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Calcidius against Plato's *obscuritas* (again)

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Carlo DELLE DONNE
Sapienza-Università di Roma
carlo.delledonne@uniroma1.it
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3146-3759>

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Abstract

At a certain point of his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* (317.15 ff. Wazink), Calcidius sets out to distinguish different kinds of obscurity that can affect a text. The first to be analysed is the *obscuritas iuxta dicentem*: in this case, *obscuritas* is said to depend on either a decision (*studio*) made by the author (this was the case of both Aristotle and Heraclitus), or the inefficacy of language (*imbecillitas sermonis*). Secondly, Calcidius takes into account the *obscuritas iuxta audientem*, i.e. that particular kind of obscurity which is due to both the novelty and even the oddity of the discourse (*cum inaudita et insolita dicuntur*), and the intellectual inadequacy of the listener (*cum is qui audit pigriore ingenio est ad intellegendum*). Thirdly, Calcidius mentions a kind of obscurity which is said to be *iuxta rem*. In other words, this obscurity is relative to any *res* (i.e. any object of analysis) which is such that it cannot be precisely and immediately understood. Note that Calcidius takes this to be the case of Plato's *chora*: for, neither it can be perceived through the means of sense perception, nor it can be intellectually grasped. But, as Calcidius clarifies, the presence of a certain degree of obscurity in a text does not necessarily put its veritative value at risk, just as the being true of a text does not automatically entail its being clearly expressed (*non statim quae vere dicuntur aperte etiam manifesteque dicuntur*). Unfortunately, to this ancient example of hermeneutics no extensive study has ever been devoted, as Professor Franco Ferrari has often pointed out. So, my objective is to extensively scrutinise the general classification of *obscuritates* provided by Calcidius and then to relate it to the Middle Platonic strategies aimed at neutralising Plato's *obscuritas*.

Keywords: Calcidius; Plato; obscurity.

οἴονται μὲν οὖν τινες ἐπίτηδες ἀσαφεῖς αὐτὸν ποιῆσαι τοὺς νόμους, ὅπως ἢ τῆς κρίσεως ὁ δῆμος κύριος. (Aristot. *Ath. Cost.* 9.2)¹

The hermeneutic problems posed by textual obscurity have often been placed under scrutiny by ancient authors. Galen, for example, provides his readers with a sort of catalogue as to how to deal with Hippocrates’ *asapheia*². First of all, if he comes across an obscure expression, the exegete is supposed to cast doubts over the *textus traditus*, collating the *antigrapha* and testing the genuineness of their readings; second, if a reading is found to be sound, the exegete has to reread the text several times, until he works out its correct meaning:

[T1] [...] ἐάν τινα λέξιν ὧν ἐξηγησάμην ἀσαφὲς ἔχειν τι νομίσης, ἐπίσκεψαι μὲν πρῶτον εἰ μὲν τὸ βιβλίον ἡμάρτηται σου, παραβάλλον τε καὶ ἀντεξετάζων τοῖς ἀξιοπίστοις ἀντιγράφοις· εἴτ’ ἂν ὀρθῶς ἔχειν φαίνεται, δευτερόν τε καὶ τρίτον ἀνάγνωθι τὴν αὐτὴν λέξιν προσέχων ἀκριβῶς αὐτῇ τὸν νοῦν. (*Hipp. Fract.* p. 321 Kühn)

In addition to Galen, many other sources could be mentioned on the same issue. But the relevant body of evidence has already been explored by scholars.³ The best contribution is surely Ineke Sluiter’s *Obscurity*.⁴ She offers to the reader a broad picture of the “obscurity dossier”, and she clearly and efficaciously reconstructs the different historical contexts, authors, problems, hermeneutic strategies regarding obscurity in Antiquity. Nonetheless, she does not examine one of the most outstanding passages about obscurity – Calcidius’ *Commentary* on Plato’s *Timaeus*, chapter 322 (Waszink). The purpose of my paper is to shed light on this neglected⁵ account:

[T2] Deinde progreditur: “Atque hoc quod de ea dicitur verum est quidem, et dicendum videtur apertius”, quia non statim quae vere dicuntur aperte etiam manifesteque dicuntur. Multae quippe orationes verae quidem sed obscurae; nascitur quippe obscuritas vel dicentis non numquam voluntate

1. This paper is a renewed and significantly broader version of Delle Donne 2020. I would like to thank Mónica Durán Mañas for her encouragement, Anna Motta for her helpful comments and the anonymous reviewers for their important suggestions.

2. On Galen’s exegetical and philological method, see Manetti-Roselli 1994; Roselli 1991, 2004, 2012, 2015, 2020.

3. For example, the Stoic material has been collected and examined by Atherton 1993.

4. Sluiter 2016; see also Kantahk (2013) on the same issue.

5. Some interesting suggestions can be found in Ferrari (2001: 532) and (2010: 62-64).

vel audientis vitio vel ex natura rei de qua tractatus est. Iuxta dicentem fit obscuritas, cum vel studio dataque opera dogma suum velat auctor, ut fecerunt Aristoteles et Heraclitus, vel ex imbecillitate sermonis, iuxta audientem vero, vel cum inaudita et insolita dicuntur vel cum is qui audit pigriore ingenio est ad intellegendum, iuxta rem porro, cum talis erit, qualis est haec ipsa de qua nunc sermo nobis est, ut neque ullo sensu contingi neque intellectu comprehendi queat, utpote carens forma, sine qualitate, sine fine. Sed neque Timaeus, qui disserit, instabilis orator nec audientes tardi; restat ut res ipsa difficilis et obscura sit.

II

Calcidius confronts us with many aporetic aspects. First of all, his life is obscure and controversial. It has been hotly debated by scholars whether he was Christian or not⁶, when and where he lived precisely⁷, whom he addresses as the commentary’s recipient (Osius)⁸, which sources he could count on and actually deploy⁹. I won’t discuss these issues here¹⁰, apart from the sources; but I will look into them only as far as his treatment of obscurity is concerned. In accordance with what Hoenig and Reydam-Schils¹¹ have maintained, I will conclude to Calcidius’ intellectually autonomous and even original use of his (probable) sources.

First of all, obscurity emerges from Calcidius’ work not only as a problematic topic. To a certain extent, obscurity is the essential property of Calcidius’ oeuvre as such. For what he has handed down to us is a (partial) Latin *translation* of Plato’s *Timaeus*, along with a detailed (and partial) commentary. But what kind of relationship links a literary model (such as the *Timaeus*) and its linguistic reproduction (such as Calcidius’ translation)? In the dedicatory letter to Osius (6 Waszink), the author puts forward an unprecedented theory:

6. See Bakhouche (2011: I, 42-44) for a balanced discussion.

7. See the *status quaestionis* by Bakhouche 2011: I, 7-8.

8. On his identity, see Bakhouche 2011: I, 8-13.

9. A detailed *status quaestionis* can be found in Bakhouche 2011: I, 34-41.

10. On the *Commentary* in general and on specific aspects, see also den Boeft 1970; den Boeft 1977; Gersh 1986: 421-492; Moreschini 2003: VII-LXXXIV; Reydam-Schils 2007, 2020; Somfai 2004; van Winden 1959.

11. Hoenig (2018: 163) and Reydam-Schils (2020: 20, and *passim*).

[T3] Itaque parui certus non sine divino instinctu id mihi a te munus iniungi proptereaque alacriore mente speque confirmatiore primas partes Timaei Platonis aggressus non solum transtuli sed etiam partis eiusdem commentarium feci putans reconditae rei simulacrum sine interpretationis explanatione aliquanto obscurius ipso exemplo futurum.

Calcidius reads a linguistic and cultural problem (translation) through the lens of Platonism (the dualism model/copy). In all this, the crucial term is *obscurius*. The relationship between a model (*exemplum*) and its copy (*simulacrum*) is inevitably affected by obscurity¹². In particular, a Latin translation (like Calcidius’ one) of a Greek text (like Plato’s *Timaeus*) is obscure precisely because a translation, a *copy*, always falls short of the original text, the *model*. In every reproduction, be it linguistic or ontological (see next paragraph), there is a reduction of clarity. As also Photius explains (*Amphilochia*, 152), every translation is necessarily obscure, because it entails a trans-linguistic operation:

[T4] Ἡ ἐν ταῖς θείαις γραφαῖς ἀσάφεια πολλὰς ἔχει τὰς αἰτίας. πρῶτον μὲν ὅτι πᾶσα γλῶσσα εἰς ἑτέραν μετατιθεμένη¹³ ἀπόλλυσι τὸν ἴδιον εἰρμόν.

