

Multae quippe orationes verae quidem sed obscurae
Calcidius' taxonomy of textual obscuritasCarlo G. Delle Donne
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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*.

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Keywords: Plato; Calcidius; obscurity.*Multae quippe orationes verae quidem sed obscurae. La tassonomia della oscurità testuale nel commento di Calcidio al Timeo***SOMMARIO:** A un certo punto del suo commento al *Timeo* di Platone (317.15 ff. Wazink), Calcidio propone una distinzione tra diversi tipi di *obscuritas*. Questa può dipendere o dall'autore (*iuxta dicentem*), o dal pubblico (*iuxta audientem*), o

dalla cosa trattata (*iuxta rem*). Ma in quale di questi raggruppamenti può essere ricompreso il particolare tipo di oscurità del Timeo e della chora di cui lì si parla? Secondo Calcidio, si tratta di una *obscuritas iuxta rem*, che non è condizionata da ragioni autoriali o di inadeguatezza ermeneutica del lettore. La difficoltà intrinseca all'argomento si riverbera, quindi, in una assenza di perspicuità della lingua in cui esso è espresso. Il discorso e il suo oggetto si rivelano così congeneri. Il proposito dell'articolo è di ricostruire la struttura e la storia di questa tassonomia, e di evidenziarne gli elementi di originalità.

Parole chiave: Platone; Calcidio; oscurità.

τὰ δὲ Πλατωνικὰ θεωρήματα πάνυ τι δύσκολά εἰσι καὶ δυσχερῆ καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν πάσῃ δόξῃ σχεδὸν ἐπόμενα (ὅτι δὲ ἐστὶ τοῦτο ἀληθές, σαφές ἐκ τοῦ δύνασθαι ἐκάστην ἐξήγησιν ἀρμόζειν αὐτὰ πρὸς ἅ βούλεται), ἢ δὲ φράσις εὐχερῆς καὶ ὁμαλὴ καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν Πλατωνικῆ.

Plato's theories are really difficult to explain and – generally speaking – they fit nearly any interpretation (this is true, and is clear in light of what follows: they can be adapted by every exegesis to take on any sense whatsoever). Nonetheless, the wording is simple, uniform and – to put it simply – Platonic.

(Dav. in *Porph.* 105.24 ff.)

I

In this paper, my objective is to examine a passage from Calcidius' commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*.¹ Here follows the text as it was established by Waszink,² along with an explanatory diagram:

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[T1] 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 (1) vel dicentis non numquam voluntate (2) vel audientis vitio (3) vel ex natura rei de qua tractatus est. (1) Iuxta dicentem fit obscuritas, cum (1a) vel studio dataque opera dogma suum velat auctor, ut fecerunt Aristoteles et Heraclitus, (1b) vel ex imbecillitate sermonis, (2) iuxta audientem vero, (2a) vel cum inaudita et insolita dicuntur (2b) vel cum is qui audit pigriore ingenio est ad intellegendum, (3) 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.

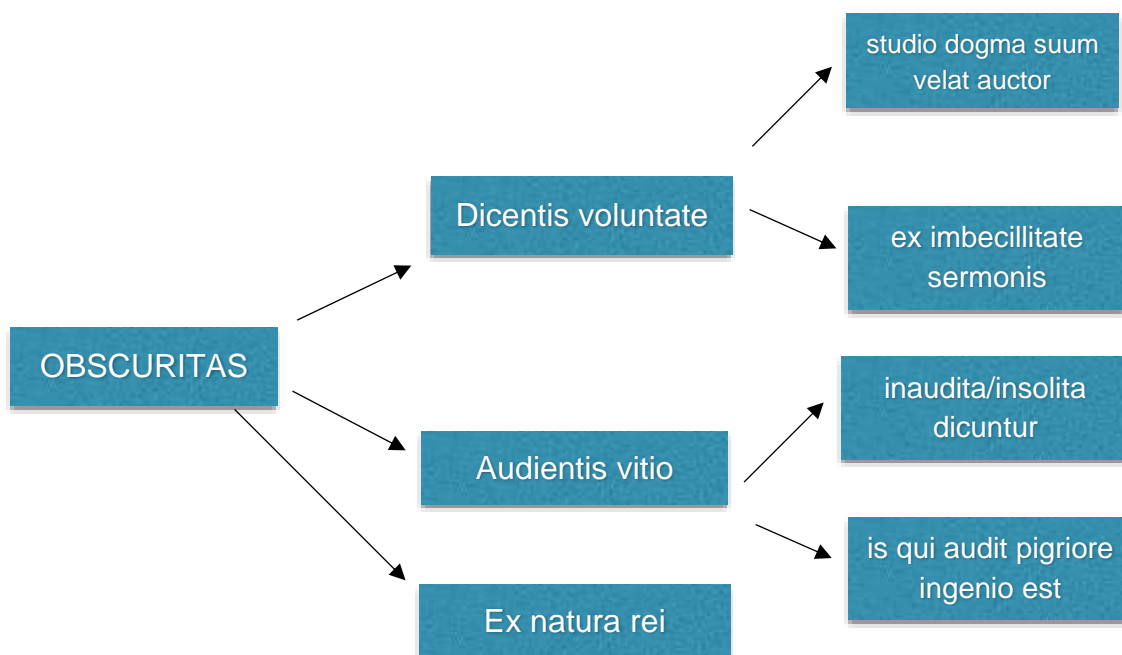
¹ On this commentary, see Bakhouché (2011); den Boeft (1970); den Boeft (1977); Gersh (1986), p. 421-492; Magee (2016); Moreschini (2003); Reydam-Schils (2007, 2020); Somfai (2004); van Winden (1959). As for the translations, if not otherwise stated, they should be considered as mine. I dedicate this paper to my mother, who has always taught me to struggle for clarity.

