

WAVE-LIKE COMMENTARIES: THE STRUCTURE AND PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION OF MIDDLE PLATONIST COMMENTARIES

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Abstract: Scholars remain far from reaching agreement about the structure of Middle Platonist commentaries on Plato's dialogues: some take them to have been running line-by-line commentaries, while others believe that Middle Platonist commentaries were mainly specialist works. In this paper I propose a fresh and comprehensive analysis of extant sources in order to show that both views, while shedding light on important features of this literary genre in Middle Platonism, should be supplemented in order to draw a more complex picture. Extant sources suggest that the Middle Platonist commentaries were characterized by a set of features which shaped a specific conception of the literary genre: they were lemmatic and followed the development of a dialogue in its progression, yet at the same time they applied a thematic focus and hence admitted a substantial degree of selectivity.

Keywords: Middle Platonism, Middle Platonist exegesis, ancient philosophical commentaries, *Timaeus* commentaries

By the first century BC, as Seneca complains, *philosophia* had become *philologia* (*Ep.* 108.23). The rediscovery of Plato's philosophy in the post-Hellenistic age is probably one of the most important factors behind this rethinking of philosophical activity, for the Platonists' attempt to systematize Plato's thought and highlight his doctrines was chiefly grounded in the exegesis of the master's dialogues. Appreciating the Middle Platonists' exegetical methods is thus a fundamental task, and, for this reason, over the last 30 years scholars have paid particular attention to the forms in which this philosophical movement developed its arguments and doctrines, and in particular to the structure of Middle Platonist commentaries.¹ After decades of debate, scholarship has developed two authoritative (yet quite different) views about this issue. On the one hand, Middle Platonist commentaries are regarded simply as running commentaries, without any further qualification or distinguishing feature; on the other, it has been suggested that Middle Platonist commentaries took the form of specialist commentaries, usually focusing only on a restricted range of sections of a dialogue and/or a well-defined problem. Both views have good grounds and grasp important aspects of the structure of Middle Platonist commentaries, but in this paper I shall show that it is possible to analyse extant sources in order to describe better and more precisely the features which the literary genre of the philosophical commentary had in Middle Platonism. More specifically, in the first section I highlight the shortcomings affecting scholarship and indicate some methodological premises, while in section II I uncover the common features of Middle Platonist commentaries – namely, they were lemmatic and progressive, *but also* arranged according to thematic interests and hence potentially selective. This reveals a complex philosophical orientation. Taking this as my starting point, in section III I highlight the philosophical and methodological orientation of Middle Platonist commentaries, according to which Middle Platonists regarded Plato's text as a selective web of intertwined thematic nuclei, deserving special attention as the bearers of consistent and articulated philosophical doctrines.

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¹ See especially Baltes (1976); Hadot (1987); Barnes (1992); (1993); Donini (1992); (1994); (2000); Dörrie

and Baltes (1993) 162–226; Mansfeld (1994); Hadot (1997); Sedley (1997); Ferrari (1998); (2000a); (2000b); (2001); (2012); Chiaradonna (2012); Boys-Stones (2018) chapter 1; Petrucci (2018) chapter 4.

I. *Status quaestionis* and methodology

Before examining the sources in order to outline a new representation of Middle Platonist commentaries, it is important to highlight the ways in which the standard views on the topic have been formulated, and hence why they should be supplemented.

The idea that Middle Platonist commentaries had a running structure emerged especially from David Sedley's seminal 1997 paper 'Plato's *auktoritas* and the rebirth of the commentary tradition'.² Here, the idea that Middle Platonist commentaries were 'line-by-line' commentaries³ is proposed by considering a specific and very influential source, namely the *Anonymous Commentary on the Theaetetus*, as a 'specimen of Platonic commentary' in Middle Platonism.⁴ Of course, this text is almost the only commentary of which we have extensive and consecutive sections; thus we are able to observe how a commentary unfolded and dealt with consecutive portions of a text. The *Anonymous Commentary* certainly displays *some* features of a running commentary; given that it starts from the beginning of the dialogue, it can be argued that it commented on the whole text (although the papyrus fragment ends at 157e4–58a2).⁵ However, it is unwarranted to take this source as bearing witness to a *standard* form, for there is no compelling evidence to suggest that it represents something other than one among several possible forms in which the literary genre of the commentary could have been practised in Middle Platonism – i.e., as Sedley suggests, it is far from clear to what extent and in what sense it represents a 'specimen' of Middle Platonist commentaries. One can solve this issue only through a wide-ranging comparison with other extant sources, and this is still a *desideratum*.

Though contributing to the debate on the issue, Sedley's research is more focused on Plato's authority in the Middle Platonist commentary tradition. Furthermore, in the years since Sedley's 1997 publication, a fundamental stream of studies has developed,⁶ concluding that the nature of Middle Platonist commentaries was rather that of *Spezialkommentare* than line-by-line analysis.⁷ However, this conclusion has also not been developed fully since there has been particular focus on just a limited number of sources. Specifically, the key texts which have been considered are Galen's *Commentary on the Timaeus*, along with other technical exegeses,⁸ and Plutarch's *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*.⁹ The former text is devoted to the 'medical part' of the dialogue, and is indeed a specialist commentary in the sense that it focuses on certain sections only of the

² But see also, for example, Göransson (1995) especially 56–59 and Dillon (2011), which adopt this view without ever calling it into question.

³ See, for example, Sedley (1997) 114 (especially n.11), where it is claimed that the format of the Middle Platonist commentary essentially derives from Crantor's model, and that both the Academic model and the Middle Platonist one had the line-by-line structure which one detects in Neoplatonist commentaries. This view (and Sedley's position in particular) is explicitly criticized by Ferrari (2002) 15 n.17.

⁴ Sedley (1997) 117.

⁵ For an excellent description of the papyrus and its contents (*PBerol* 9782), see Bastianini and Sedley (1995) 235–44.

⁶ Following Dörrie and Baltes (1993) 162–219 – which, interestingly, Sedley (1997) 114 n.11 gently criticizes.

⁷ See especially the very valuable studies of Ferrari (1998); (2000a); (2000b); (2001); (2012) 93–99. In Franco Ferrari's own words ((2002) 13): 'Spesso questi ultimi [the Middle Platonist commentaries] sono considerati dei commentari continui, in cui il dettato del testo viene riprodotto in forma lemmatica e commentato

proposizione dopo proposizione, dall'inizio alla fine. Un attento esame delle fonti dimostra, tuttavia, quanto questa immagine sia in realtà il prodotto di un pregiudizio, consistente appunto nella retroproiezione di uno stile ermeneutico accertato solamente per un'epoca relativamente tarda [i.e., among the Neoplatonists from Porphyry onwards]. ... Il *De animae procreatione* di Plutarco si innesta dunque in una lunga e consolidata tradizione di opere esegetiche di carattere monografico. Si tratta, per la precisione, della tradizione degli *Spezialkommentare*, nei quali l'autore ritagliava dal testo platonico sezioni affini per argomento, e nel fornirne l'esegesi, tentava di ricostruire la posizione platonica sull'argomento che lo interessava.'

⁸ See especially Ferrari (1998); (2000b).

⁹ See especially Ferrari (2002) 12–17. See also Petrucci (2012a) 46–62 and (2016a), with special reference to Middle Platonist technical exegesis. While I do think that this stream of studies has highlighted the fundamental features of the Middle Platonist commentary as a literary genre, at the same time, a more comprehensive enquiry could make better sense of these features and allow convergence with the 'running-commentary' hypothesis.