As a consequence, every literary reproduction – every translation – is in the need of an *interpretatio*, a *commentarium* (*simulacrum sine interpretationis explanatione aliquanto obscurius*), in order to reduce the inevitably obscure appearance of its content:

[T5] Sola translatione contentus non fui ratus obscuri minimeque illustris exempli simulacrum sine interpretatione translatum in eiusdem aut etiam maioris obscuritatis vitio futurum.

As is evident, this first form of obscurity regards the status of translation as a particular instance of the process of reproduction. But it also gives us a clue as to the authorial reasons for the literary structure of Calcidius’ work as a whole – we are given a *commentarium*, along with the Latin translation. In other words, this sort of obscurity has also a “meta-textual” value, since it sheds

12. For clarity and absence of clarity as ontological markers in the model-copy relationship, see Pl. R. VI 511, 512-514 with Delle Donne 2019.

13. Obscurity could be brought about also by another form of “translation” (*metathetis*), which would occur «at the moment of passage [...] to an alphabet distinguishing between *epsilon* and *eta* and between *omicron* and *omega*, coming from an alphabet that did not have these distinctions» (Roselli 2020: 65).

light on the reason why Calcidius’ work stands as it does. It voices Calcidius as a self-conscious author¹⁴.

But Calcidius’ remarks on his translation are revealing also for another reason. The text he is commenting on – the *Timaeus* – describes the complex relationship between a model, the intellegible realm, and its copy, the sensible world; and the partial lack of clarity of the latter, its deficiency, depends on its being a mere (though accurate) reproduction. Only Plato’s mastery, only Plato’s dialogue, is able to clarify (as much as possible) the aporetic sides of this cosmological framework. His dialogue, the *Timaeus, comments* on cosmogony, which equates to an *obscure* reproduction. Upon closer scrutiny, Calcidius’ commentary plays the same role as Plato’s *Timaeus*¹⁵: the former enlightens an obscure *linguistic* reproduction (the translation), whereas the latter sheds light on an analogously obscure *ontological* reproduction (our sensible world). In a nutshell, Plato’s cosmology and Calcidius’ *Commentary* share the same model/copy relationship, which innervates their structure, with the same undesirable effect of a considerable amount of obscurity on the part of the copies¹⁶.

III

But when it comes to *obscuritas*, there is more to it than this. For in the case of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the *exemplum* itself is *reconditum* (cf. *reconditae rei simulacrum*). Obscurity affects also the original, the *Timaeus*, along with the copy, because the former deals with the “bastard” *chora*¹⁷. Therefore, Calcidius’ purpose is to identify the kind of obscurity peculiar to Plato’s text, as [T2] above makes it clear. Actually, Plato’s *obscuritas* – with particular reference to the *Timaeus* – had often been examined before Calcidius, within the exegetical tradition. What is absolutely remarkable about Calcidius’ treatment of obscurity is that he provides us with one of the most detailed and accurate *taxonomies* of this phenomenon.

14. Reydam-Schils 2020: 13: «it allows him to instate himself as an author, with a strong first-person voice that he will maintain throughout the commentary. By relying on the model/copy analogy Calcidius expresses his awareness of his important role and responsibility». See already Bakhouche 2011: I, 41.

15. Hoenig 2018: 166-167, 173.

16. See also Reydam-Schils 2020: 12: «With his commentary he comes to the aid of his readers by creating the bridge between the model, the *Timaeus*, and the copy, his translation. In doing so he, not unlike Plato’s character *Timaeus*, performs the philosopher’s task of providing a bridge between the sensible and intelligible realms and redirecting the audience’s gaze towards the truth».

17. On Plato’s *chora*, see at least Ferrari (2007) and Fronterotta (2014).

And, at the very end of the examination, he concludes to the intrinsic obscurity of the *chora*: Plato’s subject is obscure, therefore also the dialogue is obscure. Sure, on occasion, *Timaeus*’ obscurity is said to depend also on some intellectual deficiency on the part of the reader; at the very beginning of his *Commentary*¹⁸, Calcidius explicitly contemplates this possibility:

[T6] *Timaeus Platonis et a veteribus difficilis habitus atque existimatus est ad intellegendum, non ex imbecillitate sermonis obscuritate nata – quid enim illo viro promptius? –, sed quia legentes artificiosae rationis, quae operatur in explicandis rerum quaestionibus, usum non habebant, stili genere sic instituto, ut non alienigenis sed propriis quaestionum probationibus id quod in tractatum venerat ostenderetur.*

But this form of obscurity is not particularly revealing to Calcidius’ eyes, because it is subject-dependent and hence it can be solved. You only need to get accustomed to Plato’s *artificiosa ratio*¹⁹. In other words, the *Timaeus* appeared to be *difficilis ad intellegendum* to the ancient readers – and to people like them – because they were, and are, not familiar with Plato’s conceptual framework. Already Galen²⁰ had maintained that Plato’s *Timaeus* required specific knowledge from the reader, otherwise it could come across as obscure to him (*cf. is modo intellegere potest qui in hac disciplina se exercitaverit*):

[T7] *nos autem eas notiones quas Timaeus in hoc libro expressit non eadem ratione in artum coegimus qua in ceteris (Platonis) libris usi sumus, quorum notiones in artum coegimus. In illis enim libris sermo eius abundans et diffusus (fuit), in hoc autem libro brevissimus est, tam a constricto et obscuro sermone Aristotelis quam a diffuso illo quem Plato in reliquis suis libris (adhibuit) remotus. Si autem in oratione aliquid constricti et obscuri inesse putas²¹, hoc perpaucum esse scito. Quodsi animum huic rei adieceris, manifestum tibi erit hoc non obscuritate sermonis in se per se fieri, sicut accidit lectori qui parum intellegit quando ipsi sermoni genus aliquid indistinctum*

18. The passage is quoted also by Kraus-Walzer 1951: 35 n. *ad loc.*

19. Reydam-Schils 2020: 11: «[...] in what he calls *artificiosa ratio*, that is, in arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy». See also Chapter 2, 18-21: *cunctis certarum disciplinarum artificialibus remediis occurrendum erat, arithmetice astronomicis geometricis musicis, quo singulae res domesticis et consanguineis rationibus explicarentur*. On this point, see also Hoenig 2018: 165-166 n. 27.

20. Gal. *Comp. Tim.* 1.8-23 Kraus-Walzer, in Ferrari 1998: 18 ff.. See also Kraus-Walzer 1951: 35 n. *ad loc.*

21. On the relationship between *brevitas* and *obscuritas*, see also Aristot. *Rh.* 1414a25-26 and Cic. *de orat.* 2, 326.

(et) obscurum inest. Sermo vero in se obscurus ille est <...; sermo autem qui in se obscurus non est, ille est> quem is modo intellegere potest qui in hac disciplina se exercitaverit.

But as I said, Calcidius does not believe that Plato’s obscurity in the dialogue only (or mainly) depends on the degree of expertise of the readers. The dialogue is obscure because it deals with obscure matters (like the *chora*): *restat ut res ipsa difficilis et obscura sit*, [T2]. Therefore, unlike Galen, Calcidius maintains that the *Timaeus* is obscure *in se per se*, regardless of the degree of expertise of the reader. So, in order to grasp Plato’s doctrines, one only needs an efficacious commentary, like Calcidius’ one, which is meant to clarify what the previous commentaries²² on the *Timaeus* had not clarified at all:

[T8] Ex quo apparet hoc opus illis propemodum solis elaboratum esse ac videri qui in omnium fuerant huius modi scientiarum usu atque exercitatione versati; quos cum oporteret tantam scientiae claritudinem communicare cum ceteris, infelicis invidiae detestabili restrictione largae beatitudinis fusionem incommunicabilem penes se retinuerunt. (chapter 3 W.)

