses to say openly, briefly, an impenetrable essence. Here again, we find a subtle change in the degree of assertion: the translation of Jean de Vignay by ‘I am *what* I am’ is equal to a refusal more categorical to say what the divine essence is, because even being is not asserted about it.¹¹ It remains that the meaning of the sentence must be oriented on an ‘eternal’ name, difficult to find in Jean de Vignay’s version. Is it the ‘inexpressible essence’, the ‘*what I am?*’ Probably, but it is impossible to say more about it, apart from the persistence, the stability of the name ‘for the eternity’. Finally, in the last sentence of the passage, which is abridged by the translator in making an amalgam with the next phrase of the Latin version, instead of giving a verdict about the impossibility of describing the divine essence, the translator maintains that it is impossible to state that God is ‘another thing according to his substance’. How should we interpret this disconcerting sentence? It seems to me difficult to imagine that Jean did not understand the sentence, simple as it is, so the response must be a logical one. Two meanings appear plausible to me: (1) to state something else about the substance of God than ‘what he is’, is not justified for a metaphysical or theological reason because he only knows himself and because he does not want it to be known more exactly, etc.; (2) it is impossible to assert any other statement about God than what has already been said, and this by the means of the logical impossibility that sets up the entire metaphysics of Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1005b 19-20): every being is identical with himself. It is in this sense that the divine self-definition can be apprehended as a strictly individual name.

The transformations introduced into the text of Vincent by Jean de Vignay are discreet, but carry at the same time a wholly different message from the original and are entirely coherent within the meaning of the passage. Accepting the concept of the divine ‘essence’, but not of the divine ‘being’, the theology of Jean de Vignay is no less a negative one than is that of Vincent of Beauvais, and in this way, Jean de Vignay manifests himself to be a follower of an important side of the other’s thought. For if God is more, less or simply another thing than being, he no less remains inaccessible, unapproachable and incomprehensible. And the entire interest on this

¹⁰ I maintain here the possibility that the translator rashly misunderstood the phrase.

¹¹ This interpretation has an interesting tradition in Jewish approaches of the Exodus.

translation lies here: after the image of the mistake-laden Middle Ages, which transform the texts by the preferences of the copyists or of uncountable anonymous writers, until they give an impression of a generalized cacophony, we have here an example of a translator who fulfills another philosophical vision through polished changes.

A question even sharper is the reason of his position: why would Jean de Vignay assume a metaphysical position other than that of the author he is translating? We have no autonomous writing from him. The sequel of his translation is to be inscribed into the line of thought of Vincent of Beauvais, which turns to other subjects, like the omnipotence or the divine laws: impossible to get further information about the Exodus-metaphysics. But, another translation helping, it appears that the vernacular language can remain faithful to the original, a piece of the evidence that the version of Jean de Vignay subscribes to an individual position on the metaphysics of the divine essence.

3. An abridged version and its extended Exodus

The *Abrégé lorrain du Miroir historial* [The Summary Lorraine Version of the Mirror of History] is not, as its title indicates, a word-by-word translation: it is a shortened version supposed to bring forth the most important ideas of the original text. We unfortunately do not possess any information about the translator who put the text into the Lorraine dialect, and all that is known about it is what can be gleaned from the manuscript itself. This is contained in a codex dated to the 14th century, the anonymous owners of which belonged to the bourgeoisie of 14th -15th century Metz.¹² In comparing this version with the translation of Jean de Vignay, their independence can be pronounced without contestation.

The importance of the Exodus-quotation filters through the *Abrégé*: while some paragraphs are entirely neglected and removed by the abridger – who reduces the theological matter of Vincent by a quarter –, the three sentences we successively examined by Vincent and in the version of Jean de Vignay, are rendered in his translation. The version is however different from that of Jean de Vignay:

Et pour ce proprement estre appartient a deu car totes aultres chozes compareez a la semblance de deu sont niant. Dont il dit en sa persone: Ego sum qui sum. Je suy qui suy. Cilz noms m'est pardurables. Pour quoi demonstreir, quelz choze deus est selonc la substance, est impossible.¹³

[And for this, being belongs properly to God, because all other things compared to the semblance of God are nothing. Concerning this he says personally: Ego sum qui sum. I am the one who is.