Timaeus according to a thematic logic, but, at the same time, it considers these sections in a continuous manner.¹⁰ So, regarding it as an exemplar of Middle Platonist commentaries raises the question of how to explain both its similarities to and substantial differences from a source such as that of the *Anonymous Commentary on the Theaetetus*.¹¹ At the same time, while technical exegeses do contribute to the illustration of the exegetical standards of Middle Platonism, they cannot be directly used to determine the features of Middle Platonist commentaries.¹² A similar puzzle emerges in relation to Plutarch's *De animae procreatione*, for at the beginning of this source (1012B) Plutarch explicitly defines the work as an ἀναγραφή (treatise), and not as a ὑπόμνημα (commentary).¹³ This is also true of other writings which might be regarded as testifying to the priority of the specialist form, especially Middle Platonist zetematic works. As we shall see,¹⁴ the production of these writings was particularly important and widespread in Middle Platonism, but this does not imply that they either count as commentaries or serve as a model for the structure of commentaries. Rather, they can at most testify to a particular conception of Plato's text, a conception which, *mutatis mutandis*, one could expect to be exploited *also* in the commentaries.

All in all, the existing scholarship has correctly emphasized certain aspects characterizing individual sources of Middle Platonist commentaries, but a comprehensive picture, taking all relevant testimonies into account (especially fragmentary ones), is lacking. At a more general level, scholarship has highlighted two different tendencies which are detectable in the extant sources (the possibility of their being line-by-line commentaries *and* entailing, at the same time, a strong thematic perspective), but has failed to make sense consistently of both these tendencies as belonging to the same literary genre. This is a consequence of the fact that the sources are indeed contradictory and puzzling, and that applying different analytic foci has led to the drawing of an incomplete picture. For all these reasons, I shall attempt to readdress the issue of the form of Middle Platonist commentaries by following two main methodological lines of enquiry. First, and most obviously, I shall take all relevant sources into account, *without assuming any of them to be a paradigmatic specimen of the literary genre*; rather, I shall take all of them as encompassing to some extent the features of a specific literary genre. This might create a problem of circularity, for, after all, without a definition of 'commentary' it is apparently impossible to select texts to be considered in order to identify the features of commentary as a genre. Still, at least in the form of a working hypothesis, one is in a position to select consistently a set of texts to be analysed. As a matter of fact, although the term ὑπόμνημα is not specific – for it can also designate writings which one would not consider to be commentaries¹⁵ – all extant texts which are commonly considered

¹⁰ See especially Ferrari (1998) 16–18, emphasizing the fact that isolating themes as the focus of commentaries is a common practice in Middle Platonism. At the same time, Göransson (1995) 58 and Sedley (1997) 112 regard them simply as running commentaries.

¹¹ This issue is solved by Ferrari (2000b) 176–77, by insisting on the 'anomalies' of the *Anonymous Commentary* and thus allowing it to be considered as a *sui generis* continuous commentary.

¹² This does not imply that other technical commentaries were not produced; on the contrary, it is likely, for example, that Adrastus' *Commentary* chiefly dealt with the mathematical sections of the dialogue: see Petrucci 2012b. On the other hand, for instance, Theon's *Expositio* is certainly an exegetical work, mainly devoted to the *Timaeus*' *divisio animae* and the astronomical arrangement of the world soul (Petrucci (2012a) 46–62), but it is not a commentary at all.

¹³ See also n.15 below. Ferrari acknowledges that ἀναγραφή designates a treatise in general and regards the

De animae procreatione as combining the features of monographic writings and commentaries, but then emphasizes that it can be considered a commentary since it displays key features of this genre, such as the constant reference to Plato's text: (2002) 13–17, n.3. This is correct, of course, but such an approach does not allow us to distinguish between the genre of the commentary and other exegetical formats, such as zetematic writings or exegetical monographs

¹⁴ See section II below.

¹⁵ The term ὑπόμνημα (and its latin homologue *commentarius*) does not univocally designate 'commentaries': see, for example, Iambl. *VP* 28.7, 29.3 on alleged Pythagorean ὑπομνήματα, which must be identified with some Ps.-Pythagorean writings; Elias *In Cat.* 114.4, using ὑπομνήματα for personal annotations; Gellius' use of the word *commentarius*, just referring to well-structured, complete and systematic pieces of knowledge, is also telling: see Vardi (2004) 163–64.

Middle Platonist commentaries were designated as ὑπομνήματα. In other words, if we consider all Middle Platonist writings entitled ὑπομνήματα we are bound to cover all commentaries (along with other writings). But this result can be refined, for when a commentary on a dialogue is at issue, the title of the text also indicates the Platonic dialogue which is the focus of the commentary.¹⁶ So, to put it another way, the set of texts I shall analyse encompasses all those Middle Platonist writings¹⁷ which are entitled ὑπομνήματα on a specific Platonic dialogue, and which – as one would expect – constitute our repertoire of Middle Platonist commentaries. Of course, this is a (necessary) working hypothesis, for only the analysis will confirm whether these texts, selected according to the criterion detailed above, share formal features and not merely the same title. Second, I shall proceed by developing a bottom-up analysis: I will detect what features are shared by the relevant sources and regard these as being characteristic of the literary genre. In this way, the resulting description of the genre will not satisfy some artificial need for a taxonomy; discovering a methodological and structural core of Middle Platonist exegesis by comparing the relevant sources is the only way to identify the ‘commentary’ as a formal literary genre in Middle Platonism. The question is not what the ‘essence’ of a Middle Platonist commentary is, but what (if any) the methodological boundaries were that allowed Middle Platonists to regard their own commentary writings as such; i.e. what distinguished them from zetematic writings and monographs, for instance. Unless we detect these boundaries, we cannot grasp the Middle Platonists’ concept of one of their most important approaches to Plato’s texts, and, thus, it would be impossible to speak of the ‘commentary’ as a literary genre.¹⁸ At the same time, discovering this methodological and structural core does not entail quashing existing differences; on the contrary, as the research is based on a thorough analysis of extant sources, its goal is to make sense of these differences by establishing the general boundaries and criteria according to which a Middle Platonist text could be considered a commentary – both by an author and by his readers.

II. The four structural features of Middle Platonist commentaries: a bottom-up analysis

In what follows I consider extant sources of Middle Platonist ὑπομνήματα on Plato’s dialogues in order to highlight that they all exploit four key features, which define them as belonging to the same literary genre. Although each application of these features can entail different inflections and nuances, determining a degree of fluctuation between the extant sources (none of them being paradigmatic), their interaction and general application provides a suitable and consistent model. More specifically, I shall argue that the Middle Platonist commentaries were:

- (1) lemmatic, for they analysed a dialogue by taking sections of it into account;
- (2) progressive, for they dealt progressively with the text;
- (3) selective, for, although in principle taking into account the whole dialogue (since each passage *can* have some philosophical import), a philosophical criterion was applied, determining whether, and to what extent, a passage deserved discussion, and so *potentially* leading to the omission of some passages;¹⁹

¹⁶ Moreover, although the ambiguity I refer to is not limited to a specific chronological range, the only relevant case in which it is encountered in Middle Platonist writings concerns Taurus’ T20.3, where Gellius refers to a work by Taurus on ethics (probably against the Stoics: see Petrucci (2018) 11–15) as *in ipsius commentariis*. First, it is likely that Taurus’ treatise had a much more specific title, and that the use of the word *commentarius* depends here on Gellius’ practice (see the preceding footnote). Second, and most importantly, the absence of the mention of a dialogue clearly distinguishes this work (even admitting that its original title entailed the word ὑπόμνημα) from Taurus’ commentaries, which are

always indicated as commentaries on a specific dialogue (see especially T23.5).

¹⁷ I do not include Eudorus’ *Commentary on the Timaeus* because this author, albeit sometimes regarded as the founder of Middle Platonism (see, for example, Bonazzi 2005), remains a liminal figure: see, for example, Boys-Stones (2001) 123–50; Petrucci (2018) 27–32.

¹⁸ Obvious though it may be, this is a crucial issue; as shown by Chiaradonna (2012), in antiquity the commentary *was*, indeed, a specific literary genre.

¹⁹ This is not an abstract deduction. Rather, the point is, as we shall see in section II(c), that the sources converge in indicating that selectivity was a recurrent

- (4) thematic, for they regarded key lemmata as bearers of specific philosophical issues, and focused on them particularly in order to offer comprehensive accounts of these issues.