IV

Calcidius’ remarks on textual obscurity originate from a specific passage in Plato’s *Timaeus* (49a6-7, εἴρηται μὲν οὖν τὰ ληθέες, δεῖ δὲ ἐναργέστερον εἰπεῖν περὶ αὐτοῦ), which is translated by Calcidius as follows: *Atque hoc quod de ea dicitur verum est quidem, et dicendum videtur apertius*. With reference to the first description of the *chora*, Plato has Timaeus say that what has been maintained is

22. Bakhouché (2011: I, 42) is surely right when she maintains that «si cette attaque paraît ici cibler les écoles de philosophes professionnels, elle signe également une rupture avec la tradition platonicienne». Calcidius vindicates a direct acquaintance with Plato’s text, regardless of the previous (elitarian) exegetical tradition: see also Reydam-Schils 2020: 20. Besides, as for the importance of sharing knowledge, Reydam-Schils (2020: 14 n. 14) refers to Seneca’s *Epistle* 6, 4: *Ego vero omnia in te cupio transfundere, et in hoc aliquid gaudeo discere, ut doceam. Nec me ulla res delectabit, licet sit eximia et salutaris, quam mihi uni sciturus sum. Si cum hac exceptione detur sapientia, ut illam inclusam teneam nec enuntiem, reiciam. Nullius boni sine socio iucunda possessio est*. The scholar offers an interesting reading of Calcidius’ polemics: «Calcidius could have been trying to forestall a potential criticism from Christian quarters and a prejudice against the elitism and exclusivity of so-called pagan and Platonist philosophy. This reading in itself does not imply that Calcidius is a Christian but merely suggests that his addressee may be, allowing us to see Calcidius’ move here as a concession in an overall strategy to ensure Osius’ goodwill and capture his attention».

true but, nonetheless, it could – and actually should – have been expressed in a more perspicuous way. The theme emerging from this piece of text is the relation between truth and clarity, or absence of clarity, in the philosophical discourse²³. In Timaeus’ words, Calcidius detects an example of a widespread and rather problematic connection existing between *veritas* and *obscuritas*. That this connection is rather common, is soon made clear by Calcidius himself: *quia non statim quae vere dicuntur aperte etiam manifesteque dicuntur*. In many discourses, an evident combination of truth and obscurity can be found: *multae quippe orationes verae quidem sed obscurae*. But for the philosopher – *i.e.* the exegete²⁴ – the text represents an authority; and every authority needs to be explained, justified and defended in each and everyone of its aporetic aspects²⁵. In other words, first of all it needs to be clarified, if it is somehow unclear. Therefore, in every authority, the virtual or real divergence between its fully veritative value and the obscurity of its expressive form, should be efficaciously tackled by the exegete. As a consequence, *interpreting* amounts to *clarifying* what is problematic and hence obscure. Thus, obscurity is the condition of possibility of the exegetical practice itself: as Jonathan Barnes puts it²⁶, «clarity is a virtue, obscurity is a vice. [...] Obscurity demands treatment – and the treatment lies in the hands of scholarship and of the commentator». This idea clearly underlies Calcidius’ work: the commentary itself serves the purpose of clarifying what is not clear either in the Greek text, or in the Latin translation. From this perspective, Calcidius proves himself to fully belong to the previous exegetical tradition. Galen, for example, repeatedly defends this conception of exegesis as a clarifying practice²⁷. In the *Hipp. fract.* p. 318 K., he states:

23. On this issue, in addition to Sluiter 2016, see Barnes 1992; Hadot 1987: 23; Manetti 1998: 1213-1217; Mansfeld 1994: 148-161.

24. See also SEN. epist. 108, 23: *Sed aliquid praecipientium vitio peccatur, qui nos docent disputare, non vivere, aliquid discentium, qui propositum adferunt ad praeceptores suos non animum excolendi, sed ingenium. Itaque quae philosophia fuit, facta philologia est*; 33.8: *Omnes itaque istos, numquam auctores, semper interpretes sub aliena umbra latentes, nihil existimo habere generosi, autem est meminisse, aliud scire. Meminisse est rem commissam memoriae custodire. At contra scire est et sua facere quaeque nec ad exemplar pendere et totiens respicere ad magistrum*. See Hadot 1987; Donini 2011: 211-282; Ferrari 2001; Sedley (1989) and (1997).

25. Sluiter (2016: 34) is surely right in detecting something of a contradiction in all this: if the text is foundational, it must be perfect and hence also clear; but the very existence of several commentary traditions «implicitly acknowledges that the text is not clear».

26. Barnes 1992: 270.

27. From this perspective, his *De captionibus* is of utmost importance: see Roselli 2015. In this treatise, Galen maintains that the purpose of language is teaching, but if it is unclear, or ambiguous, it does not teach at all. Therefore, scientific language should be thoroughly clear.

[T9] Πρὸ τῆς τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἐξηγήσεως ἄμεινον ἀκηκοέναι καθόλου περὶ πάσης ἐξηγήσεως, ὡς ἔστιν ἡ δύναμις αὐτῆς, ὅσα τῶν ἐν τοῖς συγγράμμασιν ἔστιν ἀσαφῆ, ταῦτ’ ἐργάσασθαι σαφῆ.

And yet, to Calcidius’ eyes the relationship between the truth of an authoritative text and the obscurity of its expression is not something simple, let alone uniform. Quite the opposite, in fact. According to him, the nature of obscurity (along with its purpose) deserves an accurate analysis and even a general theorisation: this “treatise” – so to speak – is [T2]. Such an approach is necessary to understand the genetic process of the obscurity of a piece of text like Plato’s account of the *chora*; for, by means of an aetiology of obscurity, the reader is given the opportunity to grasp its communicative aim; and grasping the communicative aim of obscurity gives him a clue as to which is the authorial truth embedded in the text.

V

Calcidius contemplates three genetic hypotheses of textual obscurity. 1) The first one might be described as “voluntaristic”, as it identifies the responsible factor for textual obscurity with the determination of the author’s will (*vel dicentis non numquam voluntate*). In this case, obscurity responds to a peculiar authorial strategy of knowledge transmission. 2) The second hypothesis regards the potential inadequacy of the recipient of the text (*vel audientis vitio*). In other words, obscurity might be a merely subjective phenomenon, which can be brought about by the *vitium* of the reader (see also [T7]). In this case, the text as such could not be charged with any form of “co-responsibility”, when it comes to the emergence of obscurity. The latter would consequently be independent from the expressive, or linguistic, or content-related dimension, and it would thoroughly fall into the sphere of the listener’s cognitive or cultural level. Therefore, regardless of the author’s intentions, and of the linguistic form of the philosophical discourse, obscurity might occur (and potentially fade away) *a latere audientis*. 3) The third and last option considered by Calcidius involves the degree of obscurity of the matter as such (*ex natura rei de qua tractatus est*). This kind of obscurity is eminently content-related; as a consequence, it turns out to be inherent to the text, as it directly and inevitably stems from the complexity of the subject communicated by the text.

Upon closer reading, this classification is partially in line with what can be found in the previous exegetical tradition. Galen is again worth mentioning. In the *Hipp. fract.* XVIII B 319 K., he distinguishes between a “real obscurity”,

«which is what it is because of itself», and another one which is “relational”, in the sense that it comes about only when the interaction between the text and the reader takes place:

[T10] δέδεικται δὲ ἐν ἐκείνῳ τὸ μὲν ὄντως ἀσαφὲς αὐτὸ δι’ ἑαυτὸ τοιοῦτον ὑπάρχον, τὸ δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πρότερον τὴν γένεσιν οὐκ ἔχον, ἐπειδὴ τῶν ἀκουόντων τοῦ λόγου διαφοραὶ πάμπολλαι τυγχάνουσιν οὔσαι κατὰ τε τὸ προπαιδεύεσθαι καὶ γεγυμνάσθαι περὶ λόγους ἢ παντάπασι γε ἀγυμνάστους ὑπάρχειν, εἶναι τε φύσει τοὺς μὲν ὀξεῖς τε καὶ συνετοὺς, τοὺς δὲ ἀμβλεῖς καὶ ἀσυνέτους.

The form of obscurity missing in Galen’s account is the “voluntary” one, which is nonetheless widely attested in the rhetorical and exegetical traditions. In Cicero’s *De finibus* (2, 15), for example, we read:

[T11] et tamen vide ne, si ego non intellegam quid Epicurus loquatur, cum Graece, ut videor, luculenter sciam, sit aliqua culpa eius, qui ita loquatur, ut non intellegatur. quod 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, non verborum, facit ut non intellegatur oratio, qualis est in Timaeo Platonis. Epicurus autem, ut opinor, nec non vult, si possit, plane et aperte loqui, nec de re obscura, ut physici, aut artificiosa, ut mathematici, sed de illustri et facili et iam in vulgus pervagata loquitur.

