Obscuritas in Medieval and Humanist Translation Theories

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Despite the continuous attempts of medievalists to dispel it, the qualifier *saecula obscura* still hangs over the Middle Ages like a dark cloud. Obscurity, moreover, is a literary topos as well as a historiographical one. Medieval culture was often labeled obscure by poets and historians alike: neither the Humanist Petrach, nor the enlightened Gibbon, for example, thought very highly of it. But by calling the Latinity of the *Hisperica Famina* or that of a labyrinthine scholastic argument obscure, we do nothing more than admit that these texts are inaccessible to us.

Languages age and so do translations. Generation after generation, words—regardless of whether they are used to write legal texts, philosophy, poems or private letters—go from clear to blurred, transforming reading into deciphering. All great works of literature in the western canon are re-translated by almost every generation since, after a while, the language of the translation no longer clarifies, but obscures the meaning of the original text. Translation is thus a particularly useful angle from which to study obscurity, especially from the comparative perspective of two historical periods like the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Renaissance Greek-Latin (re)translation movements justified and glorified themselves by condemning the medieval renderings as obscuring their originals. Judging the medieval period according to our own standards of clearness is a practice we have inherited from the humanists. Many of our misconceptions about the techniques of medieval translation come from taking for granted the humanist critique of them.

Rather than arguing that medieval translation practices were not abstruse, I propose to investigate the different understandings of the term *obscuritas* from Antiquity to the Renaissance. Obscurity was understood in very different, sometimes contradictory ways in ancient, medieval and humanist translation theory. At first glance, two different interpretations of obscurity are apparent. Readers use it critically when obscurity is seen

as damage done to a clear text by an unskilled translator. Translators, on the other hand, use it apologetically, attributing obscurity to the original text itself. One's first impression then is that readers blame the translators whenever they fail to understand a text, whereas translators blame the text whenever they are unable to translate it clearly. But on closer reading, much more is involved. In the first case, the term is applied to a faulty translation. Here, *obscuritas* is an unfortunate new layer covering the original text that has been produced by the shortcomings of the translator's craftsmanship and has to be removed in order for the text to be understood. In the second case, it describes an inherent characteristic of the source-text. In this instance, the obscure material usually strongly resists the translator's efforts. Obscurity belongs to the text's nature: it is intended to slow down and deepen the reading process. I will distinguish between these two approaches by calling them rhetorical and philosophical obscurity. Thus I argue for the existence of a positive dimension of obscurity in the Middle Ages, which is lost in humanist rhetoric.

Already in classical Antiquity, Romans thought there was something inherently obscure in the Greek language. For Lucretius (c. 99–55 BCE), translating Greek philosophical ideas into Latin verses meant also a purification and simplification of an overly complicated system. In this process, the poverty of Latin is turned into an advantage:

> Nor do I fail to understand that it is difficult to make clear the dark discoveries of the Greeks in Latin verses, especially since we have often to employ new words because of the poverty of the language and the novelty of the matters.[1]

The simplicity of Latin was seen to be in sharp contrast with the sophistication of Greek. The competitive Roman spirit translated this opposition into the antithetic pair of clearness versus obscurity, straightforwardness versus confusing intricacy.[2]

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1 "Nec me animi fallit Graiorum obscura reperta / difficile inlustrare Latinis uersibus esse, / multa nouis uerbis praesertim cum sit agendum / propter egestatem linguae et rerum nouitatem" (Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, I, 136–39, trans. W.H.D. Rouse [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959; reprint of the revised third edition from 1937], 12–13).

2 Cf. Joseph Farrell, *Latin Letters and Latin Culture from Ancient to Modern Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 50–51: "In his doxography Lucretius systematically debunks the idea that Greek is superior to Latin as a medium for poetry and philosophy on every score: its supposedly greater beauty and mellifluous qualities, its larger vocabulary, the ease with which it forms compounds, its capacity for subtle philosophical expression, all are revealed as traps that lead to obscurity, muddled thinking, silliness."

In his chapters on obscurity, Quintilian (born c. 35) opposed *obscuritas* to *perspicuitas*, clarity.[3] According to him, there are many ways to create misunderstandings: excessively complicated[4] or excessively concise[5] speech can be equally obscure, as are rhetorical figures when they are used carelessly or excessively. He also cautioned rhetors against those who value obscurity as a positive concept, confusing foggy formulation with deepness of thought.[6] *Ambiguitas* is a synonym for *obscuritas*

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3 Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8, II, 1–11, 12–21, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), 196–208. On *perspicuitas* in translation theory, see Frederick M. Rener, *Language and Translation from Cicero to Tyler* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), 77–79.

