REVIEW

Päivi Mehtonen 2003. *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature: Theory and Practice from Quintilian to the Enlightenment. Translated by Robert MacGilleon***.** Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemian Toimituksia Humaniora 320. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

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The earthy *Dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf* would seem an unlikely source of information and inspiration for a reviewer who is setting out to appraise a deeply thoughtful book on obscurity, and its opposites of clarity and perspicuity, in language, literature, and thought from antiquity through the eighteenth (and maybe even twenty-first) century. And yet two moments in the Latin text (perhaps written first in the late twelfth century, certainly attested only in the fifteenth, and at its peak of popularity in the sixteenth) would seem to offer practical measures for dealing with the puzzling relationship between lightness and darkness as well as between whiteness and blackness.

Both instances take place in the second part (Chapters 4 and 6) when the quick-witted and coarse peasant Marcolf has been constrained by none other than King Solomon, of biblical renown, to re-

main awake with him through the night. The peasant falls asleep repeatedly, but each time, when taken to task by the king, he responds by declaring that he is not sleeping but thinking; and each time, to establish that he has indeed been pondering, he makes an assertion that the king refuses to accept without proof. Once Marcolf argues that a magpie has as many white as black feathers, which is demonstrated by counting the feathers on an actual magpie. Then he advocates that nothing is whiter than day, to which the king cites milk as an exception. In this case Marcolf positions a jar filled with milk near the door of the king's bedroom, blocks all sources of light, and waits until the king haplessly puts his foot into the jar, spatters himself with milk, and falls down, which the peasant takes as a q.e.d. of what he earlier asserted, since the king could have seen by daylight but could not do so by milk. Alas, such an empirical approach is not feasible for those whose uncertainties are verbal. Chiaroscuro in art or literature does not have plumage to be tallied, and, perhaps unfortunately, it is not workable to resolve disputes with other interpreters over meaning, whether poetic, philosophical, or of any other sort, by arranging for them (or oneself) to take a pratfall.

Obscurity has been recurrently the central problem or at least a major challenge in almost every area connected with words. Rhetoricians have adumbrated (sic) techniques for attaining clarity and avoiding darkness. Poets have sought to achieve concision, but without thereby suffering a loss of intelligibility. In the famously brief but unobscure words of Horace (*Ars poetica* 25-26), "breuis esse laboro,/ obscurus fio." Believers and would-be believers have endeavored to differentiate between prophecy and madness, while everyone, not solely philosophers and literary theorists, has had to draw a line between sense and nonsense. One man's obscurity is another's poetry, just as one man's lucidity is another's prosaicism, and, to stretch the pattern a bit further, one man's sublimity or profundity is another's mediocrity or even gibberish—and the same measures hold true not only for poems and novels but also for the literary criticism that deals with them.

In this book Päivi Mehtonen grapples with all these issues and more. In her effort to shed light on darkness, she pursues the history of the concept of obscurity from antiquity, especially ancient Rome, down to the Enlightenment. (Here it should be pointed out that she does not offer a conventional historical exposition, since although she proceeds in roughly chronological order, she often interweaves aperçus that relate to other times.) The latter terminus is chosen not be-

cause it represents to her the end of the tradition, but rather because she believes that the the light of the Enlightenment would not have been conceivable without its equal and opposite, namely, obscurity.

In the first part of this book ("Language, Literature and the Trivium") Mehtonen situates theories of obscuritas and related concepts within the traditional disciplines of language, to wit, the framework of the verbal or logical arts, which she understands as comprehending poetics and Bible exegesis as well as the conventional trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic. These were the triad with which for all students the liberal arts began and with which for many (maybe even most) they ended. She identifies continua of theories about obscurity that may have originated and certainly endured in these three arts.

For her, the history of obscurity has its foundations in ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric, which (as was demonstrated long ago by Ernst Robert Curtius in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, first published in German in 1948). With good reason, she puts at the center of her consideration both Cicero and Quintilian (especially *Institutio oratoria* Book 8). She views Cicero as having exercised a predominant influence in the Middle Ages, Quintilian in the early modern.