Even though Aristotle is not mentioned in the *De finibus*, Cicero provides us with a taxonomy of *obscuritas* which is comparable, for several reasons, to Calcidius’s one. Apart from 1) that kind of obscurity typical of Heraclitus, which results from a precise choice by the author, Cicero also mentions 2) a second form of obscurity – typical of Plato’s *Timaeus*, for example – which depends on the *res* under scrutiny (*cum rerum obscuritas, non verborum, facit ut non intellegatur oratio*)²⁸. But, as I will show later (see X), also Calcidius agrees on the “objective” nature of the obscurity that characterises Plato’s *chora*. Last but not least, according to Cicero’s testimony, 3) a third type of obscurity is possible, and it stems from a poor style of writing (*vide ne [...] sit aliqua culpa eius, qui ita loquatur ut non intellegatur*). As is evident, the latter is undoubtedly guilty and

28. See also Cic. *rep.* 1,16, where Plato’s obscurity is traced back to his (partially) Pythagorean education: *Itaque cum Socratem unice dilexisset eique omnia tribuere voluisset, leporem Socraticum subtilitatemque sermonis cum obscuritate Pythagorae et cum illa plurimarum artium gravitate contexit.* I would like to thank Anna Motta for pointing this text out to me.

defective (it is typical of Epicurus), and it might be compared to the *imbecillitas sermonis* which is mentioned by Calcidius as a form of *obscuritas iuxta dicentem* [T2]. Therefore, according to Cicero, obscurity is not deplorable in itself (*sine reprehensione fit*), provided that it is brought about by one of the aforementioned causal factors (either a deliberate choice by the author, or the complexity of the content). But it is a different kettle of fish if, as a result of some aetiological research, obscurity is shown to stem from linguistic deficiency on the part of the author. Hence, like in Calcidius’ account, also in Cicero’s text obscurity turns out to be linked with either some author’s strategy (*de industria*, [T11]; *studio dataque opera*, [T2]), or the content (*rerum obscuritas*, [T11]; *ex natura rei*, [T2]), or even the weakness of the author’s style (*ita loquatur, ut non intellegatur*, [T11]; *ex imbecillitate sermonis*, [T2]). But unlike Calcidius, Cicero undermines the role played by the pupils or the public in the genesis of obscurity. This element of Calcidius’ taxonomy is to be traced back to the Middle and Neoplatonic scholastic literature, where both the Master’s and pupil’s roles in the educational process turn into the privileged topic of a stereotyped treatment²⁹.

Be all that as it may, many other intriguing testimonies regarding intentional obscurity could be mentioned. Philodemus, for example, draws quite a clear-cut distinction between an intentional and an unintentional form of textual obscurity. In his *Rhetorics* (Philod. *Rhet.* IV = *PHerc.* 1423, coll. XIII 15-XVI Sudhaus) he writes:

[T12] εὐθέως γὰρ ἀσάφεια τις μὲν ἐπιτηδευματικῶς γίνεται, τις δ’ ἀνεπιτηδεύτως· ἐπιτηδευματικῶς μὲν, ὅταν μὴθὲν ἀγαθὸν τις εἰδὼς καὶ λέγων ἐπικρύπτῃ τοῦτο διὰ τῆς ἀσαφείας, ἵνα δόξῃ τι χρήσιμον γράφειν καὶ λέγειν [...] ἄνευ δὲ ἐπιτηδεύσεως ἀσάφεια γίνεται παρὰ τὸ μὴ κρατεῖν τῶν πραγμάτων ἢ μὴ διειλημῆνως, ἢ παρὰ τὸ μὴ φιληδεῖν ἢ μὴ προσκαρτερεῖν τῇ περιωδευμένη προφορᾷ καὶ γραφῇ, καὶ κοινῶς τε παρὰ τὸ μὴ καλῶς ἐλληνίζειν ἐπίστασθαι - καὶ γὰρ σολοικισμοὶ ποιοὶ καὶ βαρβαρισμοὶ πολλὴν ἀσάφειαν ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἀποτελοῦσι - καὶ παρὰ τὸ συμφανῆ τὰ ῥήματα τοῖς πράγμασιν νομίζειν εἶναι [...].

On the face of it, like Philodemus, also Cicero and Calcidius take *industria* – in other words, intentionality – to be a causal and typological factor of *obscuritas*; but, unlike Philodemus, they tend to evaluate it not negatively (as in the case of Calcidius), or even positively (*sine reprehensione*, as Cicero puts it). In other words, deliberate obscurity, as it is described by Cicero and Calcidius,

29. See especially Mansfeld 1994: 161-166.

does not equate to Philodemus’ deceptive and misleading *asapheia*. Therefore, there is only a “categorical” similarity between these authors – namely, intentionality taken as a causal factor; but its function and value are radically different from one author to the others. But when it comes to that kind of *asapheia* which happens ἀνεπιτηδεύτως, the similarity between Philodemus, Cicero and Calcidius is undeniable. According to Philodemus, if the author lacks linguistic mastery (παρὰ τὸ μὴ καλῶς ἐλληνίζειν ἐπίστασθαι) and knowledge of the subject (παρὰ τὸ μὴ κρατεῖν τῶν πραγμάτων), an “unwilling” obscurity takes place. But also Cicero and Calcidius distinguish a voluntary obscurity (*de industria*, [T11]; *studio dataque opera*, [T2]) and an involuntary one resulting from some style-writing deficiency of the author (*ita loquatur, ut non intellegatur*, [T11]; *ex imbecillitate sermonis*, [T2]: even though the latter is not explicitly said to be involuntary, this is likely to be largely implicit).

Last but not least, Quintilian too deals with intentional obscurity in his *Institutio Oratoria* (8, 2, 17-18)³⁰. He takes it to be a *vitium*, even though he reports that some rhetoricians had supported a different view on the issue, pursuing obscurity as a privileged rhetorical objective:

[T13] est etiam in quibusdam turba inanium verborum, 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. In hoc malum a quibusdam etiam laboratur; neque id novum vitium est, cum iam apud Titum Livium inveniam fuisse praeceptorem aliquem, qui discipulos obscurare quae dicerent iuberet, Graeco verbo utens σκότισον. unde illa scilicet egregia laudatio: tanto melior; ne ego quidem intellexi.

So, both Philodemus and Quintilian blame intentional obscurity as a vice, because its purpose is to enable the author to come across as unintelligible to the public – namely, to get away with his own ignorance. Actually, already Aristotle (*Rhet.* 3, 5, 1407a 32-35) had suggested that intentional obscurity could form part of a strategy consisting in concealing one’s own ignorance:

[T14] τρίτον μὴ ἀμφιβόλοις. τοῦτο δ’ ἂν μὴ τάναντία προαιρῆται, ὅπερ ποιῶσιν ὅταν μὴδὲν μὲν ἔχωσι λέγειν, προσποιῶνται δὲ τι λέγειν· οἱ γὰρ τοιοῦτοι ἐν ποιήσει λέγουσιν ταῦτα, οἷον Ἐμπεδοκλῆς.

30. On Quintilian’s treatment of obscurity, see Fuhrmann 1966: 57-59.

To conclude on this point: there is something of a deep-rooted connection between intentional obscurity and concealing ignorance in the rhetorical and exegetical tradition. Therefore, it won’t come as a surprise if, according to Calcidius, it is not the case that Plato willingly wrote an obscure dialogue. Plato had a direct acquaintance with truth. He was an authority. He had no ignorance at all to get rid of.

VI

Nonetheless, Calcidius was perfectly aware of the fact that there had been several *prestigious* authors who used to ἐπιτηδεύειν ἀσάφειαν (for the expression, see [T18] and [T25]). They could not be simply ignorant. Moreover, also the recipient’s inadequacy to understand a text (point 2 of [T2]) seemed to him to require further explanation. This is why he goes into details on the first two types of textual obscurity, thus significantly specifying the account provided so far.

Case 1) is much more complicated than it might have seemed on first sight. The *obscuritas iuxta dicentem* is now split into another two subspecies: 1a) *cum vel studio dataque opera dogma suum velat auctor*, 1b) *vel ex imbecillitate sermonis*. According to Calcidius, on occasions the author’s *studium*, or *opera*, might bring about textual obscurity. The purpose of the latter, when voluntarily pursued, would be to conceal the author’s doctrines. But, unlike the passages discussed in the previous section (V), Calcidius does seem to contemplate the possibility of a text being obscure simply because his author didn’t want to reveal his own ignorance. He mentions only two examples of authors who had been deliberately obscure: Aristotle and Heraclitus. But they do not seem to have done so pretending to know what they ignored. They are prestigious philosophers.

As far as his quotation of these authors is concerned, Calcidius is once more in line with the previous exegetical tradition. As for Heraclitus, in addition to *De finibus* 2, 15, we only need consider Cicero’s words in the *De natura deorum* 1, 74:

[T15] neque tu me celas ut Pythagoras solebat alienos, nec consulto dicis occulte tamquam Heraclitus, sed, quod inter nos liceat, ne tu quidem intellegis.