(a) *Lematic structure*

A firm basis for the evaluation of the lemmatic structure of Middle Platonist commentaries is provided by both texts which are the basis of the interpretative instances outlined above: the *Anonymous Commentary on the Theaetetus* and Galen's *Commentary on the Timaeus*. Though incomplete and sometimes lacunose, the extant text of the *Anonymous Commentary* opens with a brief introduction (to which I shall return to in due course) and then considers the text of the *Theaetetus* by quoting its lemmata starting from 142d1–3.²⁰ Similarly, Galen's *Commentary*, while far from complete, clearly proceeded by analysing the text lemma by lemma.²¹ This does not imply, however, that lemmata were selected according to a standard length, i.e. a parameter according to which the text was divided and submitted to focused analysis; while the *Anonymous Commentary* picks out very limited sections of text, generally amounting to a couple of lines, Galen's *Commentary* isolates much longer sections, coinciding with a specific medical issue. Similarly, there is no standard ratio between the extent of a lemma and the length of its discussion; the *Anonymous* considers consistently small sections, but his discussions range from an equivalent number of lines to lengthy and very detailed philosophical treatments. In other words, while the lemmatic structure is consistently applied as a formal framework, it does not follow a rigid pattern.

Of course, the evaluation of this aspect is made more difficult when working with fragments, for the exegetical sections are often rearranged with quotations or references inserted. This is clear when one considers that our main source for these writings, namely Proclus, often had only indirect access to Middle Platonist writings – the main intermediaries being Porphyry and Iamblichus²² – and that the insertion of quotations or references into specific lemmata does not imply that the Middle Platonist sections had, in their original form, the *same* place or function.²³ Nonetheless, a wide-ranging set of testimonies explicitly indicates that Middle Platonist commentaries followed a lemmatic structure *independently* of the fact that fragments of them were later transmitted as part of Neoplatonist lemmatic commentaries.

Some initial evidence comes from Proclus, which is to say from the texts he quotes or refers to from Longinus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*. In some cases, fortunately, Proclus does not limit himself to presenting specific arguments, but also explicitly indicates that these arguments were proposed by Longinus as a commentary on particular lemmata. For instance, Proclus indicates that Longinus discussed at least some aspects of the problem of the descent of the human soul into the body when commenting on *Timaeus* 18d–e (*fr.* 48:²⁴ Λογγίνος δὲ ἐν τούτοις ἀπορεῖ κτλ.; 'on this passage Longinus raises a difficulty etc.'). An almost identical indication is provided in Proclus' discussion of *Timaeus* 19b (*Long. fr.* 49) and 21a (*Long. fr.* 50). One could push one's scepticism to the point of wondering whether even in these cases Proclus' rearrangement produces an artificial correspondence between the section he is analysing and Longinus' remarks. However, another quotation rules out this possibility.

feature of Middle Platonist commentaries; however, quite reasonably, selectivity was applied by each author to different degrees (no degree being considered as 'standard' or absolute, of course).

²⁰ See the authoritative commented edition of Bastianini and Sedley (1995), together with Sedley (1997); on the philosophical core of this writing, see Bonazzi (2013). On this commentary's partiality, see section II(c) below.

²¹ Of the *Commentary*, originally in four books, only some Greek fragments of the third book and some fragments from other books in an Arabic translation have

been transmitted; the standard critical edition is Schröder (1934). Larrain (1992) identifies 32 fragments in a manuscript of the Escorial Library, but this has not been widely accepted: see Ferrari (1998), also for a discussion of Galen's exegetical methods.

²² Pace Whittaker (1987); see especially Rescigno (1998); Opsomer (2001); Tarrant (2004).

²³ See Petrucci (2014).

²⁴ On these fragments, see the excellent analyses in Männlein-Robert (2001) *ad loc.* – the fragments are quoted according to this edition.

When dealing with *Timaeus* 19d1–e2 Proclus presents a wide-ranging discussion and then briefly focuses on 19d7–9, which he quotes again. Only now does he introduce Longinus' argument by saying that Λογγίνος δὲ ἠπόρει πρὸς ταύτην τὴν ἐκκειμένην ῥῆσιν κτλ (*fr.* 52: 'Longinus raised a difficulty with respect to the referred passage'), where, for thematic reasons, the passage at issue is not the more extensive lemma taken into account by Proclus, but the more restricted one, that is 19d7–9.²⁵

Still, the lemmatic structure (which we have already detected in the Anonymous and Galen) could have been chosen by Longinus for specific reasons; this structure certainly aids Longinus' stylistic analysis of Plato's text, which represents quite a peculiar aspect of his Platonist exegesis. Fortunately, extant texts of Taurus of Beirut strongly confirm its application. T30²⁶ is one of the passages of Taurus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* which Philoponus transmits verbatim, depending on Porphyry.²⁷ Philoponus introduces the text as follows (*De aet. mund.* 520.4–7):

Ταύρου τοῦ Πλατωνικοῦ ἐκ τοῦ πρώτου τῶν εἰς τὸν Τίμαιον ὑπομνημάτων προκειμένης τῆς παρ' ἡμῶν προεκτεθείσης τοῦ Πλάτωνος περικοπῆς 'σωματοειδὲς δὴ καὶ ὄρατὸν ἀπτόν τε τὸ γενόμενον' καὶ τῶν ἐξῆς.

Section from the first book of the *Commentary on the Timaeus* by the Platonist Taurus, placed after the quotation of the passage which we have set forth above, that is 'what is being generated is bodily, visible, and tangible' etc.

At *De aeternitate mundi* 512.26–14.13 Philoponus quotes an extensive section of the *Timaeus*, namely 31b1–32c8. After a few pages, he comes back to *some* of these lines, starting from 31b4, and, as we have seen, explicitly points out that Taurus introduced his remarks on Plato's theory of elementary bodies in correspondence with a discussion of them. There is no ambiguity to this remark: Philoponus clearly refers to Plato's textual passage in technical terms (περικοπή; 'passage') and also states that the passage was not implicitly alluded to, but quoted before the development of the argument (προκειμένης τῆς ... περικοπῆς; 'placed after the quotation of the passage which we have set forth above'). This clearly testifies to the fact that the sequence of Taurus' text was a lemma-commentary one. Taurus' texts, however, provide another important piece of information, especially in relation to the lemmata of Longinus' *Commentary*. The two most important sources for Taurus' exegesis of Plato's cosmogony are T26 and T27,²⁸ the former dealing with *Timaeus* 28b6–8 and the latter with *Timaeus* 27c5. They are quoted separately by Philoponus, who, however, refers to them again in a section devoted to criticizing Taurus' position (223.1–24.18 = Taurus T28.11–17). Interestingly, here he quotes first a section of T26, concerning *Timaeus* 28b6–8, and then a section of T27, concerning *Timaeus* 27c5, and hints at the fact that the latter passage followed the former in Taurus' *Commentary* (ἀλλ' ἐφεξῆς πάλιν ὁ αὐτὸς Ταῦρος παρατίθεται ...; 'But in what follows Taurus himself presents ...'). This is possible only provided that both passages, namely *Timaeus* 27c5 and 28b6–8, were encompassed within a single extensive lemma of a similar length to that from Galen's *Commentary*. This, however, cannot represent a standard, for we have seen that both the Anonymous and Longinus discussed rather short textual passages.

Therefore, the cases of Taurus and Longinus confirm what has already been noted in relation to the Anonymous and Galen: Middle Platonist commentaries had a lemmatic structure, but the length of each lemma was not determined by any standard practice. These are the only pieces of evidence we have as to *whether* the commentaries had a lemmatic structure: they come from very different authors, with different interests and origins, but all converge to indicate that Middle Platonist commentaries were indeed lemmatic.

²⁵ See Männlein-Robert (2001) 458 n.246.