Many periods in culture have had a yin and yang of clear and obscure styles. In antiquity the contrast is often presented as having been between the clarity of Atticism and the obscurity of Asianism. At the risk of oversimplifying, Quintilian could be said to be an Atticist. The paradox is that Atticists and Asianists alike participated in a rhetorical culture which aimed to train orators who expressed themselves primarily in prose but which relied ultimately upon principles that were distilled from oral-traditional poetry as found in Homer. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a case in point. It codified in writing practices that were (or had been earlier) found orally. Or, to state the matter differently, it first described what then prescribed: it isolated existing traits and exaggerated or elevated them. If Aristotle's position vis-à-vis Homer is complicated, a much later rhetorician such as Quintilian relates even more problematically to poetry, both of earlier literature and of his own contemporaries.

The Roman rhetorical heritage of Ciceronianism and Quintilianism was not displaced but rather complemented by the Scriptures of Christianity. If the Greeks and Romans had had difficulties applying an ultimately Homer-based or at least poetry-based rhetoric to their needs for abiding tenets of self-expression in political and legal con-

texts, the Christians of late antiquity and the Middle Ages faced an even greater test in needing to accommodate that Greco-Roman system to the complexities of the Bible—and not simply the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek but rather as altered by being translated into Latin and eventually into vernacular languages. Gone were the fora in which politicians or lawyers plied their trade in words, but challengingly present were the new communal settings of churches, where preachers had to find their own words in which to convey the Word.

The language, proverbs, images, metaphors, and so forth of the original biblical texts cried out insistently for interpretation, partly merely to be understood, partly to enable a balance between the attractions of multifarious orthodox understandings and the pitfalls of equally numerous heretical misconstruals. Augustine, the archrhetorician of Latin Christendom, sought to impose limits upon the range of possible interpretation and to set forth concepts and methods that would enable the powers of sign theory to be brought to bear upon the obscurities of the Bible. His *On Christian Doctrine* is the canonical treatise on these matters. It extended to the interpretative enterprises of biblical exegesis, preaching, and theology techniques that had been undertaken in rhetoric so as to fulfill the expressive missions of speechmaking. The sections on Augustine in this book (especially 86-90) could have been elongated considerably, for instance by giving greater coverage to the ways in which medieval dialectic broadened the methods the bishop of Hippo had advocated. Likewise, it might have been worth attending more fully to the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, since the good doctor of the Church was conditioned by them as well as by Cicero and the Bible. In general Platonism and its revivals receive short shrift, which in the treatment of the Middle Ages means that so-called Chartrianism is nearly invisible in the book.

The second part ("Philosophy and the Rise of Metapoetics and Metarhetoric") takes the seventeenth century as its point of departure, by examining obscurity and its congeners within Cartesianism and the Enlightenment. Here Mehtonen situates obscurity above all in philosophy and science, which made clarity a desideratum and which distinguished their own objectives and styles from the unclarity or obscurity of poetry. Pulling a rhetorical rabbit out of the hat, she demonstrates in a closing chapter on the Scottish philosopher George Campbell that Quintilianism was alive and well in 1776. At least in the ratiocinations of this eighteenth-century philosopher and rhetori-

cian (who has become rather forgotten and even obscure), an ambition for clarity comes together with an effort to evolve a method for interpreting obscure language and literature. To conclude the book, she highlights as being not just metaphorically but really nonsensical the basic contrast between the practical approach toward obscurity maintained in the long-lived ancient rhetorical tradition and the postmodern view of language and literature.

Just to be clear (so to speak), *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature* is an original work, not a review of scholarship. For the latter the shortcut would be the entry on "Obscuritas" in Gert Ueding, ed. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 6 (2003). By the same token, the specialist who seeks out Mehtonen's book and expects to find anything approaching the entire bibliography within a given area will be disappointed. Similarly, many readers may wish for more details on many of the topics covered: with a text that runs not much more than 200 pages, the book ends up having only ten or so to spare for each century within its chronological compass. For me the compression is as much an advantage as a disadvantage. By the same token, I believe that the zigzagging between the past and the present may be slightly offputting to some medievalists, who would have preferred a more linear way of proceeding (and more coverage to parts of the past that have had to be restricted), but that it has the potential benefit of making the book more appealing to (post)modernist readers in general and to comparatists in particular—not because Mehtonen sought to establish specious relevancies, but rather because she found between ancient or medieval conceptions on the one hand and modern or postmodern ones on the other parallels that she thought attested an ongoing tradition. The reader will not be disappointed who wishes to find an often elegant expression of one individual's ambitiously probing engagement with the obscurity that not only prefaced modernity but that in fact remains an ever-present, if under- or even unrecognized, undercurrent in it.