Moreover, there is a passage by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* V, 9, 58, 1-5) where *all* the founders of the ancient philosophical schools (Aristotle included) are explicitly said to have had the intention of concealing their truth. And – what is even more intriguing – in Clement’s text there is also a clue as to which reason might have led the above mentioned philosophers to make their own texts obscure (in [T15] there is only a hint, Pythagoras’ *alienos*): they wanted to

put “the genuine philosophers” (γνησίως φιλοσοφοῖεν) among their own students to the “test” (μὴ οὐχὶ πείραν δεδωκόσι πρότερον). This form of obscurity has nothing to do with the concealment of ignorance. It is “a pedagogic stymulus”³¹. It is hence highly likely that Calcidius had this kind of voluntary obscurity in mind, when he wanted to account for *Timaeus*’ obscurity:

[T16] Οὐ μόνοι ἄρα οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι καὶ Πλάτων τὰ πολλὰ ἐπεκρύπτοντο, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ Ἐπικούρειοί φασί τινα καὶ παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἀπόρρητα εἶναι καὶ μὴ πᾶσιν ἐπιτρέπουν ἐντυγχάνειν τούτοις τοῖς γράμμασιν. ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ Στωϊκοὶ λέγουσι Ζήνωνι τῷ πρώτῳ γεγράφθαι τινά, ἃ μὴ ῥαδίως ἐπιτρέπουσι τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἀναγινώσκειν, μὴ οὐχὶ πείραν δεδωκόσι πρότερον, εἰ γνησίως φιλοσοφοῖεν. λέγουσι δὲ καὶ οἱ Ἀριστοτέλους τὰ μὲν ἐσωτερικὰ εἶναι τῶν συγγραμμάτων αὐτοῦ, τὰ δὲ κοινὰ τε καὶ ἐξωτερικὰ³².

This makes it clear how a certain degree of obscurity – or, at the very least, opacity – was usually expected in the works of the “founding fathers” of each philosophical tradition. The Middle Platonist Plutarch, for example, strongly believed in Plato’s voluntary obscurity³³. The crucial point is: the authoritative value of the Master’s words required some form of “immunisation” from banalisation and from being divulged indiscriminately. Therefore, some kind of obscurity, be it even superficial, could ensure the exclusion of a public unsuited to genuine philosophy. This kind of “protective” obscurity is conspicuously widespread in ancient literature, from the Derveni Papyrus³⁴ to Cristian literature. For example, Photius (*Amphilochia*, 152) provides us with an incredibly valuable testimony of Byzantine literature on textual obscurity³⁵, where also a form of “protective obscurity” is contemplated. He explicitly counts the necessary protection of the Christian texts from the Pagans among the causal factors of their obscurity:

31. Sluiter 2016: 40.

32. See also David, *Porph. Isag.* 106, 25 ff. Busse: τούτου οὖν χάριν οἱ παλαιοὶ τοὺς γνησίους βουλόμενοι ἐκ τῶν νόθων διακρίνειν ἀσάφειάν τινα ἐποιοῦν, ἵνα εἰ μὲν τις γνήσιος ἦ, τὴν ἀσάφειαν τῶν θεωρημάτων ἤτοι τῆς λέξεως μὴ εὐλαβοῦμενος ἑαυτὸν ἀπαγγέλλῃ γνήσιον εἶναι καὶ δι’ ἔρωτα τῶν λόγων κόπον καὶ πόνον φέρῃ (ὁ γὰρ γνήσιος ὅσον ὁρᾷ αὐξανομένην ἀσάφειαν, τοσοῦτον σπουδαίως καθοπλίζεται, ἵνα τὸ ξένον καὶ δυσχερὲς κατορθωσάμενος μέγιστος ἐν λόγοις ὀφθεῖη), εἰ δὲ νόθος εἴη, εὐθέως τὴν ἀσάφειαν ὁρῶν τὴν ἀπαλλαγὴν εὐκταίαν ἠγήσεται, ἔρωτα πρὸς τοὺς λόγους οὐδένα ἔχων [...].

33. Plut. *Is. et Os.* 370e-f, *Def. orac.* 420f and *Quaest. Conv.* VIII 2, 719a.

34. Struck 2004: 29-39.

35. On Origenes, see Harl 1993; on Iohannes Chrysostomus, see Zincone 1996, 1997, 1998. I am sincerely grateful to professor Giuseppe Nardiello for these bibliographical suggestions.

[T17] δέκατον δὲ ὅτι ἐν τῇ αἰχμαλωσίᾳ ἐμπρησθεισῶν τῶν βιβλῶν, εἶτα διαπεμπόντων ἀλλήλοις τῶν ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλήμ εἰς Βαβυλῶνα τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ, λογῶντες ἀφήρουν τὰς βίβλους, οἱ δὲ πάλιν διὰ συμβόλων ὧν οὐκ ἠδύναντο ξένοι νοεῖν ἔγραφον, ἐξ ὧν ἡ ἀσάφεια· ἕως ὕστερον ἐμπνευσθεῖς Ἑσδρας πασῶν ἐμνημόνευσε καὶ γραφῇ παρέδωκε.

Anyway, last but not least, the obscurity of the core texts of each philosophical school was likely to act also as a unifying factor for its members. Anyone who did not succeed in understanding those texts, was consequently shown unworthy of playing any part in that philosophical community. Here, intentional obscurity functions as a “sectarian”³⁶ device³⁷.

VII

It is necessary now to look at the case of Aristotle, who happens to be the other author (apart from Heraclitus) mentioned by Calcidius as an example of voluntary obscurity. In the Aristotelian exegetical tradition, there was a well-documented debate regarding the nature of Aristotle’s *obscuritas*³⁸, which was rather unanimously accepted (see Cic. *top.* 1.2: *a libris [scil. Aristotelis] te obscuritas reiecit*)³⁹. Actually, the purpose of Aristotle’s obscurity became a classical issue to deal with in the Neoplatonic *Isagogai*⁴⁰. One need only quote the following passage from Simplicius (*In Cat.* 8.7.6 ff.):

[T18] Ἀριστοτέλης δὲ τὴν ἀσάφειαν προετίμησεν, ἴσως μὲν καὶ τὴν ἀόριστον τῶν μύθων καὶ τῶν συμβόλων ὑπόνοιαν παραιτησάμενος (ῥαδίως γὰρ ἄλλος ἄλλως ἐκδέχεται δύναται τὰ τοιαῦτα), ἴσως δὲ καὶ γυμναστικωτέραν εἰς ἀγχίνουσαν ὑπολαμβάνων τὴν τοιαύτην ἀσάφειαν. [...] ὅτι γὰρ οὐκ ἀσθενεῖα λόγου τὸ ἀσαφὲς αὐτοῦ τοῖς συγγράμμασιν ἐπεγένετο, ἴσασι μὲν καὶ οἱ μετρίως

36. Sluiter 2016: 40.

37. In ancient literature, intentional obscurity serves also another purpose. As Demetrius explains (*Eloc.* 99-102), an author may intentionally pursue obscurity as a strategy to strike fear into the public. The goal is δεινότης: νῦν δὲ ὥσπερ συγκαλύμματι τοῦ λόγου τῇ ἀλληγορίᾳ κέχρηται· πᾶν γὰρ τὸ ὑπονοούμενον φοβηρότερον, καὶ ἄλλος εικάζει ἄλλο τι· ὁ δὲ σαφὲς καὶ φανερόν, καταφρονεῖσθαι εἰκός, ὥσπερ τοὺς ἀποδεδυμένους. Διὸ καὶ τὰ μυστήρια ἐν ἀλληγορίαις λέγεται πρὸς ἐκκληζίν καὶ φρίκην, ὥσπερ ἐν σκότῳ καὶ νυκτί. ἔοικεν δὲ καὶ ἡ ἀλληγορία τῷ σκότῳ καὶ τῇ νυκτί. As Sluiter (2016: 39) points out, this form of obscurity contributes also to the sublime, and it is peculiar to Aeschylus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (927; 1058 ss.).

38. On this issue, see Erlar 1991; Barnes 1992.

39. Barnes 1992: 267-274.

40. Barnes (1992: 268 n. 4) and Motta (2019).

λόγῳ παρακολουθεῖν δυνάμενοι, ὅτι πολλὴν ἐμφαίνει λεκτικὴν δύναμιν ἢ Ἀριστοτέλους ἐρμηνεία, ὡς δι’ ὀλίγων πολλὰκις συλλαβῶν παραδιδόναι ὅσα οὐκ ἄν τις ἐν πολλαῖς περιόδῳ ἐδίδαξεν, δῆλον δὲ καὶ ἐξ ὧν ἐν οἷς ἐβουλήθη σαφέστατα ἐδίδαξεν, ὡς ἐν τοῖς Μετεώροις καὶ τοῖς Τοπικοῖς καὶ ταῖς γνησίαις αὐτοῦ Πολιτείαις [...] ἐν τοῖς ἀκροαματικοῖς ἀσάφειαν ἐπετήδευσε διὰ ταύτης τοῦς ῥαθυμότερους ἀποκρουόμενος.