²⁶ = 33F Gioè. Taurus' fragments are quoted in the text according to my own collection (Petrucci 2018); on Taurus, see also Lakmann (1995).

²⁷ See especially Philoponus' introduction to Taurus' T26; Zambon (2002) 87–89.

²⁸ =23F and 26F Gioè. On these texts, see Petrucci (2018).

(b) Progressive structure

As in the case of the lemmatic structure, the sources for which we have extended sections, namely the *Anonymous Commentary* and Galen's, play a key role in establishing the progressive nature of the commentaries. Indeed, although incomplete, the transmitted parts of these texts outline a clear progressiveness in the treatment of Plato's texts; lemmata are considered by following the order of each dialogue. At the same time, it is noteworthy that in neither case does this imply that all passages of the dialogues are taken into account; as we shall see in section II(c), the *Anonymous* leaves the dramatic prelude aside and also, throughout the whole commentary, Theaetetus' interventions, dealing only with Socrates' interventions. In contrast, Galen's *Commentary*, given its thematic focus, must have started from the point of the Platonic dialogue which Galen regarded as the beginning of its 'medical section'. In other words, these extended sections of transmitted commentaries indicate that Middle Platonist commentaries were progressive, but, at the same time, confirm that progressiveness was not synonymous with completeness; it simply entails that the overall order of the dialogue being commented on is progressively followed.

It is difficult, naturally, to identify such a structure in the fragmentary sources. Of course, it can be reasonably assumed that, when fragments from a commentary seem to deal with a set of passages from a dialogue, the author of the commentary dealt with the related textual sections by following the order of the dialogues. For instance, although Atticus clearly paid particular attention to *Timaeus* 30a and related passages,²⁹ one can trace a certain progression through the dialogue: he focuses on the dramatic prologue (*fr.* 16) and the Atlantis myth (*fr.* 17), but also discusses the rational soul's immortality (*fr.* 15), a topic examined before and after the cosmogonic part proper. Indeed, it is difficult to see, for instance, how Atticus could have discussed aspects of the Atlantis myth when commenting on passages other than the Atlantis myth itself, and this suggests that each discussion was developed in correspondence to relative textual sections. A similar case could be made with respect to Severus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*, which must have focused at least on three consecutive sections and related issues, namely: the ontological genera of reality (4T), probably in reference to *Timaeus* 27d–28a; Plato's cosmogony (6–8T); and the essence and mathematical structure of the soul (9–12T and 14–16T).³⁰ In this case, it is *at least* clear that the technical discussion of the mathematical structure of the world soul, revolving around *Timaeus* 35b–36b, must have been introduced after the treatment of the cosmogonic section.

Such conclusions remain, of course, speculative to some extent. Interestingly enough, however, the available fragmentary sources include at least one explicit case of internal cross reference, clearly highlighting progressiveness. This occurs again in Taurus' T30, which, as we have seen, was centred on *Timaeus* 31b. Taurus' argument in this passage can be summarized as follows: it is not the case that a fifth body exists even though each body is associated with a kind of sense-perception, for smell has no specific object but is naturally related to a mixture of air and water.³¹ The latter idea is not explicitly formulated in the section analysed, but can be detected later on in the dialogue, in *Timaeus* 66d–e. Taurus does not just refer to this passage as the textual basis of his argument, but explicitly indicates that a focused discussion of the passage *will* be presented (ἐροῦμεν) in due course (κατὰ τὸν τόπον γινόμενοι; 'when we have reached the suitable passage'). This cross reference explicitly indicates that Taurus' *Commentary* followed the order of Plato's text; not only is it clear that Taurus conceived his commentary as a kind of sequence of exegetical nuclei related to specific textual sections, but he also indicates, through the use of the future tense,

²⁹ See especially Procl. *In Ti.* 1.283.27–85.7, 1.391.4–96.26 (Diehl); with Petrucci (2016c); Michalewski (2018) (I am grateful to Alexandra Michalewski for having shared this paper with me before its publication). Atticus' fragments are quoted according to des Places' edition, Severus' fragments according to

Gioè's edition (in which texts are identified by a numeral followed by either T for testimonies or F for fragments).

³⁰ For a commentary on Severus' testimonies, see Gioè (2002) *ad loc.*

³¹ See Gioè (2002) *ad loc.*; Petrucci (2018) 164–66.

that a discussion of *Timaeus* 66d–e was provided after that of *Timaeus* 31b (probably quite a bit after, given the vagueness of the indication). At the same time, this does not imply that all sections before and after *Timaeus* 31b were the object of detailed commentary.

Therefore, even the fragmentary testimonies confirm the strong evidence provided by the Anonymous and Galen; on this basis, progressiveness emerges as a second fundamental feature of the structure of Middle Platonist commentaries.

(c) Selectivity

Up to this point in the discussion, the evidence seems to support the idea that Middle Platonist commentaries had a running structure: after all, being lemmatic and progressive are key features of this kind of commentary. However, we have already observed that the Middle Platonist applications of these features entailed high degrees of flexibility, both in the variegated selection and treatment of different lemmata and in the disavowal of any necessary implication between progressiveness and completeness. This aspect is indeed very telling, and definitely highlights a fundamental aspect of Middle Platonist commentaries, which, according to extant sources, *could* deal only with a selected part of the dialogue they examined; in other words, they were, to varying degrees, selective.

Even the work whose structure is apparently closest to a running one, namely the *Commentary on the Theaetetus*, is much more selective and partial than it might seem at face value. Initial evidence of this emerges from the treatment of the rather extensive dramatic prologue of the dialogue (*Tht.* 142a1–43c8), which is largely left without commentary; the Anonymous just points out that another prologue was circulating (3.28–4.27).³² This cannot be due to the Anonymous regarding the prologue as stylistically poor, for the only thing he says on the issue is that the spurious prologue is ὑπόψυχρον (3.30: ‘rather flat’), and that, on the contrary, the authentic prologue shows the excellence of Plato as a writer (3.43–44). Later on in the *Commentary* (4.17–27), however, the author says that the prologue deals with a specific philosophical problem, namely that of the προσήκοντα (‘what is appropriate’) and πρακτά (‘what is to be done’), and that this issue is typical of the Socratics; it is for this reason that it οὐ δεῖται ἐξηγήσεως (‘needs no exegesis’). Thus, the Anonymous applies a principle according to which only some passages of the dialogue reflect Plato’s thought, and only these sections are worthy of a commentary; indeed, the prologue, being ascribed to two Megarics, is somewhat heterogeneous with respect to Plato’s thought, and for this reason it can be left without comment.³³ Confirmation of this is provided by an anomaly within this very selection, for the Anonymous leaves aside the whole prologue apart from a short passage, 142d1–3. This section, however, encompasses Socrates’ positive evaluation of Theaetetus, and for this reason it might have been regarded as a surrogate of a direct intervention by Socrates. All in all, then, the Anonymous does select passages to be commented upon within the *Theaetetus*, and he does so according to a specific principle. This effectively explains a clearer structural feature of the *Commentary*, namely that Theaetetus’ interventions are systematically left without comment. Indeed, just as the prologue is left aside because it does not reflect Plato’s thought, it is likely that Theaetetus’ interventions are regarded as not really testifying to the philosophical argument Plato produces *through* Socrates. This has both an external and an internal explanation. Indeed, the author seems to follow a Middle Platonist commonplace, according to which only some characters are really the witnesses of Plato’s thought – and, among them, Socrates of course plays a privileged role.³⁴ However, the commentator does not rely on this idea as an apri-

³² The prologue that the Anonymous takes as authentic is that which is transmitted also by our manuscripts: see Tulli (2011).

³³ This form of selectivity has been noted to some extent by Seldey (1997), who, however, does not draw from this any conclusion about the form of the *Commentary*.

