

Textual Obscurity in the Middle Ages

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When one has "figured out" the meaning of a dream, one has lost touch with the aliveness and elusiveness of the experience of dreaming; in its place one has created a flat, bloodless decoded message.¹

Obscurity has been recognized as a component or aspect, a possibility, of discourse since the very beginnings of European culture. The word has numerous connotations, some of which contradict one another, and perhaps refers to a set of ideas rather than to a single idea. Nevertheless, as this volume shows, the notion is crucial for the overall conception of reality and its exploration reveals new features of medieval life and thought.

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The English word "obscurity" belongs to an ancient semantic field that is particularly multifaceted in the Sanskrit language, for example, where the metaphorical meanings of the words for "obscurity" fall into three different groups which expand in various directions the concrete sense of darkness:

- 1) Obscurity as suffering
- 2) Obscurity as a burden
- 3) Obscurity as a secret

The first group focuses on the idea of suffering, torment and hopelessness in connection with a situation of obscurity. Sanskrit *klistatva* "obscurity (of a text)" is an apt example. It is derived from the main form *klišhta*, which means "being distressed, tormented" and, used rhetorically, "not easily intelligible." The word comes from an Indo-European root **kleik-* "to pull with pain" connected to the Slavonic root **kliša* "pliers, scissors." In other words, the obscurity of a text expressed by the word *klistatva* is something that causes pain and torment, an uneasiness

¹ Thomas H. Ogden, "The Dialectically Constituted/Decentered Subject of Psychoanalysis. I. The Freudian Subject," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 73 (1992): 521.

which provokes suffering.² The same sense of deprivation and ignorance of wisdom can be discovered in the Sanskrit word *tāmas* "darkness, gloom, obscurity," which can be used to refer to mental darkness and ignorance. Its negative meaning is reinforced by the idea that *tāmas* is one of the three constituents of the creation, the one that causes heaviness, ignorance and, in general, all irrational states of mind (pride, lust, etc.). The word is also used for the obscuration, the movement from light into darkness, of the sun or moon in eclipses. The word does not derive from the Indo-European root **tem(a)-*, *temes-* "darkness," which can be compared, for example, with Latin *tenebrae* and Old High German *demar* "darkness," or German *Dämmerung*.³

The second group into which the metaphorical meanings of the words for "obscurity" in Sanskrit fall is connected with the idea of something overwhelming and oppressive. This is the case of Sanskrit *atibhāra*, which means "excessive burden, excessive obscurity (of a sentence)." Since *-bhāra* comes from an Indo-European root **bher-* "to bring" (compare Latin *ferō* or Gothic *bairan*) and the Sanskrit prefix *ati-* is used with nouns and adjectives to add the sense of "excessive, extraordinary," the ultimate connotation for obscurity in the form *atibhāra* is clear. When *atibhāra* is used in a rhetorical context connected with language, the obscurity of a sentence is perceived in a negative way as bringing with it an overwhelming burden.⁴ A similar semantic context can be proposed for the Sanskrit term *andhātāmisra*, which is used to refer to the complete darkness of the soul. The term is connected to the word-root *andhā* "darkness, turbid water" and derives from the Indo-European root **andho-* "blind, obscure," whose meaning is suggested by the Latin word *andabata*—which Varro and Cicero considered a loan-

² Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit – English Dictionary Etymologically and Philologically Arranged* (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995) [first ed. 1899], 324; Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, I (Tübingen: Francke, 2002⁴) [first ed. 1959], 602.

³ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit*, 438; Pokorny, *Indogermanisches*, 1063; Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975²¹) [first ed. 1884], 120; Alois Walde and Johann Baptist Hoffmann, *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1938³) [first ed. 1906], 664.