Two are the potential causes for the obscurity “carried out” by Aristotle (τὴν ἀσάφειαν προετίμησεν: cf. Philodemus, *PHerc.* 1005 XVI, 5 Angeli, τῶν ἐπιτετηδευκότων ἀσάφειαν). The range of alternative explanations seems not to extend beyond either the “weakness of discourse” (ἀσθενεία λόγου), or the will to hide the doctrines from “the inepts” (τοῦς ῥαθυμότερους ἀποκρουόμενος). He thus induced the more talented ones to experience and improve their exegetical perspicacity (ἴσως δὲ καὶ γυμναστικωτέραν εἰς ἀγχίνουαν ὑπολαμβάνων τὴν τοιαύτην ἀσάφειαν). That said, according to Simplicius, Aristotle’s obscurity does not stem from any linguistic or expressive deficiency. Quite the opposite, in fact. It works as both a deterrent and a stimulus towards the reader. In other words, this type of obscurity serves a “peirastic” purpose – even a selective one⁴¹. Certainly, such a selective function does not characterise Aristotle’s obscurity only; as I have said above, the Middle Platonic Plutarch (*De Is.* 370E-371A) attributes it to his own Master Plato, plausibly in light of passages like the pseudo-Platonic *Ep.* II 312D⁴².

Therefore, when Calcidius mentions Heraclitus and Aristotle as two examples of intentional obscurity, this account draws on a well-established precedent.

VIII

The second form of *obscuritas* – which derives from the *imbecillitas sermonis* – is not immediately clear. In light of the semantics of *imbecillitas*, which means “weakness” or “deficiency”, two readings of the expression seem to be possible: either Calcidius alludes to the inner weakness of language, which falls on the author’s part to the extent that it is the author who needs to deal

41. See also Aulus Gellius, 20, 5, 3-4: ἀκροατικά *autem* vocabantur, in quibus philosophia remotior subtiliorque agitabatur quaeque ad naturae contemplationes disceptationesve dialecticas pertinebant. Huic disciplinae, quam dixi, ἀκροατικῆ *tempus exercendae* dabat in Lycio matutinum nec ad eam quemquam temere admittebat, nisi quorum ante ingenium et eruditionis elementa atque in discendo studium laboremque explorasset.

42. For an analogous account, see also D.L. III, 63: Ὀνόμασι δὲ κέχρηται ποικίλοις πρὸς τὸ μὴ εὐσύνοπτον εἶναι τοῖς ἀμαθέσι τὴν πραγματείαν.

with the problem; or the reference might be to those authors who, due to their inability to express themselves adequately, or because of their limited mastery of both language and their own arguments, do not manage to achieve perspicuity.

As a matter of fact, in the rhetorical and exegetical tradition language is often depicted as intrinsically instable. For example, it is said to inevitably undergo sensible changes because of the transience of time. Philosophically authoritative texts represent no exception to this rule. Time makes their language difficult to be grasped by later disciplines and exegetes⁴³. Quintilian, for example, is perfectly aware of the historical profoundness of language (*obscuritas fit verbis iam ab usu remotis*), just as is aware of it Herodianus (I cent. a.C.), who therefore feels the need to clarify the obscure words of his authority, Hippocrates:

[T19] εικότως ἠβουλήθην τὰς ἐμφερομένας αὐτοῦ τοῖς συγγράμμασιν ἀσαφεῖς καὶ κατὰ πολὺ τῆς κοινῆς ἀνακεχωρηκείας ὁμιλίας ἐξηγήσασθαι λέξεις (p. 29, 10 ss. Klein)

But there is even more to it than this. In his commentary on *Epidemics* 6, Galen partially⁴⁴ imputes the obscurity of Hippocrates’ language to the editorial history of the text, with particular reference to the material damages that had occurred to the *textus traditus*, and also to the arbitrary emendations by some ancient scholars (especially Artemidoros Capiton and Dioscorides)⁴⁵. In other words, Galen explicitly counts the troubled history of Hippocrates’ textual tradition among the reasons for his clarifying activity – his exegesis –, which consequently needs to be based on a philologically sensitive approach to Hippocrates’ words⁴⁶:

43. See Sedley 1997. An interesting example is offered by Eutocius (3, 132, 3-18): ἐντετύχαμεν θεωρήμασι γεγραμμένοις οὐκ ὀλίγην μὲν τὴν ἐκ τῶν παισιμάτων ἔχουσιν ἀσάφειαν περὶ τε τὰς καταγραφὰς πολυτρόπως ἡμαρτημένοις, τῶν μὲντοι ζητουμένων εἶχον τὴν ὑπόστασιν, ἐν μέρει δὲ τὴν Ἀρχιμήδει φίλην Δωρίδα γλῶσσαν ἀπέσωζον καὶ τοῖς συνήθεσι τῷ ἀρχαίῳ τῶν πραγμάτων ὀνόμασιν ἐγγέγραπτο τῆς μὲν παραβολῆς ὀρθογωνίου κώνου τομῆς ὀνομαζομένης, τῆς δὲ ὑπερβολῆς ἀμβλυγωνίου κώνου τομῆς, ὡς ἐξ αὐτῶν διανοεῖσθαι, μὴ ἄρα καὶ αὐτὰ εἶη τὰ ἐν τῷ τέλει ἐπηγγελμένα γράφεσθαι. ὅθεν σπουδαιότερον ἐντυγχάνοντες αὐτὸ μὲν τὸ ῥητόν, ὡς γέγραπται, διὰ πλῆθος, ὡς εἴρηται, τῶν παισιμάτων δυσχερὲς εὐρόντες τὰς ἐννοίας κατὰ μικρὸν ἀποσυλήσαντες κοινοτέρᾳ καὶ σαφεστέᾳ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν λέξει γράφομεν.

44. Hippocrates’ language is itself brachylogic and incomplete, especially in *Epidemics* 6; see also Gal. *Comm. in Hipp. Off.* 18 B p. 630,10–632,1 Kühn.

45. See Roselli 2012: 70-77

46. Roselli 2020: 57: «He develops an increasing ‘philological’ interest during his second Roman sojourn, and, in his last commentaries, he increasingly makes references to the wording of the

[T20] δυνατὸν γὰρ δὴ οὕτως καὶ λεπτῆς ἰνὸς ἀπολωλυίας συναπολέσθαι τὴν γραμμὴν ταύτην, καὶ μυίας <γ’> αὐτὴν ἐκφαγούσης, καὶ κατ’ ἀρχὰς εὐθύς αὐτὴν ἀμυδρῶς γραφεῖσαν ἐξίτηλον [αὐτὴν] ὑπὸ τοῦ χρόνου γενέσθαι. (*Hipp. Epid.* VI, 17a, 795)⁴⁷

Galen’s exegesis is necessary because textual obscurity – be it originally Hippocratic or due to some incompetent commentator – undermines the “credibility” (or “plausibility”, τὸ πιθανόν) of the text; and «it must be an intrinsic characteristic of the text; it must be the aspiration of its interpreters; and it is the aim of Galen’s very exegetical activity»⁴⁸.

It might be the case that Calcidius refers to this kind of *imbecillitas sermonis*. After all, the instability and historical dimension of language repeatedly crops up both in the *Cratylus* and in the VII *Epistle*⁴⁹, whence Calcidius’ expression might derive. Plato was perfectly aware of the transience of every piece of language. It is hence plausible that Calcidius too believed in the *imbecillitas sermonis*.

Nonetheless, it might also be the case that the *imbecillitas sermonis* is the Latin translation of the Greek expression ἀσθένεια λόγου which occurs, for example, in Simplicius [T18]. There, “weakness of discourse” is ruled out as a causal factor for Aristotelian obscurity because Aristotle’s prose shows a “notable expressive ability” (πολλὴν [...] λεκτικὴν δύναμιν) in many works. He often manages to express “in a few syllables” (δι’ ὀλίγων [...] συλλαβῶν) issues that other

Hippocratic text, as well as to the variant readings he found in contemporary and ancient commentaries and in different editions. This philological attitude progressively intensifies also due to the fact that, in this last period, he is tackling particularly obscure and (he believes) highly corrupted texts—this is especially the case with *Epidemics* 6».