³⁴ Diogenes Laertius (3.52), for instance, lists four spokesmen for Plato’s doctrine: Socrates, Timaeus, the Athenian and the Eleatic Stranger. This is confirmed (with some variations) by an anonymous introduction to Plato preserved in *POxy* 3219: for further remarks, see Tarrant (2000) 27–30. See also Numenius’ *fr.* 23, on the

oristic assumption. Rather, this shared view serves as the framework for a more interesting exegetical point, which is highlighted in the very first pages of the *Commentary*. As a matter of fact, the dialogue is said to have the specific philosophical aim of discussing the essence of science (2.39–45), and *in order to clarify this point* it must also deal with other issues, such as the criterion (2.21–23), and develop a complex enquiry taking into account different possible solutions; to put it briefly, the dialogue conceals a sort of progressive argument (3.1–28), which, however, is not addressed in all of its sections. So, Socrates' interventions progressively articulate an argument on a specific topic, that of the essence of science, but this implies that some passages of the dialogue, namely those falling outside the development of this argument, should be marginalized: *this* is the reason why Theaetetus' interventions are not taken into account. All in all, then, the *Anonymous Commentary* is selective in the specific (but substantial) sense that it leaves aside the prologue and all Theaetetus' interventions, based on a qualified conception of the dialogue as a thematic continuity developing through the progression of Socrates' arguments (I shall return to the implications of this aspect in the next section).

The partiality of Galen's *Commentary* is much more evident, for the very concept behind this work relies on the selection of a subject and its treatment in Plato's *Timaeus*; this commentary indicates that the structural boundaries of the genre allowed a Middle Platonist to apply such sharp selectivity. Galen was not the only author to produce purely thematic commentaries, however, and it is very likely that Adrastus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* dealt with the mathematical parts of the dialogue.³⁵

Although the evidence is scarce, then, one can state that it was possible to take into account just selected parts of a dialogue according to specific thematic interests – and, of course, these technical exegeses represent cases in which the selectivity allowed by the genre was particularly exploited, for most of the dialogue was left without comment. On the other hand, apart from these few exceptions, most of the extant sources testify to commentaries having no such programmatic technical focus; this leaves open the question of whether these writings dealt with all parts of the dialogue, and to what extent.

A fundamental cornerstone for addressing this issue is provided once again by Galen, who in *De Placitis Platonis et Hippocratis* (508.4–6) briefly hints at the extent to which Platonists had dealt with the last part of the *Timaeus*:

εἰς μὲν γὰρ τὰλλα πολλοῖς ὑπομνήματα γέγραπται καὶ τισὶ γ' αὐτῶν μακρότερον τοῦ προσήκοντος, εἰς ταῦτα δ' ὀλίγοι τε καὶ οὐδ' οὔτοι καλῶς ἔγραψαν.

On the other sections commentaries have been written by many authors, and in some cases they are much longer than appropriate, while on these sections only a few have written commentaries – and moreover they did not a good job.

Galen was active in the second half of the second century AD, and we can expect him to have had a very good grasp of the Platonist scholarship of his times.³⁶ If this was the case, he may be seen to provide quite a reliable view of Middle Platonism. Now, it would be unwarranted to read the apparent reference to commentaries on the other sections of the dialogue as marking a sharp distinction, that is by regarding these writings as ones *solely* devoted to other specific sections; as we have seen, purely thematic commentaries, such as that of Adrastus, were far from typical – or,

implicit function of Socrates' dialogue with Euthyphro in the homonymous dialogue.

³⁵ On Adrastus' *Commentary*, see Petrucci (2012b), proposing a collation between the main sources for this text (Theon's *Expositio* and Calcidius' *Commentary on the Timaeus*). Although Adrastus was a Peripatetic, he adopted Platonist exegetical methods in his *Commentary*:

see again Petrucci (2012b).

³⁶ Apart from his well-known, wide-ranging readings, Galen received a very good education in Platonist philosophy in Pergamon, under Albinus (*De propr. libr.* 19.16.10–15), and then became acquainted with Atticus' Platonism: see Baltes 1983.

at least, they are very scarcely attested. Galen's point must be, then, that almost all the commentaries on the *Timaeus* as a whole focused mainly on other sections of the dialogue, and some of them pushed this pattern so far as to *totally* disregard its last part, while others dealt with it poorly, that is cursorily and hence in an unsatisfactory way. Interestingly enough, this perfectly tallies with our sources,³⁷ which suggest that Platonists focused on the cosmogonic and psychogonic part of the *Timaeus* and had little interest in its last section, while nonetheless preserving some trace of exegesis devoted to this part.³⁸ To put it briefly, Middle Platonists writing a commentary on the whole of the *Timaeus* were in a position either to leave aside completely or (more reasonably) to pay just very limited attention to the last part of the dialogue.

This approach, however, concerns not only the medical parts of the *Timaeus* – which indeed address very specific issues – for a certain degree of selectivity clearly characterizes extant testimonies of Middle Platonist treatments of the prologue of the dialogue. Proclus' testimony on Severus and Longinus is very telling in this sense (*In Ti.* 1.204.16–27 = Sev. 3T = Long. *fr.* 55; tr. Tarrant (2007)):

Μέχρι δὴ τούτων συμπληρῶται τὸ τοῦ Τιμαίου προοίμιον, ὅπερ Σευῆρος μὲν οὐδὲ ἐξηγήσεως ἤξιωσε τὸ παράπαν, Λογγίνος δὲ οὐ πᾶν ἔλεγε περιττόν, ἀλλ' ὅσα παρειακυκλεῖται περὶ τῶν Ἀτλαντίνων καὶ τῶν τοῦ Αἰγυπτίου διηγήσεων, ὥστε καὶ εἰθῆται συνάπτειν τῇ Σωκράτους δεήσει τὴν ἀπαγγελίαν τοῦ Κριτίου, λέγω δὲ τῷ 'πάρειμί τε οὖν κεκοσμημένος ἐπ' αὐτὰ καὶ πάντων ἐτοιμότητος δέχεσθαι' (*Ti.* 20c) τὸ 'σκόπει δὴ τὴν τῶν ξενίων σοι διάθεσιν, ὃ Σώκρατες, ἧ διέθεμεν' (*Ti.* 27a). Πορφύριος δὲ καὶ Ἰάμβλιχος τῇ πάσῃ τοῦ διαλόγου προθέσει σύμφωνον ἀπέφηναν, ὃ μὲν μερικώτερον, ὃ δὲ ἐποπτικώτερον.

At this point the proem of the *Timaeus* is concluded. Severus did not think it worthy of commentary at all. Longinus said it was not all superfluous, only the embedded tale of the Atlantines and of the stories told by the Egyptian, so that he used to follow Socrates' request, I mean 'I am here dressed up for it and most ready of all to receive it', with Critias' description, I mean 'Then consider the type of arrangement we have made for your entertainment, Socrates'. Porphyry and Iamblichus, though, demonstrated that it was in harmony with the overall aim of the dialogue, the one in a less complete fashion, and the other more in a style of a full initiate.

Proclus' survey clearly detects two opposite approaches to the prologue: a Middle Platonist approach and a Neoplatonist one. Indeed, while the most relevant Neoplatonist commentators on the *Timaeus* – and, of course, Proclus himself – did engage in a careful exegesis of the whole prelude, the Middle Platonists are said to have paid attention to it only selectively and to very different extents. While Severus completely disregarded it (τὸ παράπαν), Longinus' partial interest implies, on the one hand, that a large section was essentially marginalized (20c–27a), but, on the other, that what precedes this section was taken into account quite carefully. It is not by chance that Longinus' fragments 45–58 all deal with the prelude, and this indicates that his interest in this section, however partial it may have been, was considerable and well reflected in his *Commentary*. All this testifies to the fact that there is a substantial fluctuation as to the treatment of the prelude of the *Timaeus*, and it is no accident that other Middle Platonists are credited with just cursory discussions of it: Atticus (*fr.* 16) seems to have been concerned with detecting the identity of the fourth missing interlocutor (*Ti.* 17a4–5),³⁹ while Numenius (*fr.* 37) was particularly interested in the philosophical meaning of the Atlantis myth (although it is not clear in what kind of writing Numenius dealt with the issue).