⁴ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit*, 12; Pokorny, *Indogermanisches*, 128; Winfred Lehmann, *A Gothic Etymological Dictionary* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 57.

word from Gallican—which refers to a gladiator who fights without eye-slits in his helm.⁵

The third and last group into which the metaphorical meanings of the words for “obscurity” in Sanskrit fall is represented by the Sanskrit word *gūdhātva* “obscurity of sense.” It derives from the main word *gūdhā* “covered, hidden, invisible, secret, a secret place or mystery,” and is related to the derivative form *gūdhārtha* “the hidden of mystic sense, having a hidden meaning.” The word *gūdhā* comes from an Indo-European root **gheugh-*, **ghugh-* “to hide; to do something in secret,” and is related to the Avestic *guz-* “to hide” or Old Danish *gyg* “someone who lives (hidden) in the underworld.”⁶

The metaphorical meanings of the words for “obscurity” in Sanskrit thus suggest that obscurity is a negative aspect of communication which causes suffering or is considered a burden but is also a complex of knowledge shared and maintained in secrecy by a selected group.

This connection with something secret and mysterious is represented in ancient Greek by the verb *κρύπτω* “to hide,” which derives from the Indo-European root **krā[u]*-, **krāu-*, **krū-* “to hide.”⁷ From the Greek *κρύπτω* comes the substantive *κρυφίότης* “obscurity, secrecy.” The other Greek word for “obscurity” is *σκοτεινός, σκοτεινότης*. The Indo-European root of these words is **skot-* “shadow” (Gothic *skadus*, Old English *sceadu*), which shows its fundamental connection with an optical context,⁸ and it can be used figuratively to refer to something that obstructs the discernment of knowledge and thus creates anxiety and fear. The main word, *σκότος*, is always used in connection with communication expressing a negative feeling; it underlines obscurity due to the lack of clarity in the communication or in the speaker but also due to the absence of knowledge.

The semantic field for “obscurity” in other Indo-European languages is based on words that have a chromatic connection to the colors brown or black or that derive from words connected with smoke or mist. Latin *obscurus*, for example, derives from Indo-European *(*s*)*kew-*, **skewā*, **skū-* “to cover” and can be understood to mean what is covered or hid-

⁵ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit*, 44; Pokorny, *Indogermanisches*, 41; Walde and Hoffmann, *Lateinisches*, 46.

⁶ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit*, 360–61; Pokorny, *Indogermanisches*, 450.

⁷ Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1968), 589; Pokorny, *Indogermanisches*, 617.

⁸ Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique*, 1022; Pokorny, *Indogermanisches*, 957; Lehmann, *A Gothic*, 307.

den by darkness. Latin *obscuritas* thus means something which is protected or hidden.

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Any text may be obscure (or a source of suffering, a burden, or a secret—in the other meanings of the word) depending on the context, the interpretative framework in which it is placed. Consequently, clarifications of obscurity also depend on contexts and interpretative frameworks: the explanation or solution puts an end to the enigma, turns the obscurity into clarity—but only within the particular environment in which it was perceived as obscure in the first place. The question of what constitutes a successful interpretation or solution to an obscurity is, again, dependent on the context: must the solution produce general consent, or is it enough to find one that simply pleases the interpreter himself or herself? Must it take into account as many aspects of the text as possible, or is it enough to address its most troubling feature? One interpretative community may be puzzled by different features of a text from another, and thus the same text may be obscure in different communities for different reasons.

Texts that were clear in their original contexts, that is, texts that operated smoothly in their original community, are liable to become obscure when transported into a new community, one with different rules and expectations. Obscurity is in fact a violation of expectations, rules, or order within a particular framework. This is especially apparent when one deals with texts from the past: they all tend to seem obscure and in need of explanation to us. Of course, some texts are generally perceived as more obscure than others because some expectations are more generally shared than others. For example, if a text violates the grammatical rules of a language, it will strike more readers as obscure than if it violates semantic rules or simply does not follow the current stylistic trends.

The solutions to obscurities depend on the available tools and competencies and dealing with obscurity may transform the community that does so. If it lacks the tools and competences to solve the enigma, the community may appropriate it, actualize it, or establish new rules that will accommodate it. In this way, either the enigma itself or the interpretative framework in which it is set is transformed in order to produce a solution. Thus, obscurity is very productive of change.

Obscurity may, from another point of view, be seen as the normal state of affairs: this world is in fact naturally obscure and ambiguous.