4 "A greater source of obscurity is, however, to be found in the construction and combination of words, and the ways in which this may occur are still more numerous. Therefore, a sentence should never be so long that it is impossible to follow its drift, nor should its conclusion be unduly postponed by transposition or an excessive use of hyperbaton. Still worse is the result when the order of the words is confused as in the line: *In the midmost sea / Rocks are there by Italians altars called*" ("Plus tamen est obscuritatis in contextu et continuatione sermonis, et plures modi. Quare nec sit tam longus ut eum prosequi non possit intentio, nec traiectione vel ultra modum hyperbato finis eius differatur. Quibus adhuc peior est mixtura uerborum, qualis in illo uersu: 'saxa uocant Itali mediis quae in fluctibus aras'"; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8, II, 14, pp. 204–05).

5 "Others are consumed with a passion for brevity and omit words which are actually necessary to the sense, regarding it as a matter of complete indifference whether their meaning is intelligible to others, so long as they know what they mean themselves. For my own part, I regard as useless words which make such a demand upon the ingenuity of the hearer" ("Aiii breuitatem aemulati necessaria quoque orationi subtrahunt uerba, et, uelut satis sit scire ipsos quid dicere uelint, quantum ad alios pertineat nihili putant: at ego uitiosum sermonem dixerim quem auditor suo ingenio intellegit"; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8, II, 19, pp. 206–07).

6 "Such expressions are regarded as ingenious, daring and eloquent, simply because of their ambiguity, and quite a number of persons have become infected by the belief that a passage which requires a commentator must for that very reason be a masterpiece of elegance. Nay, there is even a class of hearer who finds a special pleasure in such passages; for the fact that they can provide an answer to the riddle fills them with an ecstasy of self-congratulation, as if they had not merely heard the phrase, but invented it" ("Ingeniosa haec et fortia et ex ancipiti diserta creduntur, peruasitque iam multos ista persuasio, ut id [iam] demum eleganter atque exquisite dictum putent quod interpretandum sit. Sed auditoribus etiam nonnullis grata sunt haec, quae cum intellexerunt acumine suo delectantur, et gaudent non quasi audierint sed quasi inuenerint"; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8, II, 21, pp. 208–09).

in his rhetorical terminology.[7]

While a rhetorician should avoid obscurity, a philosopher can choose to use it, if so he pleases. Late Antique philosophical commentaries often claimed to clarify the thoughts of intentionally obscure or ambiguous philosophers like the pre-Socratics or Aristotle. In this case, the degree of a text's obscurity was considered a measure of the difficulty of its themes and arguments. Calling a philosopher obscure was not a critical judgment, but an observation about the level of complexity of the work. This obscurity could be caused by the complicated subject matter, the philosopher's knotty argument, or the reader's level of understanding. According to Cicero (106–43 BCE), philosophical obscurity has two acceptable sources: a philosopher may choose to write obscurely or his subject-matter may require it.[8]

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7 "Above all, ambiguity must be avoided, and by ambiguity I mean not merely the kind of which I have already spoken, where the sense is uncertain, as in the clause *Chremetem audivi percussisse Demean*, but also that form of ambiguity which, although it does not actually result in obscuring the sense, falls into the same verbal error as if a man should say *visum a se hominem librum scribentem* (that he had seen a man writing a book). For although it is clear that the book was being written by the man, the sentence is badly put together and its author has made it as ambiguous as he could. Again, some writers introduce a whole host of useless words; for, in their eagerness to avoid ordinary methods of expression, and allured by false ideals of beauty they wrap up everything in a multitude of words simply and solely because they are unwilling to make a direct and simple statement of the facts: and then they link up and involve one of those long-winded clauses with others like it, and extend their periods to a lengths beyond the compass of mortal breath" ("Vitanda in primis ambiguitas, non haec solum, de cuius genere supra dictum est, quae incertum intellectum facit, ut 'Chremetem audiui percussisse Demean,' sed illa quoque, quae etiam si turbare non potest sensum in idem tamen uerborum uitium incidit, ut si quis dicat 'uisum a se hominem librum scribentem'. Nam etiam si librum ab homine scribi patet, male tamen composuerit, feceritque ambiguum quantum in ipso fuit. Est etiam in quibusdam turba inanium uerborum, qui, dum communem loquendi morem reformidant, ducti specie nitoris circumeunt omnia copiosa loquacitate, eo quod dicere nolunt ipsa: deinde illam seriem cum alia simili iungentes miscentesque ultra quam ullus spiritus durare possit extendunt"; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8, II, 16–17, pp. 204–07).