³⁷ Of course, this could be conditioned by the fact that Proclus' *Commentary on the Timaeus* is incomplete; nonetheless, it is noteworthy that we have no evidence of exegetical remarks on the medical sections apart from Galen's.

³⁸ See, for example, Taurus' cross reference in T30, quoted above in section II(b).

³⁹ See also Procl. *In Ti.* 1.20.9–10, on Dercyllides, to whom, however, our sources ascribe no commentary, but rather an extensive work (11 books) on the philosophy of Plato: Porph. *fr.* 92 Sodano.

One last piece of evidence is indirectly offered once again by Taurus' T30. As we have seen, this deals with *Timaeus* 31b, and Philoponus tells us that the text was included in the first book of Taurus' *Commentary*. Now, Taurus' exegeses of other short passages (such as T27 on *Ti.* 27c5) are fairly detailed, but, if such a treatment was applied to *all* sections of the dialogue, it would be impossible – for obvious material reasons – for *Timaeus* 31b to have been commented upon in the first book of Taurus' work.⁴⁰ So, it is impossible to argue that the first book of Taurus' commentary took into account *all* sections preceding *Timaeus* 31b with such highly detailed commentaries,⁴¹ and, given the importance which Taurus clearly ascribes to the cosmogonic passages, it is reasonable to suppose that he dealt with the prelude only in a very concise way (if at all).⁴²

Accordingly, although no standard attitude towards the *Timaeus* prelude can be detected (in contrast to the largely disregarded last part), it can be established that the structure of Middle Platonist commentaries allowed the authors either to completely leave the prelude without comment (as Severus did) or to deal only with some parts of it – without any fixed priorities – or, finally, to take it into account in its entirety, either cursorily or in a more careful way. But why did some Middle Platonists disregard the prelude? Here too Proclus' testimony proves important, because it points out why Porphyry and Iamblichus felt the need to deal extensively with this section: they regarded it (in contrast to the Middle Platonists) as τῆ πάσῃ τοῦ διαλόγου προθέσει σύμφωνον ('in harmony with the overall aim of the dialogue'). This implies that the Middle Platonists disregarded the prelude because they took it to be thematically heterogeneous with respect to the alleged core of the dialogue – which must reasonably be identified with its cosmologic and psychogonic section, with which almost all the Middle Platonists dealt. Significantly, the Middle Platonists who deal with the prelude seem to do so in order to draw from it philosophical elements which could be important for the following and thematically crucial core. After all, Longinus (for example *fr.* 48) and Numenius (*fr.* 37) discuss *Timaeus* 18d–e and the Atlantis myth, respectively, in order to illustrate Plato's view about the problem of the descent of human souls into the world and their moral status, while Atticus' interest in the identity of the fourth interlocutor (*fr.* 16) is related to his attempt to gain a better understanding of the dialogue *in its entirety*.

From all this, two fundamental conclusions follow. First, the Middle Platonists could deal with extensively, cursorily comment upon or completely leave aside even very extensive parts of a dialogue, depending on the potential contribution they could offer to the understanding of its philosophical core, that is, on their thematic relation to such a core. Second – and more generally – the Middle Platonists were willing to leave several and substantial sections of a dialogue without comment based on this thematic criterion; however, more nuanced approaches, such as a cursory treatment, were also commonly applied. At the same time, however partial Middle Platonist commentaries might be, only in exceptional cases (such as those of Severus and Galen) did they *completely* disregard entire sections of a dialogue; the usual policy appears to have consisted in not completely avoiding certain passages, but in devoting to them just very limited remarks, possibly making the most of these sections in relation to the thematic core. All in all, therefore, the Middle Platonist conception of commentary as a genre entailed a *potential* selectivity, even a radical one, but in most cases Middle Platonists wrote their commentaries in such a way as to touch upon – if only cursorily – most of the dialogue they were dealing with. This *qualified selectivity* would be both absolutely inconceivable in the framework of a running line-by-line commentary and inconsistent with a radically specialist structure; more generally, it reveals a specific conception of Plato's texts, namely a thematic one.

⁴⁰ For instance, a substantial running commentary such as Proclus' discusses this passage only in its third book. This conclusion is not affected by the fact that we cannot know whether Taurus' commentary also encompassed prolegomena at its beginning (see Mansfeld (1994) for a survey), for in that case the space for the analysis of

the first part of the dialogue would have been even shorter.

⁴¹ As Dillon (1977) 246 seems to suppose.

⁴² Göransson (1995) 59–60 suggests that Taurus' *Commentary* did not consider the prelude at all; while Dörrie (1973) 26 n.15 and Donini (1982) 65 take it to focus only on some crucial passages.

(d) Thematic nature

The preceding sections have already alluded to the peculiar thematic orientation of Middle Platonist commentaries, which determined and shaped their lemmatic and progressive nature and selectivity. First, it has been noted that this lemmatic structure does not imply that the correspondence between lemmata and their respective commentaries is managed according to a regular pattern. This is particularly clear when taking into account the *Anonymous Commentary on the Theaetetus*, which is characterized by considerable fluctuation in terms of the lengths of the focused commentaries: paraphrases (for example 8.11–17 or 21.13–24) and very limited remarks (for example 12.13–30, on three consecutive lemmata) alternate with wide-ranging discussions of various aspects of Plato's thought taking a lemma as their starting point (for example 44.41–45.40 or 58.12–59.34). Furthermore, the extent of the commentary does not depend on the length of the lemma commented upon; on the contrary, lemmata of the same length can receive very different treatments. So, the author was completely free to expand on certain passages while limiting himself to some clarifying remarks about other sections, and this must have been due to the fact that he regarded only some passages as actually being important with respect to the philosophical core of the dialogue. The very same logic also determines the progressiveness and selectivity of commentaries, as we have seen; even when following in principle the continuous order of a dialogue, Middle Platonists felt free not to comment on certain passages that were regarded as being thematically heterogeneous with respect to the philosophical core of the dialogue.

We also have other evidence of this key aspect; in this sense, Taurus' exegetical texts prove fundamental. As Aulus Gellius informs us, Taurus wrote a *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias* in more than one book. We have two testimonies about this text,⁴³ and one of them (T23) deals with the reasons justifying punishment. Gellius starts by listing three reasons identified by Taurus in the first book: κόλασις or νουθεσία (chastisement which aims to correct people who have acted wrongly), τιμωρία (redress designed to restore the dignity of someone who has suffered a wrong) and παράδειγμα (punishment which is meted out in an exemplary fashion in order to discourage other people from committing the same crime in the future). Taurus' contribution consists of denying that the second reason can be admitted, and he bases this claim on a specific passage of the *Gorgias*, namely 525b1–4, which is quoted verbatim.⁴⁴ Now, Gellius explicitly indicates that Taurus' discussion was contained in the first book of the *Commentary* (T23.5). However, Taurus' point is strictly and explicitly related to a passage, *Gorgias* 525b1–4, that occurs at the end of the dialogue. This implies that the exegetical structure of Taurus' commentary allowed him to insert an in-depth enquiry into a passage from the last part of the dialogue in the initial, or intermediate, part of the commentary. We are not in a position to guess what this passage was, but the reason for anticipating the discussion of *Gorgias* 525b1–4 must be that a previous section raised a *philosophical problem*, namely that of the notion of punishment, which could only be solved by anticipating an analysis of *Gorgias* 525b1–4 in the thematic discussion. So, this thematic arrangement must have compelled Taurus to discuss *Gorgias* 525b1–4 in relation to a passage somehow touching upon the theme at issue, a passage which must have been inserted before the section where one would expect to find it, based on the order of Plato's text – and, in all likelihood, when discussing the last part of the dialogue, Taurus did not repeat his analysis.⁴⁵

⁴³ One is T23 (= Aul. Gell. *Noctes Atticae* 7.14) and the other is dubious: in *Noctes Atticae* 10.22 Gellius reports a complex interpretation of Callicles' description of the philosopher, which is taken to have philosophical importance inasmuch as, through Callicles' words, Plato describes a bad, or false, philosopher. The complexity of this explanation and the fact that Gellius refers to Taurus' *Commentary on the Gorgias* elsewhere make it likely that this passage too indirectly stems from Taurus' work, and thus I include it in my collection of Taurus' texts as

T24: see Tarrant (1996) 178–84; Petrucci (2018) 200–01.