The human desire to impose order and system on it results inevitably in only partial and temporary solutions. Every system produces only partial order and leaves part of reality unexplained and obscure. Attempts to explain the obscure leftovers bring about new systems which will inevitably fail to explain yet other aspects of reality. Reality is thus a dynamic space on which we impose changing concepts of what is normal and what is exceptional, what is clear and what is obscure, what is central and what is marginal, and our focus regularly shifts between the center—the canon—and the margins.

The history of the perception and treatment of a textual obscurity can tell us a great deal about the interpretative communities through which texts move. The texts that a community deemed worthy of interpretation were surely not those that simply seemed the most obscure. They were those that were considered both obscure *and* meaningful, that is, interpretable; those whose obscurity could be clarified and made useful in a particular environment. The appropriation of the obscure text aimed at achieving something and eventually gaining some power in the community. It is thus worthwhile to study what texts were considered obscure under what conditions, and in what ways their obscurity was treated. Some texts seem to have presented a continuous challenge to interpretation while others were explained once and the explanation was accepted. Is it possible to identify what constitutes clarity—what makes an interpretation acceptable—at least within a given community? Is it possible to specify the origin of the feeling that a particular aspect of a text is significant and needs to be interpreted? Why were some texts more likely to be chosen for interpretation than others?

Modern Western readers of medieval texts often find them obscure. Some of this obscurity is accidental and inevitable and is due to the historical and cultural distance that separates them from medieval authors. It comes from the disappearance of the material and social contexts in which these works were written, the loss of their linguistic contexts, the loss of sources, our ignorance of certain codes that may have governed their production, the vagaries of the transmission of these texts over the centuries, and so on.

Some of this accidental obscurity would, of course, have rendered medieval texts obscure for medieval readers as well. A poorly transmitted, twelfth-century French text might, that is, have been even more obscure to a fifteenth-century Polish reader than it is to a modern French one. Even when allowances have been made for the historical and cultural distance between modern readers and medieval authors, however,

many medieval texts seem to be willfully and frustratingly obscure. Some of this frustration, at least, is due to significant differences between modern readers' attitudes towards textual obscurity and those of medieval readers and authors, who appear to have had a higher tolerance for textual obscurity than we do. They even seem to have viewed obscurity as desirable and a virtue in certain texts and certain contexts. Textual obscurity, that is, was an accepted and inherent part of mainstream medieval "high" culture.

Even though obscurity had been recognized as a component or possibility of discourse long before the Middle Ages, the tolerance of and even taste for obscurity in medieval literary circles was new and remarkable. It seems to have had three principle sources: the obscurity of the Bible for medieval readers; a rhetorical and literary tradition of obscure composition; and a lack of linguistic authority.

As the history of biblical exegesis and its importance in medieval culture show, the Bible was an obscure text for medieval readers. Given that communications of supramundane origin seem to have been traditionally and habitually obscure throughout human history (perhaps as a sign of the incommensurability of the mundane and supramundane), their obscurity was in fact a guarantee of their divine origin: the more obscure a passage was, the more pregnant it seemed to be with divine meaning. Biblical obscurity was thus a promise and a challenge for medieval exegetes and led them to develop both intricate schemes of textual interpretation and intricate theories of obscure signification. Primarily because of the Bible and the discourse surrounding it, obscurity was also understood to be a part of objective reality. God's other "books," the created universe and history, were likewise felt to be full of obscure and inexhaustible meaning. God was understood to have expressed himself obscurely in order to subdue human pride, exercise the human intellect, and associate the pleasure of discovery with the revelation of his intentions.

The Church Fathers had, however, already established that communication between God and mankind had broken down after the Fall of Adam and Eve. As Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa explain, human beings are unable to understand plain messages from God because of their corrupted nature. God thus has to employ oblique means of communication when addressing them in order to accommodate his