8 "Obscurity is excusable on two grounds: it may be deliberately adopted, as in the case of Heraclitus, 'The surname of the Obscure who bore,/So dark his philosophic lore'; or the obscurity may be due to the abstruseness of the subject and not of the style – an instance of this is Plato's Timaeus" ("Duobus modis sine reprehensione fit, si aut de industria facias ut Heraclitus – cognomento qui σκοτεινός perhibetur quia de natura nimis obscure memoravit – aut cum rerum obscuritas

Since the late Antique and medieval Greek-Latin translation canon consisted mostly of philosophical and theological works, this concept of philosophical obscurity was more prevalent than the rhetorical one. But translators still faced the question of what they should do with such obscure passages? Should they leave them obscure or attempt to simplify and clarify them? In philosophical education this was the duty of the commentator, but it was not clear whether translators were also commentators or whether they should leave interpretation to someone else. Rufinus of Aquileia (340/345–410), for example, chose to emend Origen's (184/185–253/254) work as well as translate it. In his prologue, he affirmed that Origen's *On the Principles* was in all respects difficult and obscure, and that its subject-matter gave philosophers countless troubles.[9] This statement was followed by a brief description of his methodology, in which he admitted that he rearranged Origen's passages as he had found it suitable, in order to clarify obscure ones—he claims, however, that he did that using Origen's own words from elsewhere.[10]

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non verborum facit ut non intelligatur oratio, qualis est in Timaeo Platonis"; Cicero, *De finibus* II, V, 15, trans. H. Rackham [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914], 94–95). He then goes on to mention a third type of obscurity, which has no explanation and is the fault of the writer. Cf. Jonathan Barnes, "Metacommentary," in *Oxford Studies of Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1992): 267–81. See also Jaap Mansfeld, "Insight by hindsight: Intentional Unclarity in Presocratic Proems," in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 40 (1995): 225–32. For a detailed discussion of the understanding of *ambiguum* and *dubitabilis* in medieval philosophy see Dragoş Calma, "Du bon usage des grecs et des arabes. Réflexions sur la censure de 1277," in *Christian Readings of Aristotle from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Luca Bianchi, Studia Artistarum 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 115–84.

9 "et praecipue istos, quos nunc exigis ut interpreter, id est peri archon, quod uel de principiis uel de principatibus dici potest, qui sunt re uera alias et obscurissimi et difficillimi. De rebus enim ibi talibus disputat, in quibus philosophi omni sua aetate consumpta inuenire potuerunt nihil"; *Tyrannii Rufini Opera*, ed. M. Simonetti, CCSL 20 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1961), 246. Cf. Marguerite Harl, "Origène et les interprétations patristiques grecques de l'"obscurité' biblique," *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, 4 (1982): 334–71.

10 "If, however, speaking as he does to men of knowledge and discernment, he has occasionally expressed himself obscurely in the effort to be brief, I have, to make the passage clearer, added such remarks on the same subject as I have read in a fuller form in his other books, bearing in mind the need for explanation. But I have said nothing of my own, simply giving back to him his own statements found in other places" (Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth [New York: Harper and Row, 1966], lxiii); "Si qua sane uelut peritis iam et scientibus loquens, dum breuiter transire uult, obscurius protulit, nos, ut manifestior fieret

Rufinus's method of dealing with the author's obscurity is thus an interventionist one: Origen had supposed that his readers would be knowledgable, but Rufinus did not and thus tried to make explicit whatever was implicit in the original. Brevity here is a synonym for obscurity and it was to be avoided because the danger of obscurity in a theological text is that it can lead to heretical interpretation. Rufinus also argued that if knowledgable readers or scribes don't emend the text, then more obscurities will get generated for the readers.[11] In their debate on translating Origen, Jerome (347–420) and Rufinus thus held opposite views about the role of the translator: Jerome contested Rufinus's tactic of combining the two functions of translator and commentator.

The second most obscure Greek theologian after Origen is arguably Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. He was successfully translated into Latin in the ninth century by John Scottus Eriugena. Eriugena chose a different path from Rufinus. In the preface to his translation of Pseudo-Dionysius, he warned his eventual readers of the danger of finding his version obscure, because he, as a faithful interpreter, had to leave the text impenetrable.[12] But he intended this more as a clarification than an apology. In his view, the obscurity was already there in the original, and one way to try to understand it was to use the work of a commentator like Maximus Confessor.[13] Eriugena didn't consider it his duty to make

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locus, ea quae de ipsa re in aliis eius libris apertius legeramus adiecimus explanationi studentes. Nihil tamen nostrum diximus, sed licet in aliis locis dicta, sua tamen sibi reddidimus" (*Tyrannii Rufini Opera*, 246).

