

PÄIVI MEHTONEN: *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature. Theory and Practice from Quintilian to the Enlightenment*. Translated by ROBERT MACGILLEON. *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Humaniora* 320, Helsinki 2003. ISBN 951-41-0911-2. 228 pp. EUR 38.90.

This book is a comprehensive study of the history of the notion of obscurity in the field of rhetoric and literary studies. "Obscurity" is defined as a textual feature, which can be either deliberate or involuntary. An obscure writer is one whose meaning is difficult to understand. Elliptical style and use of archaic words or ornate language are traditional examples of textual devices creating obscurity. Obscurity is treated in this book as a technical term in literary history, and Mehtonen explains many different standpoints for sources and types of obscurity.

The writer promises in this book to trace the contexts in which grammarians, rhetoricians, dialecticians and scholars of poetics have voiced their opinions either for or against obscurity. Mehtonen makes clear statements about the interlacing of the disciplines of the *trivium* (for example the debate about whether clarity is a grammatical or a rhetorical quality of language), and persuasively introduces the *artes liberales* and the history of the system. This background information provided in Part I is one of the most useful aspects of the study. As the writer points out in the epilogue of this book, obscurity rests on the ancient legacy of rhetorico-poetological rules, and divergence from these rules may itself become the rule. Therefore the codes of rhetoric, grammar and poetics are to be seen as less uniform and normative than subsequent generations have been willing to acknowledge.

A central figure in theories of obscurity in both ancient and early modern rhetoric is Quintilian, whose categorisations of style form a starting point for Mehtonen's discussion of *obscuritas* and its definitions. Quintilian is perceived as a boundary mark between the language of Cicero and the evolving Christian discourse. Mehtonen points out that especially book eight of *Institutio oratoria* has been seen by later writers, linguists and art theoreticians as a summary of many important points concerning *obscuritas* and *perspicuitas*. Other ancient writers receiving attention in this book are Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, Varro and Sextus Empiricus. Another essential writer, according to Mehtonen, is St. Augustine, whose *De doctrina christiana* was in fact a defence of obscurity. Biblical obscurity – a central problem for all Christian writers throughout the ages – is discussed in the context of the Augustinian doctrine of signs.

From antiquity, the Church Fathers and the Middle Ages, Mehtonen proceeds all the way to the early modern era (c. 1500–1750), Cartesianism, and finally to the legacy of ancient rhetorical theory in Baumgarten (1714–1762) and Campbell (1719–1796). Mehtonen explains the continuum of obscurity theories as an alteration of various "isms", one prominent line running from medieval Ciceronism to early modern Quintilianism. Nevertheless, a history of an idea is not easy to bring together into a consistent description or, as Mehtonen puts it: "The line between obscurity of language and *writing* of the obscurity of language was – and is – exasperatingly thin." There are some problems in the readability and coherence of this book, although it still seems to be a useful literary-historical tool for anyone interested in the reception of classical disciplines through the centuries.

*Inkeri Kinnari*