



Päivi Mehtonen, *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature: Theory and Practice from Quintilian to the Enlightenment*. Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia Toimituksia Humaniora 320. Helsinki: The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters 2003. 228 pages.

The post-modern world has become obsessed with obscurity and nonsense. This fascination has spread into contemporary philosophy as well; one reason for this (although certainly not the only one) is something which Wittgenstein writes about in the Preface to the *Tractatus*. There he claims that “the book will ... draw a limit to thinking, or rather – not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts The limit can ... only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.”

Wittgenstein suggests in this passage that he will outline in his book a limit to what can be thought and that this limit can only be drawn in language; in other words, what cannot be expressed with language cannot be thought. We cannot go outside our own language, and, according to Wittgenstein, what lies beyond the limits of language is simply nonsense. A very interesting book which has recently explored the limit Wittgenstein points to and how this limit has been expressed throughout history is Graham Priest’s *Beyond the Limit of Thought* (OUP 2002).

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is itself a very obscure work, particularly since an articulation of the limits of our thought will be by necessity obscure or nonsensical. To be able to set up a limit one has to say where that limit is; to do this, one must express something that goes beyond language itself, but

because this is beyond language it cannot be anything but nonsense. Wittgenstein's project is thus doomed from the start and entangled in contradiction.

This does not hinder some philosophers from being interested and fascinated by the project and the limits of thought. Some would even say that this is what philosophy is. However, it seems to me that this fascination says more about the human psyche than about the nature of philosophy. We humans seem to be drawn to the obscure and it is no surprise that thinkers ever since antiquity have been discussing the nature of obscurity and how to draw a line between the obscure and the clear. A recent book by the Tampere-based Finnish scholar Päivi Mehtonen, *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature: Theory and Practice from Quintilian to the Enlightenment* traces the history of the notion of 'obscurity'.

In her book, the history of obscurity takes its beginnings in an ancient rhetorical tradition. A key figure seems to be Quintilian, who, in his widely influential work *Institutio oratoria*, warns against using an unclear and unintelligible style in rhetoric, and then gives a full list of what in his view leads to obscurity in speech. He mentions the use of rare and outdated words, regional or dialectic expressions, technical jargon, the abuse of metaphors, the misuse of figures, ambiguity, confused word order, etc. He thus sets a standard for both obscurity and clarity and then begins a discussion on obscurity.

The discussion of obscurity is naturally taken over by the Christian authors of the Middle Ages. The Bible is by no means a clear work – on the contrary, it is highly obscure and riddled with metaphorical expressions, which a great deal of interpretation is required to make sense of. In his important work *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine discusses the nature of the obscurities found in the Bible and the Christian doctrines in general. He develops his famous theory of signs as a tool to study obscure texts and the Bible in particular.

In the Middle Ages, the discussion of the concept of obscurity developed into theories of interpretation, and, as Mehtonen explains, the obsession with dialectics or logic we find in the Middle Ages can be seen as an attempt to form a platform for the clarity of thought or writing. The medieval discussion of obscurity can also be linked to the development of theology. Theology is then seen foremost as a discipline developed to interpret the scripture and the church fathers.

Mehtonen links early modern discussions of this concept primarily to philosophy and its search for a method. Obscurity is then primarily seen as

something science and philosophy should avoid and poetry is put forward as a prime example of obscure literature. In Hobbes' *Leviathan*, clarity is strongly defended, while Dante's *Divine Comedy* is used as an example of unclear poetry.

The tradition of rhetoric and the influence of Quintilian can also be seen in the eighteenth century. Mehtonen ends her book with a chapter on the Scottish philosopher George Campbell. After the philosophers' attacks on literature, or poetry, there was a need to defend these, and Campbell does just that. In the tradition of Quintilian, he is an advocate of clarity, but he also seeks to develop a theory for interpreting the obscurity and unclarity of literature or speech in general.

However, as Mehtonen notes, Campbell is a traditional thinker on the issue of obscurity since he thinks obscurity is appropriate for prophetic utterances and certain poetry, although it should be otherwise generally avoided. He therefore only gives a limited justification for obscurity. In the last pages of Mehtonen's book, this traditional view is contrasted with the post-modern view of language which I mention at the beginning of this review. In contemporary thought, 'nonsense' has become the paradigmatic model for language and literature. Campbell gives a 'clear' division and analysis of different kinds of nonsense in language, but for him it stays a type of language use that is best avoided.

Mehtonen's book is very interesting and convincingly shows that a way of approaching literature thought to be very modern or, rather, post-modern in fact has a long and interesting history. It is also encouraging that the tradition which started and to a large extent is still continuing in the field of rhetoric sees obscurity or nonsense as a phenomenon best avoided. They try to develop interpretative tools to bring clarity to obscure texts, not the opposite.

Considering the time span and materials it covers, this is, at only 220 pages, a rather short book. I therefore find that it lacks discussions of movements in history which have been accused of being obscure, such as neo-Platonism and the medieval mystical traditions. Some of the medieval mystics discussed language and the way it mediates one's relation with God. Mehtonen also depicts early modern philosophy and science as a tradition that promotes clarity or prioritizes clarity. This is certainly true of some thinkers – Descartes, for example, makes clarity a part of his philosophical method, but Mehtonen forgets to mention the mystical tradition inspired by Plato which came to exist parallel to modern science and of which many

famous scientists have been a part. Clarity and obscurity went hand in hand in early modern philosophy and science.

However, the most serious shortcoming of the book is its lack of an understanding of medieval dialectics or logic. The view Mehtonen presents of medieval logic is derived from early modern figures such as Vives and Ramus, and they had very little positive to say about this logical tradition. In their view, medieval logic was highly obscure, but in the eyes of a twentieth century analytic philosopher, medieval logic is a high point of clarity and sophistication.

The weak passages on medieval logic are, however, representative of the part of the book which discusses the Middle Ages. She not only forgets to treat medieval mysticism, but much of the medieval rhetorical tradition as well – something I would have liked to see a discussion of, especially as it (as far as I know) was very much influenced by Quintilian.

These shortcomings aside, I find Mehtonen's book a true scholarly achievement. It brings to light a historical tradition that has been largely neglected. Her way of writing the history of an idea reminds me of Lovejoy's seminal work *The Great Chain of Being*, and this is a true ideal to aim for – although a very hard one to reach.

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