⁴⁴ Gellius mentions just two possibilities, which are probably those proposed by Taurus: this might be due either to the fact that the second reason is *omnino parva et contemptu digna* or to the dialogic context, since *there*, that is in *Gorgias* 525b1–4, Plato is interested in punishment as applied in the afterlife. In this sense, Gellius' dismissal does not testify to the fact that Taurus also did the same: see Tarrant (1996) 184.

⁴⁵ This is a way to make better sense of previous

These provisional conclusions are confirmed by extant fragments of Taurus' *Commentary on the Timaeus*. In general terms, Taurus regarded relevant passages of the dialogue as being strictly related to specific philosophical puzzles (ζητήματα), as the beginning of T26 shows. This is the well-known text encompassing the list of four non-temporal meanings of γενητόν ('generated'), which is presented as an analysis of *Timaeus* 28b6–8.⁴⁶ Now, although the textual focus is clear, Taurus opens his discussion with a reference to the *problem* of the generation of the world (ζητουμένου δέ, εἰ κατὰ Πλάτωνα ἀγένητός ἐστιν ὁ κόσμος, κτλ; 'as to this problem, that is of whether according to Plato the world is ungenerated, etc. '); between a passage and a philosophical theme a strict link is detectable, which an exegete must exploit by developing discussions of these themes in correspondence to related textual sections. This is even clearer in the case of T30. The passage which Taurus discusses, *Timaeus* 31b, in principle concerns only the reciprocal proportional arrangement of the elementary bodies, and indeed Taurus accounts for it in the transmitted text. Nonetheless, in the same text he argues against Aristotle's and Theophrastus' arguments for the existence of the fifth body by appealing (as we have seen) to the correspondence between sense perceptions and the elements, namely to the fact that smell corresponds not to a fifth element, but to a mixture of air and water. Interestingly enough, the exclusion of a fifth body is to some extent necessary in order to make good sense of *Timaeus* 31b, since its existence could undermine the four-term relationship between the elements; at the same time, however, this is a thematic implication, which the text at issue does not justify in itself. In other words, Taurus seems to take the passage as thematically addressing the core of Plato's theory of the elementary bodies, and *for this reason* he explores it from a wide-ranging perspective in relation to the commentary on the theory. This also has the obvious implication that the commentary on this passage serves as a philosophical discussion of other passages, and especially *Timaeus* 55c4–6, which could be regarded as stating the existence of the fifth body.

So, at least to some extent, the commentary on a specific lemma took a textual section as a starting point in order to address wider philosophical problems, and, as a consequence, it also entailed the analysis of other passages, which occur elsewhere in the dialogue. This does not imply that passages evoked and discussed in commentaries on other sections were not treated *at all* when Taurus came to deal with them, since, as we have seen, Taurus acknowledges that he will discuss *Timaeus* 66d–e (κατὰ τὸν τόπον γενόμενοι; 'when we have reached the suitable passage') in due course; once he reached *Timaeus* 66d–e, he must have treated this passage from other points of view, for its cosmological import had already been analysed in correspondence with the lemma devoted to the theme.

Therefore, a thematic focus characterized and shaped Middle Platonist commentaries, and especially conditioned their lemmatic structure, progressiveness and selectivity. If their general structure is conceived this way, moreover, it is much easier to understand why it was also acceptable for exegetes to write properly 'specialist' commentaries, such as Galen's. These can be regarded as adopting, and exploiting, specific structural features of standard commentaries, but they do not apply a thematic focus for an analysis of the whole dialogue; rather, they select *a priori* a specific section that contains all the dialogue has to say about the theme the author wishes to discuss.

suggestions, which understate the link between Taurus' argument and *Gorgias* 525b1–4, and which are untenable unless one interprets the Middle Platonist commentaries in the terms I am proposing. Indeed, Taurus' remarks could hardly have been inserted in correspondence with the commentary on the passage where the word τιμωρία occurs for the first time, that is *Gorgias* 472d8 (see, for example, Lakmann (1995) 90), because Taurus' focus is not on the meaning of the word τιμωρία, but on the notion of punishment. Similarly, a focused commentary on *Gorgias* 477e is not a good candidate either (Dillon

(1977) 247), since this section still concerns punishment in *this* life, while one of Taurus' arguments excluding the second meaning is centred on reference to the afterlife, which is in turn the core of *Gorgias* 525b1–4. It has also been proposed that the passage occurred in the commentary's preface: Dillon (1977) 247; Tarrant (1996) 185–86. Although not impossible, this is a highly speculative hypothesis, devoid of any textual foundation.

⁴⁶ On this passage, see Gioè (2002) *ad loc.*; Petrucci (2016b); (2018) *passim*.

III. The structure and philosophical orientation of Middle Platonist commentaries

Middle Platonist commentaries were neither line-by-line running commentaries nor specialist ones; rather, it is possible to discover a more specific – and complex – methodological core emerging from extant sources. Thus, while being lemmatic and progressive, they present such a flexible application of these features as to prevent us from identifying them as line-by-line running commentaries. Indeed, it has emerged that selectivity was as fundamental a feature as lemmatic structure and progressiveness, and that there was no standard approach to the selection of lemmata to be treated. All these fluctuations, however, depend on the thematic nature of these writings; adherence to the philosophical issue which the Middle Platonist commentator regarded as the thematic key of the dialogue was the criterion through which the commentary acquired its shape and philosophical focus. In such a way a dialogue could be regarded as the progressive yet non-consecutive articulation of philosophically dense nuclei; the author's attention fluctuated – even to the point of completely omitting parts of a dialogue – depending on the philosophical import of each passage and the overall philosophical orientation ascribed to the dialogue being commented upon.

From a general point of view, the fundamental conclusion is that the four formal cornerstones of Middle Platonist commentaries – namely, a lemmatic structure, progressiveness, selectivity and a thematic nature – are intrinsically intertwined and influence each other, since each can be applied to different extents on a case-by-case basis. The lemmatic and progressive structure implies neither that there is a standard ratio between the lengths of lemmata and their commentaries nor that all passages deserve enquiry; on the contrary, the thematic nature determines a huge variability in the extent of discussions and justifies 'consistent irregularities' in the approach to a text. In turn, selectivity and the thematic nature of the text do not really eclipse its lemmatic and progressive structure; the dialogue is still regarded as a continuity of passages, although their philosophical relevance is mirrored by their differentiated treatment. This also entails that the structure at issue can result in pieces of exegesis which are very different, at least at face value. For instance, Galen's *Commentary on the Timaeus* exploits selectivity and thematic focus, which implies restriction of the lemmata taken into account but also full consideration of that part of the dialogue which is isolated *a priori*. On the other hand, the *Anonymus Commentary on the Theaetetus* considers the whole dialogue a continuous argument by Socrates and, though appearing to be a line-by-line running commentary, it is selective in systematically avoiding those sections which do not include Socrates' words – or what can be taken to be Socrates' opinion. These sources represent two very different – yet consistent, by my reading – ways of exploiting selectivity, but it is likely that there was a range of more nuanced applications of the structure just outlined. Here, the first advantage of the model I am outlining clearly emerges, for it allows us to explain consistently *all* extant Middle Platonist commentaries as various ways to inflect and exploit a single methodological perspective and a single literary genre. Indeed, a Middle Platonist commentary could (in principle) start and end at any point of a dialogue, depending on the main philosophical theme(s) the exegete detected in it. It would progressively follow Plato's text by focusing on its lemmata, but would do so by applying different levels of analysis and (potentially) by marginalizing lemmata which were not regarded as relevant in the philosophical *and* textual web which the exegete detected throughout the narrative. If one had to represent graphically such a structure with respect to the text, it could never be as a straight line running parallel to the text; rather, an irregular wave-like form would be required in order to represent alternating in-depth discussions of certain lemmata, cursory exegetical hints at other passages and even the complete obscuration of extensive textual sections. This wave-like structure can effectively integrate and resolve the opposition between a line-by-line running commentary and a specialist one.