² Waszink (1962).

Sed neque Timaeus, qui disserit, instabilis orator nec audientes tardi; restat ut res ipsa difficilis et obscura sit.³

Then, he goes on: “What has been said about it (*scil.* the *chora*) is surely true; nonetheless, it should be expressed more clearly, as it seems”, because it is not the case that what is said truly is said *ipso facto* also openly and perspicuously. Many discourses are true, but obscure; and obscurity stems from: (1) either (sometimes) the speaker’s will; (2) or some defective condition on the part of the public; (3) or even the nature of the thing dealt with. (1) Obscurity originates on the side of the speaker: (1a) either when the author conceals his own doctrine willingly and purposely, as Aristotle and Heraclitus did; (1b) or as a consequence of the deficiency of the discourse. (2) Obscurity occurs on the part of the public: (2a) either when something strange and unprecedented is stated; (2b) or when the public is intellectually too lazy to understand what is said. (3) Obscurity stems from the content, when the latter is like the one which is being dealt by us right now: it (*scil.* the *chora*) cannot be grasped by means of the senses, nor could it be comprehended with the intellect, as it is deprived of form, quality and delimitation. But neither Timaeus – the speaker – is an insecure speaker, nor is the public slow. Hence, only one possibility is left open – the content itself is difficult and obscure.

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³ On this page, see Ferrari (2001), p. 532 and Ferrari (2010), p. 62-64.

Later in the commentary (69.12 W.), Calcidius puts Plato's obscurity under scrutiny once more:

[T2] Timaeus Platonis et a veteribus difficilis habitus est atque existimatus ad intellegendum, non ex inbecillitate 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.⁴

Plato's *Timaeus* was taken and deemed to be difficult to understand also by the ancients because of its obscurity, which didn't depend on the deficiency of the discourse – is there anything on earth more talented than that man? Rather, the point is that the readers were not accustomed to the artificial ratio which was at work to explain things, with the style being such that what had been treated could be explained only by means of the author's own arguments regarding that very issue, not by means of any extraneous ones.

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As it is evident, even if the two passages agree on the fact that Plato's obscurity doesn't depend on the *imbecillitas sermonis* (whatever it means: see VI *infra*), they seem to disagree on the role played by the recipients of the dialogue. [T2] imputes obscurity to the *legentes*, who might be not particularly familiar with the kind of arguments used by Plato (*artificiosae rationis [...] usum non habebant*); [T1] instead, explicitly removes any responsibility from the *audientes*, who are described as anything but *tardi*; *obscuritas* in the *Timaeus* stems from the *res* at issue. This contradiction might come across as all the more striking, given that it is Calcidius himself who finds it necessary to provide the reader with a taxonomy of obscurity! Nonetheless, there may be a plausible way out. In [T2], it is not the case that Calcidius is proposing a general account of Plato's obscurity; rather, he is looking for an explanation for an ancient assessment (*a veteribus [...] habitus est atque existimatus*). The *Timaeus* appeared to be *difficilis ad intellegendum* to the ancient readers, and only to them, because they were not familiar with Plato's argumentative strategy. This is not to say that Plato's obscurity in this dialogue generically depends on the degree of expertise of the readers; theoretically speaking, the dialogue is obscure because it deals with obscure matters;

⁴ The passage is quoted also by Kraus-Walzer (1951), p. 35 n. *ad loc.*

nonetheless, in the past, no one who read the dialogue was up to the task, thus getting the impression of a particularly difficult and obscure text.