47. See also *Hipp. Epid.* VI, 17a, 908-909: ἐπεὶ δέ, ὡς ἔφην, ἐκατέρως λεγόμενον οὐδετέρως ἐστὶ πιθανόν, ἐπὶ τὸ μεταγράψαι αὐτὸ παρεγένοντο πολλοί, καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ὅσα καθ’ ἓν ὄνομα τὴν ἀσάφειαν ἔχει. καὶ τινὲς μὲν τὴν δευτέραν συλλαβὴν διὰ τοῦ γ καὶ ἰ γράφουσιν, “ὀργίσασθαι”, τινὲς δὲ τὴν πρώτην διὰ τοῦ ε καὶ ρ, τὴν δὲ δευτέραν διὰ τοῦ γ καὶ α, ἐργάσασθαι τὸ ὅμοιον. [...] γέγραπται μὲν οὖν τοῦτο κατὰ πολλὰ τῶν ἀντιγράφων, ὁρθῶς δὲ ἐν τοῖς κατὰ Διοσκουρίδην οὐ γέγραπται. φαίνεται μὲν γὰρ εἰς ἐξήγησιν προσγραφέν ὑπὸ τινος αὐθις εἰς τοῦδαφος ὑπὸ τοῦ βιβλιογράφου μετατεθεῖσθαι. τὸ γε μὴν διὰ τοῦ γ καὶ ἰ γραφόμενον “ὀργίσασθαι” πάνυ κακόζηλόν ἐστὶ καὶ πόρρω τῆς Ἱπποκράτους ἐρμηνείας, ἐάν τε ἐφ’ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν ἐάν τε ἐπὶ τῶν θεραπευομένων λέγεται μορίων ἐάν τε ἐπὶ τῶν χυμῶν. τὸ γὰρ οἶον εἰς ὀργὴν αὐτὰ προτρέψαι καὶ ἐπεγεῖραι πρὸς τὴν ἔκκρισιν ἡγούνηται δηλοῦσθαι διὰ τοῦ “ὀργίσασθαι” ῥήματος. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν εὐκαταφρόνητα καὶ σμικρά, καθάπερ καὶ πάνθ’ ὅσα περὶ τῆς λέξεως ἐξήγηται, τῆς τῶν πραγμάτων ἀληθείας φυλαττομένης.

48. Roselli 2020: 62; see also: «A lack of plausibility elicits attention on the part of the interpreter and justifies the correction of a text» (*ibid.*).

49. See Forcignanò 2016.

writers wouldn’t be able to express “in many sentences” (ἐν πολλαῖς περιόδοις). As a consequence, the lack of perspicuity in Aristotle’s texts cannot be imputed to a *lack of mastery* of language (ἀσθένεια λόγου)⁵⁰. So, in Simplicius’ account, it is not a matter of the intrinsic weakness of language as a potential producer of *asapheia*, but it is its possible defective usage on the part of the author that is at issue. Hence, if the expressions *ex imbecillitate sermonis* and ἀσθενεία λόγου can be legitimately coupled, Calcidius is likely to consider the unefficacious use of language as one of the main causes of the *obscuritas iuxta dicentem*. The allusion here might be to Epicurus, who was commonly identified as the symbol of stylistic roughness by the whole exegetical tradition (see e.g. Cicero’s [T11]).

Moreover, one can get the impression of obscurity from a text both due to its excessive length, and as a result of the scarce quality of the author’s style. These two factors belong to linguistic *imbecillitas* as well. Within the Aristotelian exegetical tradition, David (*Porph. Isag.* 105, 9-28 Busse)⁵¹ distinguishes a form of obscurity which is brought about by the theories dealt with (such as Heraclitus’ obscurity), from the obscurity which depends on the author’s style; the latter can be further divided in two subspecies, which are characterised, respectively, by the quantity and the quality of the wording:

[T21] γίνεται τοίνυν ἡ ἀσάφεια ἢ ἀπὸ τῆς λέξεως ἢ ἀπὸ τῶν θεωρημάτων. καὶ ἀπὸ μὲν θεωρημάτων, ὡς ἔχει τὰ Ἡρακλείτεια· ταῦτα γὰρ βαθέα καὶ δεινὰ ὑπάρχει· περὶ γὰρ τῶν συγγραμμάτων Ἡρακλείτου εἴρηται δεῖσθαι βαθέος κολυμβητοῦ. ἀπὸ δὲ λέξεως γίνεται διττῶς ἡ ἀσάφεια· ἢ γὰρ διὰ τὸ μῆκος τῆς φράσεως γίνεται ἀσάφεια, ὡς ἔχει τὰ Γαλήνεια (κἄν γὰρ εὐφραδῆ εἰσιν, ἀλλ’ οὖν διὰ τὸ μῆκος ἀσαφῆ εἰσιν), ἢ διὰ τὴν ποιότητα τῆς λέξεως, ὡς ἔχει τὰ Ἀριστογένεια· οὗτος γὰρ ‘καὶ ἡδὺν πόνον καὶ ἐνσεσαγμένον’ φησί, ποῖος δὲ πόνος ἡδὺς καὶ ἐνσεσαγμένος οὐκ οἶδαμεν. τί δαὶ ἀπὸ πολλῶν τοῦτο δεικνύειν ἐπιχειροῦμεν ἡμῶν εὐπορούντων τοῦτο αὐτὸ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχηγῶν καὶ προστατῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας δεῖξαι, Πλάτωνός τε καὶ Ἀριστοτέλους; τούτων γὰρ ὁ μὲν εἰς τὴν ἀσάφειαν διὰ τῶν φράσεων ποιεῖν ἐπετήδευσεν, ὁ δὲ ἕτερος διὰ τῶν θεωρημάτων· τὰ μὲν γὰρ Ἀριστοτελικά θεωρήματα εὐχερῆ εἰσιν, ἢ δὲ φράσις δύσκολος. ἀμέλει εἰ νοήσεις τί ἐστὶν ἐντελέχεια καὶ ποσὸν καὶ

50. Sometimes, texts are obscure because of their punctuation or the somehow awkward syntax. See e.g. Alex. *CAG* 1, 758, 37: ἀλλ’ ἐπειδὴ ἔχει τινὰ ἀσάφειαν ἢ λέξις, σαφηνιστέον καὶ ἐτι αὐτήν. οἶμαι δὴ χρῆναι ὑποστιζέειν εἰς τὸ τὰ ζῶα, εἶτα ἐπάγειν τὸ φαίη τις συγκεῖσθαι ἐκ ζῶων. On the clarifying function of punctuation, see also Galen, *De indolentia*, 14, and e.g. *Scholia* to Aristophanes’ *Knights*, 197c: ἀλλ’ ὅποταν μάρνη· αὕτη ἀρχὴ ἐστὶ τοῦ χρησμοῦ. ὁρᾷς ὅτι ἐμπεπλεγμένους τοῖς λόγοις ἀσάφειαν κατὰ τὴν ἐρμηνείαν ἐργάζεται.

51. On this passage, see Mansfeld 1994: 151 n. 273.

δύναμις, ἡδέα καὶ εὐχερῆ φαίνεται σοὶ τὰ λεγόμενα· ὥστε οὖν ἡ φράσις ἐστὶ δυσχερῆς. τὰ δὲ Πλατωνικὰ θεωρήματα πάνυ τι δύσκολά εἰσι καὶ δυσχερῆ καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν πάση δόξει σχεδὸν ἐπόμενα (ὅτι δὲ ἐστὶ τοῦτο ἀληθές, σαφές ἐκ τοῦ δύνασθαι ἐκάστην ἐξηγήσιν ἀρμόζειν αὐτὰ πρὸς ἃ βούλεται), ἡ δὲ φράσις εὐχερῆς καὶ ὁμαλὴ καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν Πλατωνικῆ.

David plausibly depends on Porphyry for this taxonomy⁵². In any case, there are two major species of obscurity: 1) an expressive one (ἀπὸ τῆς λέξεως), which was voluntarily practiced by Aristotle (ὁ μὲν εἶς τὴν ἀσάφειαν διὰ τῶν φράσεων ποιεῖν ἐπετήδευσεν); and 2) a content-related one (ἀπὸ τῶν θεωρημάτων), like the one typical of Plato’s dialogues (ὁ δὲ ἕτερος διὰ τῶν θεωρημάτων). First of all, the general classification recalls Cicero’s taxonomy: *rerum obscuritas, non verborum, facit ut non intellegatur oratio* (T11). Second, along with Heraclitus, also Plato is described as obscure due to his obscure theories. Thus, as far as the latter is concerned, David is on the same line as Calcidius, whereas the two commentators diverge in their assessment of Heraclitus’ obscurity: it is intentional for Calcidius and Cicero, whereas it is inevitably brought about by the complexity of the content, according to David. But the two are again in agreement when it comes to Aristotle’s intentional obscurity, even though David explicitly imputes it to the Aristotelian style (ἡ φράσις ἐστὶ δυσχερῆς), unlike Simplicius. Last but not least, “quantitative linguistic obscurity” is pointed out also by Quintilian (8, 2, 14-15)⁵³:

[T22] 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. [...] etiam interiectione (qua et oratores et historici frequenter utuntur, ut medio sermone aliquem inserant sensum) impediri solet intellectus, nisi quod interponitur breve est.