11 "(everyone who shall either transcribe or read these books) shall emend it and make it distinct to the very letter, and shall not allow a manuscript to remain incorrect or indistinct, lest the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning, if the manuscript is not distinct, should increase the obscurities of the work for those that read it" (Origen, *On First Principles*, lxiv); "et inemendatum uel non distinctum codicem non habeat, ne sensuum difficultas, si distinctus codex non sit, maiores obscuritates legentibus generet" (*Tyrannii Rufini Opera*, 246).

12 "si obscuram minusque apertam praedictae interpretationis seriem iudicaverit, videat me interpretem huius operis esse, non expositorem"; E. Dümmler, Ernst Perels and others, eds. *MGH Epistolae 6 Karolini Aevi* 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1902–1925), 159.

13 "Fortassis autem qualicunque apologia defensus, non tam densas subierim caligines, nisi viderem, praefatum beatissimum Maximum saepissime in processu sui operis obscurissimas sanctissimi theologi Dionysii Areopagitae sententias, cuius symbolicos theologicosque sensus nuper Vobis similiter jubentibus transtuli, introduxisse, mirabilique modo dilucidasse, in tantum, ut nullo modo dubitarem, divinam clementiam, quae illuminat abscondita tenebrarum, sua ineffabili providentia hoc disposuisse, ut ea quidem, quae nobis maxime obstrusa in praedictis

the text *maius apertam* (clearer) than it is, but delegated this task instead to the *expositor*; the commentator on the work. In the case of Rufinus, these were overlapping functions, the translator having full powers over the author. But what seemed to be a possibility in Rufinus's late Antiquity was not even considered in the Middle Ages. Respect for the authority of the theologian and fear of responsibility for the heretical accusations that might eventually result from combining interpretation and translation reduced the translator's freedom.

Obscurity was thus valued and respected in theological discourse. But what about other literary genres? The Neapolitan translation school that flourished in the ninth and tenth centuries and specialized in hagiographic texts despised obscurity deeply seeing in it a vice of translation. Admittedly, the sources of this view arealso more problematic: condemnation of the previous version was often part of the justification for a new translation and thus cannot always be taken at face value. However, it is not by chance that these criticisms occurred mostly in the context of translating hagiography, that is to say, a type of narrative, and not technical writing.

One of the translators, Bonitus, complains both about the absurdity and the obscurity of the earlier version of the *Gesta Theodori*.[14] His colleague, Guarimpotus, in his prologue to the *Passio Blasii* (BHL 1380–1379), claimed that the other translation had lost the meaning and the clarity of the original, truth had been replaced by falsity, clearness by obscurity, and wise words had been turned into stupidity.[15] He considered it the duty of the translator to groom the text by reordering, cutting out the superficial parts, adding what was missing and clarifying what was unclear.[16] The genre and the use of the texts required a certain level of stylistic attractiveness to facilitate oral understanding. As Guarimpotus

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beati Dionysii libris, aut vix pervia, sensusque nostros fugere videbantur, aperiret, sapientissimo praefato Maximo lucidissime explanante"; Maximi Confessoris, *Ambigua ad Iohannem, iuxta Iohannis Scotti Eriugenae latinam interpretationem*, ed. E. Jeanuneau, Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca 18, 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1988), p. 3, l. 15–25.

14 "Tanta eas absurditate faminum, tantaque obscuritate sensuum replevere"; Bonitus, "Vita Theodori," in *AASS*, February, vol. 2, 30–31.

15 "de virissimis falsa, de liquidissimis obscura ac de praeclaris reddire turpia"; Guarimpoto, *Passio Blasii*, in Paul Devos, "L'oeuvre de Guarimpotus hagiographe napolitain," *Analecta Bollandiana* 76 (1958): 157.

16 "inordinata componimus, superflua resecamus, quod deest adhibemus, quodque obscurum est ad liquidum ducere curamus"; Guarimpoto, *Passio Blasii*, 158.

also argued, it is important that a text that is intended to be read and listened to in the liturgy should avoid being ridiculed by the audience.[17] For these translators of hagiographic texts, there was no obscurity in the source-text. It was caused, rather, by the translator's miscomprehension, his inadequate skills, or his chosen methodology.

