

Päivi Mehtonen:

Obscure Language, Unclear Literature. Theory and Practice from Quintilian to the Enlightenment

Translated by Robert MacGilleon

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This book is an outstanding study in the history of rhetoric. It deals with the history of a problem of central importance, about which no comprehensive monograph is yet available. It is probably no exaggeration to say that Mehtonen's book approaches the fulfilment of this desideratum more than any other work.

The study centres on the question of how the rhetorical tradition since antiquity has dealt with phenomena of spoken and written language that could be perceived either as difficult to understand ('dark'), complex, unintelligible, or even senseless or nonsensical. The key concept for the naming and evaluation of such phenomena in Latin rhetoric is *obscuritas*. The opposing concepts are *perspicuitas* (*sapheneia* in Greek) and *claritas*. Book VIII, chapters 1 and 2, of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, is one of the canonical documents in this history of style categorisation. However, classical rhetoric does not always opt – and does not, as many claim, opt in principle – for *perspicuitas*. Rhetorical criticism of style therefore involves more than, and often something other than, merely pointing out the devices of *ornatus* that threaten or impede the clarity and transparency of speech. One of the most valuable contributions of Mehtonen's study is that it reveals how we conceive of the relationship between clarity and darkness, lucidity and banality, sense and nonsense. These concepts are not to be thought of as mutually exclusive alternatives, but rather as extremes between which an entire range of mixtures are possible, in accordance with many different variables that appear throughout rhetoric's history. The historical concept that best captures this range of options is *skiagraphia* (Greek). "Skiagraphic balancing" (p. 65), then, means working with several variables, thereby producing a range or spectrum of possibilities rather than mutually opposed alternatives. Drawing attention to the way this mode of thinking and operating is characteristic of 'old rhetoric' is another main contribution of the present study. I am referring here to a principle, 'skiagraphic balancing', which is not usually included as one of the basic concepts of rhetoric, much to the detriment of our picture of rhetoric and its history.

The introduction attempts to sketch a history of obscurity that encompasses the conceptual cornerstones as well as the temporal scope from Quintilian to the twentieth century.

Part I (*Language, Literature and the Trivium*) starts out with the theories of *obscuritas* and its corresponding concepts within the framework of the *artes liberales* in the Latin Christian Middle Ages, especially in the areas of grammar, rhetoric and dialectics, poetics, and Bible exegesis. It soon becomes clear that the decisive questions that continue to puzzle theorists of literature and language were explicitly formulated in the Middle Ages at the latest, and that, even before that time, they had been the subject of extensive discussions.

Part II (*Philosophy and the Rise of Metapoetics and Metarhetoric*) begins with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and deals, in the first place, with the reception of the topics treated in the trivial disciplines before addressing the same issues within the contexts of Cartesianism and the Enlightenment. Mehtonen appropriately devotes a substantial degree of attention to the reception of Quintilian, whose influence may have been even more pronounced in the Early Modern Period than in Antiquity. She also places special emphasis on the tendency in the Modern Period to change ‘obscurity’ into a positive concept (*Positivierung*). But even here historical precedents are considered. One needs only to think of the traditions of hermetics, astrology, pansophy, etc., which reach far into the past and were able to blossom fully in the Early Modern Period. There seems to be at this time a deepening sense of the old conception that wisdom and truth are basically as yet unknown, and that true knowledge is tied to the darkness of night, to enigmas, puzzles, and secrets. This way of looking at knowledge stands in opposition to Cartesianism, and seems to have become more intense through what Mehtonen calls the “crisis of meaning in philosophy and poetry” (pp. 153ff). ‘Obscurantism’ also stems from rhetorical *obscuritas* and became a negative term in the vocabulary of the *Trivialaufklärung*, above all in Germany. In the context of the Early Modern Period it definitely also has some positive connotations, as Mehtonen reminds us. Even in the texts of Baumgarten, who was truly no hermetic writer, the *descriptio poetica* (‘poetic description’) is especially poetic when it is described in a muddled way, “confuse describatur” (pp. 180 and 181). The detailed chapter about the rhetorician George Campbell, who, unlike Edmund Burke, remained – or perhaps became over time – largely unknown, provides, not least from a German viewpoint, strikingly new insights, especially when it comes to his theory of obscurity in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776).

Throughout the study, not only in the chapters about the Early Modern and Modern Periods, the author raises many questions belonging to the agenda of the so-called post-modern Modern Period. The book may therefore appeal even to those readers who might otherwise have objected to a study dealing with ‘old rhetoric’ only. In fact, the possible objection that this is a work which deals exclusively with some far-away past cannot be made for two reasons, one being that the author always strives to demonstrate that the ‘old’ questions are still valid today, another being that she continuously interrupts her attempts at reconstruction with references to and digressions into more or less contemporary parallels and discussions.

However, my main criticism of this study begins precisely with this connecting of the past to current concerns. Underlying Mehtonen’s investigation is an assumption of continuity, an insinuation that the meaning of concepts and debates may be transferred from one period of time to another, which I find quite problematic, especially since this assumption is allowed to remain completely implicit and apparently unrecognised.

Why, I should like to ask in general, must the intense preoccupation with the history of tradition, with key concepts of the tradition of rhetoric, be legitimised through the establishment of a connection to ‘modern’ or ‘current’ problems and writers? Is this manner of legitimising past traditions justified, in turn, by the naive belief that what is closest to us in terms of time and place is also the most relevant? That would be a case of ‘hermeneutic presentism’ in the style of Gadamer, for which, taken in this respect, I have no understanding.

Instead of obsessively connecting the most interesting findings from Quintilian to Campbell with modern rhetoric, with Shklovskij, Mallarmé, or Queneau, or with the ‘theories’ of the so-called Post-Modern Period (in itself a sort of pseudo-concept that disguises and disfigures the problems of the late Modern Era more than it characterises and explains them), I think it would have been far more productive and instructive if Mehtonen had provided a more detailed analysis of certain writers and fields of interest in the Early Modern Period. I fear that no one will really benefit from the attempt to make topical the history of a tradition (*Aktualisierung der*

Traditionsgeschichte), because it contributes nothing to the knowledge of ‘old rhetoric’ and too little to that of the Early Modern and Modern Periods.

In any case, this reader would really have liked to learn more about *skiagraphia* from such an outstanding expert on the history of rhetoric as Mehtonen.¹ I would especially have wanted to know more about how the concept was used and defined in the Early Modern Period, and not only by Baumgarten, whose work came late in the tradition.² It seems to me that, within the European context, Baumgarten is really only of moderate interest as a philosopher or author of theory, except maybe as the first user of the term *Aesthetica* in the modern philosophical vocabulary. As for *claritas/obscuritas* it appears that, considering the long span of time from Descartes to Gassendi to Leibniz, the references to these important concepts are too general. There are also other exciting and, as yet, not well explored topics, which would have deserved more than the occasional mention, such as the relationship of *obscuritas* to *paradox*, which was known in the British scholarly culture of the Early Modern Period as an ‘epidemic’ predilection, or the relevance of issues of style to the *ancients/moderns* debate and to the *Querelle*.

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¹ On key concepts of medieval rhetoric and *Erzähltheorie* see Mehtonen’s most illuminating study: *Old Concepts and New Poetics. Historia, Argumentum, and Fabula in the Twelfth- and Early Thirteenth-Century Latin Poetics of Fiction* (Helsinki, 1996).

² Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten: *Skiagraphia encyclopaediae philosophicae* (Halle, 1769).