So, the form of textual obscurity which depends on the *imbecillitas sermonis* can be traced back both to the exegetical tradition and to rhetorics.

52. Mansfeld 1994: 7-8.

53. See already Cic. *inv.* 1, 129: *nam saepe res parum est intellecta longitudine magis quam obscuritate narrationis.*

IX

Calcidius also considers the possibility that 2) *obscuritas* might fall outside the text and the authorial dimension; in other words, it could occur on the occasion of the interaction between the intended reader (*iuxta audientem vero*) and the written work. This kind of obscurity, can occur: 2a) if what has been said is unexpected and even peregrine (*vel cum inaudita et insolita dicuntur*); 2b) if the listener/reader’s intellectual ability for philosophy is limited (*vel cum is qui audit pigriore ingenio est ad intellegendum*). The tradition which lies behind this taxonomical section is quite heterogeneous. That *obscuritas* might be a subjective phenomenon, depending on the reader, resulting from the latter’s inability to rationally come to terms with the content of a text, is a widespread assumption in the exegetical tradition (see Galen’s [T7]). Instead, the concept of obscurity as a product of the unusual and peregrine nature of discourse might be traced all the way back to Plato’s *Timaeus* (48d5-8):

[T23] θεὸν δὴ καὶ νῦν ἐπ’ ἀρχῇ τῶν λεγομένων σωτήρα ἐξ ἀτόπου καὶ ἀήθους διηγήσεως πρὸς τὸ τῶν εἰκότων δόγμα διασῶζειν ἡμᾶς ἐπικαλεσάμενοι πάλιν ἀρχώμεθα λέγειν.

If this is the case, Calcidius would be alluding to what Timaeus states in the *Timaeus* itself; even though in Plato’s text obscurity is not explicitly mentioned, Calcidius’ *inaudita* might refer to the *atopia* (ἀτόπου) typical of Timaeus’ discourse, whereas *insolita* might paraphrase the Platonic adjective ἀήθους, whose meaning is precisely «not in accordance with custom» (like *in-solitus*).

X

But the type of *obscuritas* which affects Plato’s account of the *chora* is not included either in 1) or in 2), according to Calcidius. He maintains that *neque Timaeus, qui disserit, instabilis orator nec audientes tardi*; therefore, obscurity, in the case under scrutiny, stems from the intrinsic difficulty of the object under discussion – namely, the *chora*. And this comes as no surprise, in light of the *chora*’s “bastard” and essentially hybrid nature, which is both extra-empirical and extra-intellectual:

[T24] iuxta rem porro, cum talis erit, qualis est haec ipsa de qua nunc sermo nobis est, ut neque ullo sensu contingi neque intellectu comprehendi queat, utpote carens forma, sine qualitate, sine fine. [...] Nec silva quicquam difficilior ad explanandum; ergo cuncta quae de natura eius dicta sunt mera praedita veritate sunt nec tamen aperte dilucideque intimata.

Also in this case, Calcidius is likely to draw on different sources. We have several testimonies belonging to the exegetical tradition where something of an “objective” textual obscurity is put forward. Cicero’s [T11] is very clear on this point. But Philodemus too could have dealt with this kind of obscurity. In a papyrus from Herculaneum (*PHerc.* 1005 XVI, 5 Angeli) he employs an intriguing (and obscure!) expression regarding obscurity:

[T25] δ[ύ]ναται μ[έν] τοῖς [β]ιβλίοις παρακολουθεῖν οἱ καὶ τετυ[χ]ότες ἀγωγῆς Ἑλλησι καὶ [ο]ῦ [Πέρσαις] πρεπούσης καὶ παι[δευθ]έντες ἐν μ[α]θήμασι, δι[δά]σκουσι καὶ [τ]ὰ πᾶν ἐπιτετηδευκότων ἀσάφειαν ἐξευρίσκουσι καὶ ὁμοειδῆ γ’, εἰ μηδὲν ἕτερον, ἐκ παιδίου μέχρι γήρωσ φ[ι]λοσοφήσαντες καὶ τοσαῦτα καὶ τοιαῦτα ταῖς ἀκριβείαις συντεθεικότες ...

First of all, the need to solve the absence of perspicuity in Epicurean texts was something which Epicureans perceived as an urgent duty. As a result, since the very first generation after Epicurus’ last direct disciples, Epicureans used to practice a philologically based exegesis of the *ipsissima verba* of the *kathegemones*⁵⁴. In particular, in the *PHerc.* 1005 XVI, 5 (Angeli), Philodemus maintains that whoever is able to understand Epicurean books also «teaches to rediscover not only the thoughts of those who dealt with the obscurity of things, but also thoughts of analogous content».

According to Anna Angeli⁵⁵, in this column the term *asapheia* should be given an “objective” semantic value, as it refers to the obscurity peculiar to the topics, the things dealt with. Hence, she proposes to translate it with the expression “obscurity of things”. Were this to be the case, the reference would be to doctrines belonging to the Epicureans themselves; according to the philosopher, the impression of obscurity that such “thoughts” might bring about would result from the nature of the topics under discussion. Hence, analogously to what both Calcidius and Cicero maintain with regards to Plato’s *Timaeus*, Philodemus might have imputed the scarce perspicuity typical of Epicurean texts to the objective complexity of the assumptions and concepts of Epicurean philosophy. The overall context of this column would be interscholastic polemics.

54. The literature on this issue is abundant: see at least Capasso 1987: 39-59; Blank 2001; Erler 1993, 1996, 2003, 2011; Ferrario 2000; Puglia 1980, 1982, 1986, 1988: 49-106; Roselli 1991; Sedley 2003; Tulli 2000.

55. Angeli 1988: n. *ad loc.*.

Nonetheless, according to Michael Erler⁵⁶, the expression *epitedeuein asapheian* might have another meaning here. As we have seen, in the works by some late commentators (Simplicius, Philoponus etc.), this *tournaire* tends to refer to the voluntary use of obscurity as a privileged expressive device. Should this be the correct reading of Philodemus’ expression, the writings referred to in the text could not be Epicurean; all in all, expressive *sapheneia* was very important for the members of the Garden, who pursued it as a stylistic feature⁵⁷. Rather, Philodemus could be referring to some writings belonging to other schools, whose founders (like Aristotle or Plato, for example) had really made use of obscurity for the sake of education and selection of the potential pupils⁵⁸. According to this interpretation, the students praised by Philodemus would show a striking intellectual flexibility, as they would end up teaching to discover the thoughts of philosophers belonging to other schools.

Be all that as it may, only at the end of the taxonomy Calcidius identifies the correct reason of Plato’s *obscuritas*: it is a content-related phenomenon. But he has also shed light on the problematic relationship which links truth and its expression in the case at hand: although the content of the discourse (*i.e.* the *chora*) is true (*mera praedita veritate sunt*), the objective complexity of the *chora* negatively affects the perspicuity of the exposition – it considerably undermines it. Against the background of this analysis, the commentator seems to be making a particular assumption regarding the form-content relationship: the “kinship” between *logos* (at least, in terms of its clarity) and the *onta*. But this kind of “kinship” is notoriously stated at the beginning of the *Timaeus* (29b4-c2):

[T26] ὧδε οὖν περὶ τε εἰκόνοσ καὶ περὶ τοῦ παραδείγματοσ αὐτῆσ διοριστέον, ὡσ ἄρα τοὺσ λόγουσ, ὧνπέρ εἰσιν ἐξηγηταί, τούτων αὐτῶν καὶ συγγενεῖσ ὄντασ⁵⁹.

Calcidius’ *Commentary* on Plato’s *Timaeus* and Plato’s *Timaeus* itself show once more their profound kinship – like two sides of the same coin.

56. Erler 1991: 86-87.

57. De Sanctis 2015, Tulli 2000.

58. As for Epicurus, it is perhaps worth pointing out that an Epicurean philosopher, Lucretius, used to describe his own philosophy as obscure (and he was perfectly aware of Heraclitus’ obscurity too). But this evaluation was not negative in his opinion, since Epicurus’ obscurity resulted from the complexity of the matter dealt with: see I, 136-137; I, 921-922; I, 933-934; IV, 8-9, with Piazzi 2011: 174-175.

59. See Donini 1988.

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