Word-to-word translation techniques, which became the standard way to render treatises written in a technical language, be it philosophical, theological, legal or medical, seem inevitably to have produced obscurity. The medieval *Corpus Aristotelicum*, which was built up during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with this method, so enraged Roger Bacon that he could suggest only one remedy (which, luckily, he could not carry out): to burn all the manuscripts.[18]

This type of criticism escalated with the arrival of Humanism. Let me illustrate it with two incidents: first, a passage from Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439), an Italian humanist, who, in his preface to his translation of John Climacus's *Scala Paradisi* (dedicated to Matteo Guidone, c. 1419) speaks in the following terms about the previous translator of the work:

> Meanwhile they will not in the least deny that his translation is extremely obscure. What therefore is my crime if what was translated obscurely I have tried to render more clear or rather more Latin? Moreover, is it necessary to say how erudite that translator was? They may contend that he revealed himself to be very learned in both languages. I, dissenting completely from them, will affirm truthfully that in neither was he fully adequate. For it will be easily established by anyone who has even a mediocre knowledge of the language that he did not understand correctly most of the Greek. And whoever affirms that he could have been erudite in Latin signifies with little doubt his own ignorance. If they will assert he was a holy man, easily and willingly I will agree. Because he was a saint, however, it does not follow that he was erudite and capable of translating. For holiness is one thing, erudition another. Indeed if he was a saint, he ought not to have attempted what he could not execute properly, nor to have approached this task which exceeded his power. For one causes injury

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17 "absurdissima extitit Passio, ut non solum non intellegeretur, verum etiam ridiculum legentibus et audientibus eius incompta denotaret obscuritas"; Guarimpoto, *Passio Blasii*, 158.

18 "Certus igitur sum quod melius esset latinis quod sapientia Aristotelis non esset translata, quam tali obscuritate et perversitate tradita . . . et sic omnes qui aliquid sciunt negligunt perversam translationem Aristotelis, et querunt remedia sicut possunt . . . si enim haberem potestatem super libros Aristotelis ego facerem omnes cremari, quia non est nisi temporis amissio studere in illis, et causa erroris, et multiplicatio ignorantiae ultra id quod valeat explicari"; Roger Bacon, "Compendium studii philosophiae," in *Fratris Rogeri Baconi opera quaedam hactenus inedita*, ed. J.S. Brewer (London: Longmans, 1859), 469.

to a learned man by rendering his utterance in an ignorant and rustic way."[19]

The medieval translator referred to was Angelo Clareno (1247–1337), a Franciscan friar from Cingoli. During the two long periods he had spent in Greece—in the Corinthian bay (1295–1297) and in eastern Thessaly (1298/9–1304/5)—he translated a substantial amount of Greek spiritual literature, including the *Scala Paradisi* of John Climachus, a number of writings of Basil the Great (including the Rule, letters, and prologues to several of his ascetic pieces), and a letter of Saint John Chrysostom to Ciriacus. According to his hagiographer, he had acquired the language through the Holy Spirit, while spending Christmas in a Greek monastery.

Another indignant voice was that of Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370–1444). Encountering the earlier version of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* sent him into fits of rage and contempt. In 1417 he attempted to replace this earlier, medieval version with a fresh one by himself.[20] In the preface to his translation, he called the medieval version of the Aristotelian text more barbarian than Latin, immature, ignorant, absurd and awkward, and the translator half-Latin and half-Greek, incompetent in both languages, an author of a work that is altogether unworthy of Aristotle and of the Latin language, perverted, full of twisted words, obscure concepts

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19 "Praeterea traductionem illam esse obscurissimam ne ipsi quidem negabunt. Quod ergo crimen meum est, si quod ille obscurius transtulit, apertius ipse, et aliquanto etiam latinius convertere conatus sum? Porro quam fuerit ille Interpres eruditus quid adtinet dicere? Contendant isti peritissimum illum in utraque lingua exstitisse: ego ab illis longe dissentiens, in neutra illum satis plenum fuisse veraciter adseverabo. Nam graeco pleraque non recte intellexisse cuilibet eius linguae vel mediocriter perito facile constabit: et latine erudite posuisse, qui affirmat sese imperitissimum esse haud obscure significat. Sanctissimum illum fuisse virum si adseverant; facile, ac perlubenter consentiam: non tamen, quia sanctus fuerit, eruditum etiam fuisse sequitur, atque idoneum ad transferendum. Aliud enim sanctitas est, atque aliud eruditio. Imo vero si sanctus fuit; ne id quidem tentare debuit, quod commode implere non posset, neque id onus subire, quod virium suarum excederet modum. Facit enim iniuriam doctissimo viro, qui illum imperite, ac rustice loquentem reddit;" *Ambrosii Traversarii Generalis Camaldulensium latinae epistolae*, ed. Laurentius Mehus, 2 vols, (Florentiae: ex Typographio Caesareo, 1759; reprint Bologna: Forni, 1968), vol. 2, col. 962 (book 23, letter 7); trans. Charles L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers. Ambrogio Traversari [1386–1439] and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 111.