message to the imperfection of human intellect.⁹ In fact, the source of obscurity in the Bible is often the surprising character of divine speech. On the one hand, there was a universal expectation that the Bible be perfect since it is the word of God. On the other hand, however, medieval readers could not fail to see certain "imperfections" in the Bible. Since these imperfections ran contrary to their expectation, they perceived the "imperfect" passages to be obscure: Why did God bother to record so many little details concerning the lives of the patriarchs or the prophets? Why are biblical heroes sometimes praised for apparently immoral behavior? Why is Jesus sometimes depicted as if he had doubts, when he was God and God cannot have doubts? The literal meaning of these passages was clear but the reasons for including them in a sacred and perfect book were obscure. Why would God include in his revelation so many banal details, or, as in the case of the Song of Songs, erotic scenes? These were important cases of obscurity to the medieval mind, and the usual explanations for them argued that God intentionally concealed his own divine nature and used human modes of communication in order to get closer to the human intellect. Thus, for example, Jesus *pretends* to have doubts in order to bring his message closer to his disciples, or inessential little details of a biblical story allude to divine mysteries which cannot be communicated directly.

In any case, attempts to interpret the Bible, the universe and history were praiseworthy activities bringing one closer to God.

The interpretation of biblical obscurity also revitalized this old text composed in and for a radically different culture and made it relevant to medieval life and preoccupations. And once the machine of textual exegesis had been built and was running smoothly, its methods of adjusting and recuperating an old text in new contexts through the interpretation of its obscurities could be applied to a wide array of obscure or "unacceptable"—ancient and pagan—texts, bringing them into the reservoir of medieval culture and enlarging it. These methods made even the unintentional creation of obscurity culturally productive, as when, for example, obscurity produced by an "author's" conceiving of himself as a mere copyist led to subsequent "clarifications" and further "corruptions."

Obscurity also had a distinct and established role in the rhetorical and poetic traditions the Middle Ages inherited from Antiquity. In these traditions, discourse was understood to consist of a play between clarity

⁹ Gillian Rosemary Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1–8.

and obscurity, which was something to be actively employed as a particular way of encoding a message. Its use was recommended, at least occasionally, as a refreshing strategy to draw attention to one's discourse, to make it more memorable, and to increase the audience's pleasure of understanding by delaying it and making it work for it, although rhetors and authors were also warned against using it too much or too often.

Created obscurity was also used as a pedagogical tool, "to establish," as Virgilius Maro put it, "students' acuteness of perception" (*sagacitatem discentium adprobare*).¹⁰ It could be used in a related way to make a discourse's meaning less accessible to the uneducated crowds. It thus created an additional source of social pleasure for, an elite subaudience of people who could understand it. Obscurity operated as an "added value," separable from the message, making it more accessible to some than to others.

Created obscurity could similarly be made to serve political ends by veiling a subversive or contestatory discourse reserved for a group of initiates. It was thus always suspect to some degree and viewed as a potential challenge to the clarity produced by established order. The play between obscurity and clarity thus also involved, or was an allegory for, a play between the margin and the center, the refused and the accepted, the unknown and the known, anarchy and order, heresy and orthodoxy. The opposite of obscurity was in fact less clarity than the order, the authority that produces clarity. A clear discourse can be combined easily with other clear discourses to produce a totalizing or encyclopedic one, a single grand discourse of which the many individual discourses are but parts.

Medieval audiences schooled in these traditions appreciated even unresolvable obscurity in moderation, which suggests that they did not always find it necessary to understand a discourse to enjoy it. These traditions permitted and in some ways encouraged a linguistic creator to lose himself or herself in language; to develop a metaphor or an etymology until it broke the bars of received knowledge and developed new, unforeseen meanings that expanded existing epistemological possibilities; to talk or write even when one had nothing to say, for the pleasure

¹⁰ Epitome 10, Johannes Huemer, ed., *Virgilii Maronis Grammatici opera* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1886), 76; Giovanni Polara, trans., L. Caruso and G. Polara, eds., *Virgilius Maro Grammaticus, Epitomi ed Epistole*, Nuovo medioevo 9 (Naples: Liguori, 1979), 128.

of talking or writing, or to provoke a reaction. Obscure discourse could, that is, be an inventive, leisure activity, a form of pure pleasure and pure research.

The tolerance and even taste for obscurity in medieval literary circles was also in part the result of a lack of linguistic authority. Obscurity is always relative, is obscure only from the point of view of some norm or canon: the stronger the norm, the more different kinds of discourse will appear obscure in relation to it. In the Middle Ages, however, literary languages were still ill-defined and ill-regulated. Even the leading literary language, Latin, had no clear spelling guidelines and no settled grammatical rules, while most of the "vulgar" languages were, so to speak, uncultivated wildernesses—or absolute democracies.