II

From the very beginning of [T1], the relationship between truth and obscurity of expression is at issue (*non statim quae vere dicuntur aperte etiam manifesteque dicuntur*). As a consequence, the author soon introduces a classification, a *taxonomy*, of the main types of *obscuritas* which happen to affect *multae orationes*. With regards to this aspect, I intend to identify the most remarkable moments of the exegetical tradition upon which Calcidius draws. This will make it possible both to claim for Calcidius' debt towards Middle Platonism, and to shed light on Calcidius' direct (or indirect) dependence on some late Hellenistic texts.⁵

A few preliminary remarks are in order, before going into detail on [T1]. Some clues on the theme of *obscuritas* can be found in the dedicatory letter to Osius as well. This document is intriguing when it comes to authoriality and the nature of the commentary. First of all, what was the point in writing a commentary along with a translation? Calcidius provides his recipient (and the reader) with an interesting explanation:

[T3] Itaque parui certus non sine divino instinctu id mihi a te munus iniungi propterea que 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.

So, I have obeyed you because I was sure that you had assigned such a task to me not without any divine impulse. That is why I have dedicated myself to the very first part of the *Timaeus* more promptly and with stronger hope, and not only have I translated it but I have also written a commentary on that part, because I believed that the reproduction of something obscure would have been even more obscure than the model itself without the explanation deriving from interpretation.

⁵ On the exegetical tradition behind Calcidius' commentary, see Gersh (1986), p. 425-434; Moreschini (2003), p.VII-XI, XVI-XIX and Reydams-Schils (2007).

The crucial term in the passage above is *obscurius*. The relationship between a model (*exemplum*) and its copy (*simulacrum*) is inevitably affected by obscurity. In particular, a Latin translation (like Calcidius' one) of a Greek text (like Plato's *Timaeus*) might come across as obscure precisely because a translation, a copy, always falls short of the original text, the model.⁶ In any reproduction, there seems to be a reduction of clarity.⁷ As a consequence, any literary reproduction – any translation – is in the need of an *interpretatio*, a *commentarium* (*simulacrum sine interpretationis explanatione aliquanto obscurius*), in order to get its content clarified as much as possible. As it is evident, this first kind of obscurity regards the status of translation as a particular instance of the process of reproduction. Sure enough, it directly (though partially) involves Calcidius' work in as much as it is a Latin rendering of an originally Greek source. Nonetheless, this type of *obscuritas* also gives us a clue as to the authorial reasons for the literary form 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 light on the reason why Calcidius' writing stands as it stands. 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*. Obscurity affects also the original, along with the copy. Already Galen had pointed out Plato's *obscuritas*, when it comes to the *Timaeus*. According to the Middle Platonist,

[T4] 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 Aristotelis⁸ quam a diffuso illo quem Plato in reliquis suis libris (adhibuit) remotus. Si autem in oratione aliquid constricti et obscuri inesse putas, 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 (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.⁹

⁶ See Reydam-Schils (2007).

⁷ For clarity and absence of clarity as ontological markers in the model-copy relationship, see Plat. *Resp.* VI 511, 512-4 in Delle Donne (2019).

⁸ Galen is not particularly favourable to Aristotle's style of writing, which was responsible for its own *obscuritas* in his opinion. See also *infra*.

⁹ Gal. *Comp. Tim.* 1.8-23 Kraus-Walzer, in Ferrari (1998), 18 ss. See also Kraus-Walzer (1951), p. 35 n. *ad loc.*

We have not condensed those notions expressed by Timaeus in this book in the same way as we did in the case of (Plato's) other books, whose notions we have actually condensed. In those books, Plato's discourse was abundant and lengthy, whereas in this book it is extremely succinct - as remote from Aristotle's concise and obscure discourse as it is remote from that lengthy one employed by Plato himself in other books. But if you believe that in the work there is some conciseness and obscurity, please be aware that it is a slight thing. For if you focus on this phenomenon, it will be perspicuous to you that it occurs not as a result of the obscurity of the discourse as such: this happens when the reader comprehends very little, because some form of obscurity and confusion resides in the discourse itself. That discourse is obscure as such <...: on the contrary, any discourse which is not obscure in itself can be comprehended only by those who have exercised themselves in this discipline.