20 Cf. Hanna-Barbara Gerl, *Philosophie und Philologie. Leonardo Brunis Übertragung der Nikomachischen Ethik in Ihren Philosophischen Prämisen* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1981). For related writings of Bruni, cf. Paolo Viti, ed., *Leonardo Bruni, Sulla perfetta traduzione* (Napoli: Liguori, 2004).

and a shaky doctrine.[21] The identity of the medieval translator(s) was unknown to Bruni at the time but he used a version that had been translated in the mid-thirteenth century by Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, and revised by William of Moerbeke, the famous medieval translator of the entire *Corpus Aristotelicum*.

Moerbeke, Grosseteste and Angelo Clareno had no chance to defend themselves from these accusations of obscurity. Their cause was taken up, however, by Alonso of Carthagena (1384–1456), a converted Jew from Spain, bishop of Burgos, famous church politician, canon lawyer, and learned humanist, who wrote a little treatise against Bruni's accusations.[22] From Alonso's defense, it is clear that humanist and medieval translation theories operated in two entirely different conceptual worlds, and thus must be judged according to their own criteria, rather than each other's and our own.

These medieval translators practiced the most widespread method among the medieval guild of translators, that is to say, the so called *verbum e verbo* method. We would now call it literal translation in English, that is, a word-for-word faithful following of the original. This translation practice conceives of the sentence as a chain, where only two elements have semantic value: the chain itself and the links, or words, of which it is composed, which are defined by their meaning and their position in the chain, and not, for example, by their relation to other links in the chain.

Why did medieval translators have such a notorious predilection for literal translation? How, if at all, can such a practice be explained? This

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21 "O ferreum hominem! Hoccine est interpretari? . . . Ego igitur infinitis paene huiusmodi erroribus permotus, cum haec indigna Aristotele, indignaque nobis ac lingua nostra arbitrarer, cum suauitatem horum librorum, quae Graeco sermone maxima est, in asperitatem conversam, nomina intorta, res obscuratas, doctrinam labefactatam viderem, laborem suscepi novae traductionis, in qua, ut cetera omittam, id assecutum me puto, ut hos libros nunc primum Latinos fecerim, cum antea non essent"; A. Birkenmajer, "Der Streit des Alonso von Cartagena mit Leonardo Bruni Aretino," in *Vermischte Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Philosophie*, ed. Clemens Baeumker (Münster: Verlag der Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922), 159.

22 See González Rolán, A. Moreno Hernández, P. Saquiero Suárez-Somonte, *Humanismo y Teoría de la Traducción en España e Italia en la primera mitad del siglo XV. Edición y Estudio de la Controversia Alphonsiana: Alonso de Cartagena vs. L. Bruni y P. Candido Decembrio*, (Madrid: Ediciones clásicas, 2000) and María Morrás, "El debate entre Leonardo Bruni y Alonso de Cartagena: las razones de una polémica," *Quaderns. Revista de traducció* 7 (2002): 33–57.

question has troubled specialists of medieval translation theory and practice for a long time,[23] and although it has not been completely answered, major misconceptions have already been removed: the lack of a good knowledge of Greek or Latin, for example, is no longer considered a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon. The literal method was not chosen because of one's limited capacities (even if, from certain viewpoints, these capacities, or rather the tools for developing them, were quite limited). Translators were often good rhetoricians when it came to their own prose and the commentaries they often provided on the texts they translated show that they grasped the texts' meanings perfectly even if they did have problems with Greek and thus rendered it somewhat awkwardly. Word-for-word translation was not therefore a primitive form of interpretation, not the result of a handicap, but a choice. Translators were conscious of the impossibility of creating a perfect translation.

A translation was not expected to be explicit, or clear, or, *horribile dictu*, beautiful. Texts were to be concise and terminologically coherent, and should not attempt to interpret themselves, so to speak. For this, there were commentaries. A text had to be deciphered, and if you manage, promises Alonso, what seemed so repulsive at the beginning, will actually become beautiful and not a syllable will be in the wrong place.[24]

In the effort of reading, one had to distinguish between text and commentary.[25] This too is a very medieval concept, rooted in late antique educational practice. Hellenistic philosophical and literary exegesis, at least the way it was practiced in schools, was based on literal exposition followed by a paraphrase type of commentary. Thus literal translation is the interlingual application of an originally intra-lingual textual transformation, which in turn was a school-technique of textual exegesis. Jerome himself says that it is the commentator's role to make plain what the author expressed obscurely.[26]

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23 Cf. Paolo Chiesa, "Ad verbum or ad sensum? Modelli e coscienza metodologica della traduzione tra tarda antichitt e alto medioevo," *Medioevo e Rinascimento* 1 (1987): 1–51.