Many medieval texts that seem quite obscure to modern scholars were often fully integrated into the mainstream culture; their obscurity was not considered striking or unusual. The medieval approach to texts was fuzzy and approximate rather than clearly definable, distinguishable, and articulate. Medieval audiences were simply more ready to tolerate obscurity because it formed an integral part of their world. Sometimes they did pursue the objectives of system, order, and efficiency but rarely in a systematic, orderly, and efficient manner: they did not believe that obscurity could ever be eradicated. They were not scared of the indescribable, undividable, and ungraspable; they accepted reality as complex and ultimately unintelligible. Obscurity was not simply a riddle to be solved. It was a source of wonder, questioning and a search for meaning.

Whatever its source, whether created or accidental, obscurity was also a source of change in the Middle Ages. What entered the culture as obscure might very quickly become the norm, pushing what was originally clear to the obscure peripheries. And there were always admirers of the margins as well as of the center.

Obscurity itself went in and out of fashion during the Middle Ages. It was more normal, more tolerated, more desirable at some times than others. One might suggest, for example, that the exegetical triumphs of the eleventh century led to the flowering of obscurantism in the twelfth, which led in turn to the encyclopedism of the thirteenth, which led to the obscure flamboyance of the later Middle Ages.

The study of medieval attitudes towards, and uses of obscurity, is, finally, an important form of self-reflection that can teach us much about our own attitudes towards obscure texts, including those of the Middle

Ages, and our own desires to understand and thus recuperate those texts, both past and present.

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The essays collected in this volume present "partial successes:" interpretations of particular obscurities in which, however, a certain degree of obscurity persists. For example, biblical exegesis, which can never be completely "satisfactory" (since the Bible cannot be fully comprehended in this life), or interpretations that do not meet with universal consent or that are built of strange associations and suspicious links and seem obscure in themselves. This "persistent obscurity" is of two kinds. One is an enigma which seems to have been created in order to remain enigmatic as a means to provoke interpretation. Greti Dinkova-Bruun and Noel Putnik discuss this kind of obscurity in the Bible, while Florin George Călian focuses on provocative enigmas in Plato and Jeff Rider on those of twelfth-century French literature. The second kind of persistent obscurity is found in texts that were probably not meant to be enigmatic but became obscure when transferred to a new community, and have been transmitted without any fixed interpretation attached to them. These obscure texts continued to be handed down perhaps through inertia or because of the authority attached to them. They were often strikingly "successful," that is widely copied and read, as Hiram Kümper shows.

The essays are presented here in a rough chronological order but this is not intended to suggest any development in the perception, use, or interpretation of obscurity. There are subjects that reappear in the essays across the volume, such as discussions of the deliberate creation of obscurities within particular communities (Veyrard-Cosme, Rider, Piccone), the (often obscure) medieval strategies for interpreting obscurities (Călian, Dinkova-Bruun, Forrai, Putnik, Kümper), or the contemporary interpretations of medieval obscurities (Zironi, Small, Mehtonen).

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Florin George Călian discusses an example of interpreting obscurity which seems rather obscure in itself: interpreting Plato allegorically in a neoplatonic context. Based on his analysis of Proclus's interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides*, Călian explores allegory as a philosophical device rather than a literary mechanism, and asks why someone would read a philosophical text allegorically, and what conditions allowed allegory to

be included in a philosophical inquiry. In this case, he suggests that they were the authority of the author (Plato's texts were believed to be both coherent organisms with a hidden meaning, and divinely inspired), and the belief of the neoplatonic interpretive community in the principle "*panta en pasin*," that is, the interconnectedness of reality whose elements can thus be used to explain each other.¹¹

Christiane Veyrard-Cosme analyzes Latin collections of riddles from the seventh and the eighth centuries (dominated by the works of Aldhelm) and the nature of the textual poetics created within the insular monastic environment. Veyrard-Cosme argues that obscurity, linked to brevity, was perceived within this environment as an inherent part of the created order and an important tool for spiritual instruction: the collections of enigmas were intended to be microcosmic representations of the universe, and their enigmatic qualities reflected the enigmas of the world. The riddles imitated God's creation both by their order and by their obscurity. Their poetic form initiated the reader to the pursuit of higher meaning and proved the reality of a higher level of existence. Thus, the same interpretative framework was to be applied to solving the riddles and to understanding the created world.