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Calcidius' remarks on textual obscurity originate from a specific passage in Plato's *Timaeus* (49a6-7, εἶρηται μὲν οὖν τὰληθές, 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 regards to the first description of the *chora*, Plato has Timaeus say that what has been maintained is true (εἶρηται μὲν οὖν τὰληθές) but, nonetheless, it could – and actually should – be expressed in a more *perspicuous* way (δεῖ δὲ ἐναργέστερον εἰπεῖν περὶ αὐτοῦ).¹⁰ The theme emerging from this piece of text is the relation between truth and clarity, or absence of clarity, in a philosophical discourse.¹¹ Thus, in Timaeus' words Calcidius detects an example of a widespread and rather problematic connection existing between *veritas* and *obscuritas*. That this connection is anything but uncommon in the philosophical texts, is soon made clear by Calcidius himself: *quia non statim quae vere dicuntur aperte etiam manifesteque dicuntur*. Rather, in many discourses an evident combination of truth and obscurity is to be found (*multae quippe orationes verae quidem sed obscurae*). But for the philosopher – i.e. the

¹⁰ On Plato's *chora*, see at least Ferrari (2007) and Fronterotta (2014).

¹¹ See Barnes (1992); Hadot (1987), p. 23; Manetti (1998), p. 1213-1217; Mansfeld (1994), p. 148-161.

exegete¹² – the text represents an authority;¹³ and any authority needs to be explained, justified and defended in any of its aporetic aspects. In other words, first of all it needs to be *clarified*. Therefore, in an authority, the virtual or real divergence between its fully veritative value and the obscurity of its expressive form, cannot be neglected by the exegete. In general, when it comes to the scholastic exegesis, interpreting mainly entails *clarifying* what is problematic and hence *obscure*. Actually, obscurity is the *condition of possibility* of the exegetical practice itself; as Jonathan Barnes (1992, p. 270) puts it, “clarity is a virtue, obscurity is a vice. [...] Obscurity demands treatment – and the treatment lies in the hands of scholarship and of the commentator”. With regards to this – I mean, the clarifying function carried out by exegesis – Calcidius is in agreement with Galen (In *Hipp. fract.* XVIII, B318 K.):

[T5] 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.

Before the exegesis of each aspect, it would be better to know something about any form of exegesis in general - that its ability amounts to render clear any obscure thing whatsoever should be found in the writings.

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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. It is fundamental to understand the genetic process of the obscurity of a text; for, by means of an aetiology of obscurity, the reader is also given the opportunity to grasp its communicative aim; and, last but not least, the communicative aim of obscurity deals directly with its relation to the truth of the text. What is hence at issue is entwining levels of analysis, that consequently deserve to be considered as a whole. Let's follow Calcidius then in his

¹² See also Sen. *Ep. Mor.* 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, numquam ausos aliquando facere, quod diu didicerant. Memoriam in alienis exercuerunt. Aliud 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. Cf. Hadot (1987); Donini (2011), p. 211-282; Ferrari (2001); Sedley (1989, 1997).

¹³ This authoritative value of the Master's written texts was typical of Epicurean philosophers as well: see Delle Donne (2021) (forthcoming), along with Erler (1996), Sedley (2003).

reconstruction of the causal or genetic factors of obscurity, in order to take its communicative functions into account.

IV

Calcidius contemplates three genetic hypotheses, in relation to obscurity. 1) The first one might be described as “voluntaristic”, as it identifies the responsible factor for obscurity in a text with the determination of the author’s (or the speaker’s) will (*vel dicentis non numquam voluntate*). Were this to be the case, obscurity would not be without any particular communicative value; rather, it would respond to a specific authorial strategy of knowledge transmission.¹⁴ 2) The second hypothesis raised in [T1] regards the potential inadequacy of the recipient of the philosophical text (*vel audientis vitio*). In other words, obscurity could boil down to a merely subjective phenomenon, which would exclusively result from the vitium of the reader/listener. Sure enough, 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 in it. The latter would consequently come across as 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 (or of the piece of philosophy subject to scrutiny) *as such* (*ex natura rei de qua tractatus est*). In this case, the kind of obscurity at issue would be eminently related to the content; as a consequence, it would turn out to be within, or inherent to, the text, as it would result from the complexity of the theoretical matter under examination. So, regardless of the author’s style or language (which might even be regarded as appreciable),¹⁵ or of