24 "sed cum studiosi ingenio vel glossarum auxilio quod conceperit pandere cogitur, sic eius dulce fulget eloquium, ut eius maiestatem mirari cogamur et nedum verbum aliquod, sed nec syllabam deficere arbitremur, quae obmissa videbantur, ex industria sic conscripta cernentes"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 167.

25 "textuum ac glossarum non debet similis esse locutio"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 167.

26 "Commentarii quid operis habent? Alterius dicta edisserunt, quae obscurae

Medieval translations are strongly dependent on this concept of reading. Texts were expected to be obscure and had to be unlocked; they did not unlock themselves. And this in turn brings us to the issue of meaning. Texts did not explain themselves because their explanation did not lie within, but beyond the shell of letters, words, and language in general. Bruni repeatedly defines translation as a rendering from one language to another.[27] Alonso, on the other hand, explicitly says that he does not know Greek and does not even care about it. For one has to understand not what Aristotle wrote down in Greek, but what he thought, what he must have meant.[28] For this, one does not need to use Greek texts, but simply sound reasoning, as Greek texts might be faulty themselves, not presenting very clearly what Aristotle should have had in his mind. Also, chances are that Aristotle might have meant something more reasonable than what he actually said.[29]

According to this reasoning, if someone finds in a Greek text that 2 plus 2 equals 5, one should translate 2 plus 2 equals 4, as there are obvious extralingual elements which support the verity of the second version, and refute the logic of the first. In philosophy, this ultimate external reference point is reason. Different idioms follow and express the same reason; that is why, Alonso argues, there is no need for him to know Greek in order to critically assess the translation. In theology, this reason is God, or his revelation. The external pressure of orthodoxy upon translators played a huge role in shaping translation techniques. Texts were supposed to be faithful not to the literary category of what could be today called the author's intention, but rather to the religious system of which they were part.

Beyond the *verbum* and *sensum*, there was a category called *veritas* that is perhaps much closer than *sensum* to what we would term "mean-

scripta sunt, plano sermone manifestant"; Hieronymus, *Apologia Adversus Libros Rufini*, I, 16 in P. Lardet, ed., *Apologie Contre Rufin*, SC 303 (Paris: du Cerf, 1983), 44.

27 "Interpretatio autem recta, si graeco respondet, vitiosa, se non respondet. Itaque omnis interpretatio contentio unius linguae ad alteram est"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 189.

28 "Non ergo an in Graeco sic scriptum est, sed an sic scribi potuit, ut translator noster edixit illis in locis, ubi dire reprehensus est, inquiramus"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 166.

29 "Cum igitur Aristoteles ipse non rationem ab auctoritate, sed auctoritatem a ratione consecutus est, quicquid rationi consonant, haec Aristoteles dixisse putandus est et Graece arbitremur scriptum fuisse, quicquid Latinis verbis translatio nostra sapienter depromit"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 166.

ing" today. Nevertheless, the task of the translator was not to grasp and to express this truth, but only to present a version of the text that would allow the reader to reach its *veritas* by himself. A translator was supposed only to make this *veritas* accessible, rather than express it, since translation was not supposed to interpret in the sense of deciding on a meaning. On the level of terminology, perhaps this can be caught in the distinction between *interpretare* and *intellegere*, the first being the task of the translator, the second the task of the audience, that is to say, the reader or commentator. It is along these lines that Boethius distinguishes between his translation and his commentary on the *Isagoge* of Porphyrus: he was after uncorrupted truth, not beauty of the style, when he translated the work. While he claims he is guilty of translating faithfully, he seems to think this is unavoidable, and should be remedied later via commentaries.[30]

That is one of the reasons why the contamination of Latin with Greek and other foreign expressions does not seem as scandalous to medieval scholars as it does to Bruni, who was obviously brought up on Quintilian's notion of various lexical obscurities to be avoided. Every thought, every concept was thought to have a perfect expression, or rather, a most concise and more precise expression, which needed to be found regardless of the language. A concise foreign word was considered superior to a loose circumscription in Latin, said Alonso.[31]