¹² Serge Lusignan, 'En passant par la Lorraine... une traduction partielle et anonyme du *Speculum historiale* de Vincent de Beauvais', in *Le Nombre du temps. En hommage à Paul Zumthor* (Paris: Champion, 1988), p. 156.

¹³ Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (BN), MS fonds français 9558, fol. 54^v.

This name is perpetually mine. For this, to demonstrate what God is according to the substance, is impossible.(my translation)].

The divergence is striking. In translating ‘I am the one who is’, the anonymous author is clearly settled by the vision of God as being, an interpretation that corresponds to that of the ‘*Speculum Historiale*’ of Vincent of Beauvais. From sentence to sentence: firstly, it is a fact that being belongs to God, the rest is worth nothing; secondly, the self-affirmation is completed by a ‘personally’, which was added by the translator – this additional word and the Latin ‘*Ego sum qui sum*’ are his unique ‘deviation’ from the original text. The quotation of the sentence in Latin sounds like a confirmation of the otherness of God – a difference which was supposedly pronounced in another language – and reminds one of the practice of the authors of antiquity to transliterate the Hebrew instead of translating it, even if the mark of the Latin culture is immediately followed by the dialectal, vernacular version. This redundancy puts even more emphasis on the importance of the divine definition, given that the translation is in fact a summary version: the Supreme Being speaks out in Latin; the exact reference is set in front of the readers – who did not comprehend at all, or only very little, Latin. God remains, as he is by Vincent, ‘the one who is’. Consequently, it appears impossible to demonstrate what God is according to his substance – which is a translation wholly faithful to the original text of Vincent of Beauvais.

The quotation of the Latin *Exodus*-version requires a thorough reflection. Why did the anonymous translator give the original version while writing for an audience probably unable to understand this language of past times? Beyond the importance laid on the biblical verse with this double quotation, an incontestable effect is the presence of the translator, so that it is possible to interpret this fact as a testimony-appeal: the translator cites the Latin to prove his expertise. But it reveals another aspect probably appearing in the mind of the Lorraine readers: God speaks another language than the translator or the reader; he speaks Latin when he wishes to express his identity, an act confirmed by the ‘personally’, an addition of the anonymous writer in the sentence. More simply, this Latin quotation refers to the language of the liturgies and to that of the biblical passages read in the churches: it is a fact that to everybody in the Middle Ages, God spoke in Latin. In this perspective, the translator only sends back to a still existing common sense of the epoch: grafting and transplanting are plainly assumed here.

Curiously enough, with regard only to this passage, the anonymous translator of the *Abrégé* appears more a translator than a philosopher in comparison to Jean de Vignay, a proportion that is reversed in the following episode of his presentation. For, given a summary version of the original, the anonymous translator had to select certain affirmations, to eliminate others, briefly,

to make choices that can be qualified as philosophical ones. Now in translating the Exodus-verse the anonymous writer remains a translator, whereas Jean de Vignay is a philosopher. Between the two possibilities, the metaphysics of the Exodus remains a field of interest.

The medieval period of graft and transplant activity on texts appears indeed more varying and more conscious than originally supposed. A Latin encyclopaedia and its two translations offer three different identities: Vincent of Beauvais appears as the conventional monastic author; Jean de Vignay is the clever, self-fulfilling translator; the Lorraine anonymous writer is present as the loyal, but autonomous abridger.

If, for Gilson, the rough-edged stone of the metaphysics was set down by Moses, it could sometimes be removed and transferred by translators. This does not constitute a problem, but a sort of answer to the question of the authority of the language on metaphysical subject matter.

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