Jeff Rider, too, addresses the deliberate creation of enigma in a particular social environment. He argues that when French literature emerged in the twelfth century it did so from and against a clerical—ecclesiastical, learned and Latinate—background. Its authors had been trained in clerical schools or at least in the clerical tradition and the literature they created was in some sense Latinate literature for people who did not know Latin, had not been to school, and were used to oral entertainments. The literature that evolved from this encounter welcomed some obscurity as a provocation to interpretation and resulted in an enigmatic style in the works of twelfth-century court poets like Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, who sought first and foremost to entertain their audiences. They also embraced the enigmatic style in order to endow the aristocratic life portrayed in their works with its own spiritual dimension, a mysterious, quasi-allegorical aura, suggesting they had a hidden higher meaning for those who have ears to hear. The audience

¹¹ In spite of the obvious similarities, this is a different theoretical model of obscurity than the mainstream Christian ideas about the obscurity of the Bible. E.g. there is no notion of the original sin, no idea of God taking on human form and accommodating his message to human imperfection in neoplatonism, and in Christianity there is no principle "*panta en pasin*."

for works in French had changed significantly by the mid-thirteenth century, however, and the French literary tradition had grown increasingly independent of the Latin one. The enigmatic style gave way to a more "realistic" and often ironic style anchored more clearly in secular concerns and reflecting more clearly worldly attitudes.

Susan Small's essay explores the ways in which the hermeneutic device of "mise en abyme," or infinite regress, serves to organize and elucidate the semiotic structures underlying Marie de France's twelfth-century "Lay of the Nightingale." Tracing the complex interplay of mirror-image symmetry and kaleidoscopic refraction in "Laüstic," the essay finds its center in the figure of the dead nightingale, wrapped in an embroidered shroud and enclosed in a jeweled casket at what T.S. Eliot might term the inert, ambiguous, and endlessly reflective "still point of the turning world."

Greti Dinkova-Bruun's contribution introduces the treatment of biblical obscurity in an educational context. Alexander of Ashby and Aegidius of Paris, both writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century, propose two different views about the perplexing nature of the biblical narrative for the sake of students. In the prologue to his biblical versification, the *Breuisssima Comprehensio historiarum*, Alexander outlines three main *turbationes* that confuse the carnal soul when it attempts to understand scripture: *obscuritas significationis, uarietas expositionis, and mutatio personarum*. Being a preacher and a teacher, Alexander then goes on to explain these difficulties and to give practical advice to his readers on how to deal with them. Aegidius takes a much more mystical approach. In his prose prologue to Peter Riga's *Evangelium*, he links the obscurity of the Bible to the Book of Revelation and the seven seals mentioned in it. Scripture is sealed by God with *signacula* and *enigmata* which can be understood only by those who know how to unlock their secrets. Despite their differences, both Alexander and Aegidius exemplify scholastic methods of study and strive to bring order and clarity to the vast field of theological thought inherited from previous centuries in order to make it useful in the classroom.

Carla Piccone also deals with thirteenth-century didactics, but she introduces us to the practice of teaching Latin grammar. She draws our attention to examples of widely diffused grammatical didactic poetry (Alexander de Villa Dei's *Doctrinale puerorum*, Eberhard of Béthune's *Grecismus*, and Conradus de Mure's *Novus Grecismus*) that are, upon a first uncontextualized reading, very obscure because they are highly condensed, elliptic, and closely connected to longer textbooks (e.g., Pris-

cian's Latin grammar) with which one has to be familiar in order to understand them. They are highly condensed in order to be more easily memorized and were intended to be accompanied by the oral instruction of the master, which made them clear and useful. For those who were instructed on the correct use of these verses, they are clear. *Brevitas* leads to *firmior memoria* and *facilior acceptio*. *Obscura brevis* is a vice; *brevitas* should always be *lucida*. In the way they operate, these verses are similar to *versus memoriales* and *differentiales*, which address the subject of *equivoca*, homophones, or exceptions to a particular grammatical rule, often in a very cryptic manner. The fact that these verses were already frequently glossed in medieval manuscripts suggests that they often already seemed obscure then.