According to Alonso words are like hostages taken in wartime from the enemy.[32] And in the war of scientific discussion, one needed to be rigorous and accurate, and not to complicate what is simple. He argued that one needs to examine the semantic field of the Latin words, rather than looking for superficial equivalence with Greek, as the Latin term should refer back to the essence of the philosophical discourse, rather

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30 "Secundus hic arreptae expositionis labor nostrae seriem translationis expediet, in qua quidem uereor ne subierim fidi interpretis culpam, cum uerbum uerbo espressum comparatumque reddiderim. Cuius incepti ratio est quod in his scriptis in quibus rerum cognitio quaeritur, non luculentae orationis lepos sed incorrupta ueritas exprimenda est"; *Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii in Isagogen Porphyrii commenta*, ed. S. Brandt, CSEL 48 (Vienna: Tempsky and Leipzig: Freytag, 1906), XVIII.

31 "Nonne melius fuit illa, ut iacebant, dimittere, ut sub nostris refulis declinata inter Latina haberemus, significatione earum per descriptiones et sequentia plene percepta – quam circumlocutionibus totam scripturae seriem perturbare?"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 169.

32 "quasi ab hostibus capta alienas voces et nomina"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 168.

than to the way it was expressed in Greek.[33]

There was, therefore, a crucial difference in the attitude of medieval and humanist translators towards obscurity. For the former, it was a philosophical, theological concept, an admirable quality of dense and concise texts, which could also act as a filter and defend the text from inept readers. Unlocking obscure passages was the role of the commentator rather than the translator. As the Neapolitan hagiographic translations testify, however, not all obscurity was tolerated: narrative texts, especially those used in liturgy, were to be polished in order to facilitate their immediate grasp by the audience.

Humanists, on the other hand, operated with the rhetorical concept of *obscuritas*. Criticism based on such a concept would, however, have been meaningless to medieval translators of philosophical works: they would never have dreamed of trying to find and restore *elegantia* to the Aristotelian corpus[34]—neither would we, for that matter. For humanists, obscurity was a rhetorical vice to be avoided, in contrast with clarity and elegance. Theirs was a purist approach that resented the usage of Greek neologisms or of any technical vocabulary in fact. During the late Renaissance, this conflict over translation methodologies became part of a larger debate between scholastics and humanists, philosophy and rhetoric.[35] As a result, obscurity lost the positive connotations of its

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33 "Quisquis tamen ille fuerit, obscuritate arguendus non est, cum in omnibus fere scientiis textuum conditores brevitati studuerunt. Nam sicut alia principem, alia oratorem decet oratio et aliter iudicem, aliter advocatum congruit loqui, sic textuum ac glossarum non debet similis esse locutio: nam breviter textus nos docet, glossule vero quid textus senserit aperire solent; quod tam in liberalibus artibus, quam in naturalibus scientiis ac iurium doctrinis saepe repertum est, ut, his saepe solis verbis plerumque contenti sint, quibus conceptus sensus includi vix valuit, adeo quod plerique rudimenta artium amore brevitatis adinuenta duxuerunt. Non ergo translationis incusandus est, qui recte intellectus breuibus uniuersa conclusit. Procul dubio enim in primis armis quodammodo translatio haec defendere se uidetur et uiolentiam legentis uir|liter propulsare; sed cum studiosi ingenio uel glossarum auxilio quod conceperit pandere cogitur, sic eius dulce fulget eloquium, ut eius maiestatem mirari cogamur et nedum uerbum aliquod, sed nec syllabam deficere arbitremur, quae obmissa uidebantur, ex industria sic conscripta cernentes"; Birkenmajer, *Der Streit*, 167.

34 The Humanists adhered to Cicero's statement about Aristotle's "pouring forth a golden stream of eloquence" ("flumen orationis aureum fundens Aristoteles"; Cicero, *Academicorum Priorum Liber* II, 38, in Cicero, *De natura deorum. Academica*, trans. H. Rackham [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933], 620–21).

35 Cf. Erika Rummel, *Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation*

semantic field. Medieval translation theory and practice, however, remind us that obscurity is inherent in human discourse: inherent in language, inherent in philosophy, inherent in theology, inherent in translation. It is a manifold and powerful presence that requires a manifold methodology that is genre and audience dependent.

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11: "The battle lines were drawn and the stereotypes established: all scholastic theologians were obscurantists who had never read classical authors, wrote atrocious Latin, and were interested only in esoteric quibbles, while all humanists were grammarians and wordspinners, interested in form rather than substance, pseudo-Christians whose brains had been addled by reading pagan literature."

Obscurity in Medieval Texts

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

SONDERBAND XXX

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Table of Contents

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List of Figures