The second advantage is more general, and concerns the possibility of more firmly establishing the place of Middle Platonist commentaries in the framework of the literary genres adopted in post-Hellenistic Platonism. Indeed, Middle Platonist exegetical treatises share both a strong thematic orientation and a special focus on textual sections. The first aspect clearly forms the base of both

thematic writings, such as Plutarch's *De animae procreatione*⁴⁷ or Theon's *Expositio*, which are conceived as focused analyses of specific issues raised by Plato's texts, and zetematic works, which collect several discussions on rather well-defined topics. The second aspect, while clearly important also in thematic treatises, acquires particular significance in zetematic writings, which were generally structured as discussions of a textual section that was isolated as a lemma and commented on separately.⁴⁸ Nine out of the ten Plutarchan *Platonic Questions* are (thematic) commentaries on lemmata,⁴⁹ which are recalled through a paraphrase and vary in length. Albinus' argument for a sempiternalistic cosmogony (12T) is based on the wording of *Timaeus* 27c5,⁵⁰ while Proclus informs us that his idea that Plato formulated his δόγματα in two ways, εἰκοτολογικῶς ('as a likely discourse') and ἐπιστημονικῶς ('scientifically'), has *Timaeus* 29b4–5 as a textual basis (14T).⁵¹ Harpokration⁵² applied such an approach to other dialogues; he defined the divine lover by directly engaging with the wording of a passage of the *First Alcibiades* (104e) and discussed the implications of two passages of the *Phaedo* (66c7–8 and 68b8–c3) by emphasizing and exploiting the way in which Plato had phrased them.⁵³ In other words, the reference to and focused treatment of textual sections regarded as having a huge and thematically consistent philosophical significance were fundamental features of Middle Platonists' exegesis in general, and, according to my reading, were also exploited in their commentaries, determining their structure.

But there is also more to this, for all aspects characterizing Middle Platonist commentaries and their overall interactions highlight a specific philosophical orientation. A lemmatic commentary exploits the idea that each passage plays a constructive role in the philosophical structure of the dialogue. At the same time (and in contrast to zetematic writings), the practice of progressively following the order of a dialogue by detecting relevant passages to be analysed implies that the dialogue itself was deliberately structured by Plato in such a way as to make some specific claims: a dialogue consists in the progressive unfolding of philosophical argument, and this unfolding is exploited lemma after lemma. However, if not all the passages of a dialogue are considered, but only those which are thematically related and relevant, then Plato's dialogues are conceived not as argumentative wholes, but as an orderly web of literarily and philosophically dense nuclei, which Plato himself connected by establishing specific links: the dialogue is a literary structure within which a deeper philosophical and argumentative structure is embedded. This structure is, in turn, a thematic one: select passages interact in a certain way and according to a certain logic, because they address a certain philosophical theme to varying extents and from different angles.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Moreover, as widely known, *De animae procreatione* is organized as an extensive discussion of two lemmata: *Ti.* 35a1–b4, quoted at 1012B8–C10, and 35b4–36b5, quoted at 1027B1–9.

⁴⁸ On the nature of zetematic exegesis, see especially Opsomer (1996); (2011).

⁴⁹ The only exception to this model is the fifth question, which more generally concerns the solids which Plato associated with the elements.

⁵⁰ See Gioè (2002) *ad loc.*

⁵¹ There is no evidence to suggest that Albinus wrote any commentary; his exegetical remarks may well have been contained in his Ὑποτυπώσεις Πλατωνικῶν δογμάτων (4T). On the Platonist exegetical practice of taking a Platonic passage as a 'starting point', see Erler (2016).

⁵² Harpokration wrote a very extensive exegetical text on Plato, which was not, however, a commentary (1T); rather, it is likely that it consisted of a series of 'questions': Dillon (1971) 131; Dörrie and Baltés (1993) 181.

⁵³ See especially 4T (Olympiodorus informs us that Harpokration proposed his exegesis ἐνθαῦτα γενόμενος – 'once he reached this passage') and 6T (Plato's phrase is quoted as the direct object of Harpokration's interpretation).

⁵⁴ These ideas could, after all, be consistent also with a Neoplatonist perspective, and, indeed, a lemmatic structure and progressiveness also characterize Neoplatonist commentaries; they were generally, however, line-by-line running commentaries, as has been widely demonstrated: Lamberz (1987); Hadot (1997); (2004); Hoffmann (2006); Runia and Share (2008) 4–8. At the same time, Neoplatonist commentaries regarded all passages of a dialogue as being thematically intertwined; as we have seen, this is why Porphyry and Iamblichus paid attention to the prelude of *Timaeus*, and it is not by chance that the Anonymous *Prolegomena* (especially 15.1–23) illustrate a conception of Plato's dialogues as organic wholes mirroring the world's perfection; on which, see the discussion and survey of Motta (2014) 63–

All this has one final philosophical implication, allowing us to grasp the deep meaning of Middle Platonist exegesis. Although all the passages which are regarded as worthy of scrutiny in a commentary are interwoven, forming a comprehensive structure, priority can be ascribed to some of them that have a particular influence over the way Plato formulated his views; commenting on a dialogue amounts to detecting its internal thematic articulation, i.e. the way in which passages mutually interact to build up a consistent doctrine. If this interpretation is correct, arguing through a commentary is not just a matter of simply interpreting a set of passages. On the contrary, given that commenting upon a dialogue in such a way implies selecting its thematically fundamental nuclei and highlighting their correct articulation, and given that this amounts to shaping a specific doctrine out of these passages, exegesis becomes a formal way to produce *philosophical arguments*, for each exegesis can be evaluated on the basis of some objective parameters, such as internal consistency, fitness to integrate all thematically related passages and compliance with *all* related core texts. In other words, by establishing a hierarchy and qualified interaction between thematically relevant passages, a specific doctrine is shaped, entailing a consistent internal economy and a specific relationship with its textual foundations.

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72). Of course, Neoplatonist commentaries too were structured according to a certain flexibility. For instance, it has been emphasized that Porphyry’s and Iamblichus’ commentaries diverge in several methodological respects – for example in *In Ti.* 1.204.24–27 Proclus describes Porphyry’s exegesis as μερικώτερον (‘in a less complete fashion’), as opposed to that of Iamblichus, which is εποπτικώτερον, i.e. ‘more in a style of a full initiate’: see Périin (1974) – and this implies that the overall structure of Neoplatonist commentaries admitted substantial differences in each author’s application of it: see also, again, Hadot (2004). However, although it would be unwarranted to say that Neoplatonist commentaries *always* commented on every single word of a text, they did usually divide the *whole* text of a dialogue into lemmata; omissions – if any – were quite rare and not related to a

thematic selection. This is, for instance, the structure which immediately emerges from Proclus’ commentaries on the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*. Although both texts are incomplete, it is certain that the *Parmenides* covered the whole dialogue (see Segonds and Luna (2007) xxxvi–xxxvii) and that a pattern is regularly applied according to which the dialogues are divided into lemmata without any gaps. One could argue that this is not the case with the so-called *Commentary on the Republic*. Now, although the ancient tradition designates this work as a υπόμνημα, it is clear that it was not conceived as such by Proclus himself, who in this text even addresses his readers as though presenting a lecture (1.1.5–7, 5.3–21); significantly, the title of the first essay is συνανάγνωσις (‘reading together’): see Mansfeld (1994) 22–23; and, more generally on this text, Sheppard (2013).

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