Alessandro Zironi's essay discusses the role and reception of the Latin poet Virgil in Middle High German literature during the thirteenth century. According to a so-called *Liber Maronis*, Virgil was himself an obscure figure who cryptically transmitted forbidden arts, specifically the *ars notoria*. The representation of Virgil as a magician and / or necromancer probably originated in Naples, but thanks to British and German intellectuals like Gervase of Tilbury and Konrad von Querfurt, it rapidly spread throughout Western Europe, and to Germany in particular. When the stories about Virgil reached Germany, they were incorporated into poems like *Zabulons Buch* and *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, and thus became popular among a courtly public. In this case study, we thus witness the productive force of obscurity as the obscure figure of Virgil produces a variety of new meanings and associations.

Hiram Kumper discusses the obscurity that arises through the process of transmission and reception, and focuses on the practices within a community of later readers who strive to use texts that have become unintelligible but still possess great authority. Using the examples of traditional Saxon legal texts, the *Saxon Mirror* and the Magdeburg Law (*Weichbildrecht*), he discusses the various attempts of changing audiences to understand these highly authoritative yet increasingly obscure texts and make them useful.

Noel Putnik examines some examples of the ways the Renaissance Neoplatonist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) reinterpreted some of the standard doctrines of Christian orthodoxy by dwelling on the obscurities and ambivalences of Scripture. He argues that Agrippa's aim in doing so was to legitimize his theological synthesis by grounding it in the Bible. One of the cases in question is Agrippa's treatment of the Johannine and Pauline notions of spiritual rebirth. For example, by apply-

ing his exegetical methods to 1 John 3: 9, Agrippa apparently changed the basic theological meaning of the passage and attributed an aura of orthodoxy to an otherwise highly heterodoxical idea—that of spiritual rebirth as understood in the late antique *Corpus Hermeticum*. However, the basic theological sense of the notion was itself unclear, thus enabling Agrippa to build it into his Platonic-Hermetic paradigm of spirituality. Putnik demonstrates that reinterpreting obscurities in Scripture was a deliberate rhetorical and literary strategy for Agrippa that served an important goal: to apologize for his synthesis and increase its persuasive power.

Reka Forrai traces the lineage of the concept of *obscuritas* in translation theories from Antiquity to the Renaissance. She argues that medieval and humanist translation practices were based on two different understandings of obscurity. Medieval translation practice focused mostly on philosophical and theological texts, and used a philosophical concept of obscurity. Obscurity in this practice was not a negative result of an unskillful translation, but a characteristic of the original text which had to be respected and taken into account. Humanists, on the other hand, considered obscurity from the point of view of rhetoric, and tended to see it as a shortcoming to be avoided, the opposite of clarity. One should therefore not judge the achievements of the medieval translators according to humanist (or for that matter, modern) criteria, but instead try to reconstruct the value system according to which these translations were produced.

Päivi M. Mehtonen explores the links between first-person speech and obscure language in medieval historical and mystical texts as well as in later fiction that emulates such pre-modern forms. Mystical first-person speakers often emphasize the obscurity of the experiences that they and they alone have had, or the limits of their ability to understand them. Starting from the medieval reception of Cicero's doctrine of the genus *obscurum* and the modern notion of auto-communication, the essay discusses cases of first-person literature that alternate between narrative and non-narrative forms (e.g., meditative essays, "descriptions" of an inner state as well as medieval and modern fiction that adopts such forms). This final chapter aptly illustrates that part of our experience always remains obscure and surpasses our ability to articulate it. Thus, however difficult it is to grasp and communicate, obscurity forms a natural part of everyday life.



Obscurity in Medieval Texts

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

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CHARLES UNIVERSITY RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS
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