¹⁴ See also Simpl. *In Phys.* 8.18 Diels: ἐν τοῖς ἀκροαματικοῖς ἀσάφειαν ἐπετήδευσε διὰ ταύτης τοῦς ῥαθυμοτέρους ἀποκρουόμενος, ὡς παρ’ ἐκείνοις μηδὲ γεγράφθαι δοκεῖν; Diog. 3.63 *apud* Baltes (1993), 532 ff.: Ὀνόμασι δὲ κέχρηται ποικίλοις πρὸς τὸ μὴ εὐσύνοπτον εἶναι τοῖς ἀμαθέσι τὴν πραγματείαν; and David, *Porph.* 106, 25 ff.: τούτου οὖν χάριν οἱ παλαιοὶ τοῦς γνησίους βουλόμενοι ἐκ τῶν νόθων διακρίνειν ἀσάφειάν τινα ἐποίουν, ἵνα εἰ μὲν τις γνήσιος ἦ, τὴν ἀσάφειαν τῶν θεωρημάτων ἦτοι τῆς λέξεως μὴ εὐλαβούμενος ἑαυτὸν ἀπαγγέλλῃ γνήσιον εἶναι καὶ δι’ ἔρωτα τῶν λόγων κόπον καὶ πόνον φέρῃ (ὁ γὰρ γνήσιος ὅσον ὄρα ἀξανομένην ἀσάφειαν, τοσοῦτον σπουδαίως καθοπλίζεται, ἵνα τὸ ξένον καὶ δυσχερὲς κατορθωσάμενος μέγιστος ἐν λόγοις ὀφθῆι), εἰ δὲ νόθος εἴη, εὐθέως τὴν ἀσάφειαν ὀρῶν τὴν ἀπαλλαγὴν εὐκταίαν ἡγήσεται, ἔρωτα πρὸς τοῦς λόγους οὐδένα ἔχων [...].

¹⁵ See David, *In Porph. Isag.* 105.9-28 Busse: ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἐμνήσθημεν ἀσαφείας, φέρε διδάξωμεν πόθεν ἡ ἀσάφεια τίκτεται. 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 [...], ἢ διὰ τὴν ποιότητα τῆς λέξεως, ὡς ἔχει τὰ Ἀριστογένεια [...] 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

his communication and knowledge transmission strategy, and also of the listener's degree of education, an unbeatable form of obscurity might come about, whose very existence would originate from the nature itself of the subject dealt with. In relation to this point, it is worth mentioning Galen's distinction (*In Hipp. fract.* XVIII, B 319K.) between a "real obscurity" (τὸ μὲν ὄντως ἀσαφές), "which is what it is because of itself" (αὐτὸ δι' ἑαυτὸ τοιοῦτον ὑπάρχον), and another one which is "relational" (τὸ δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πρότερον τὴν γένεσιν οὐκ ἔχον), in the sense that it comes about only when the interaction between the text and the reader takes place. This represents another example of continuity between Calcidius and the Middle Platonic exegesis:

[T6] [...] τὸ μὲν ὄντως ἀσαφές 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 παντάπασί γε ἀγυμνάστους ὑπάρχειν, εἶναι τε φύσει τοὺς μὲν ὀξεῖς τε καὶ συνετοὺς, τοὺς δὲ ἀμβλεῖς καὶ ἀσυνέτους.

What is genuinely unclear is so in and by itself. The other sort however is not originally obscure, because there are after all numerous differences among those who read the argument as to their having either received a preliminary education and training in relation to arguments, or being entirely untrained. And as regards their natural disposition, some are sharp and intelligent, others dumb and stupid.¹⁶

ἐπετήδευσεν, ὁ δὲ ἕτερος διὰ τῶν θεωρημάτων· τὰ μὲν γὰρ Ἀριστοτελικά θεωρήματα εὐχερῆ εἰσιν, ἢ δὲ φράσις δύσκολος. [...] τὰ δὲ Πλατωνικά θεωρήματα πάνυ τι δύσκολά εἰσι καὶ δυσχερῆ καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν πάση δόξῃ σχεδὸν ἐπόμενα (ὅτι δὲ ἐστὶ τοῦτο ἀληθές, σαφές ἐκ τοῦ δύνασθαι ἐκάστην ἐξήγησιν ἀρμόζειν αὐτὰ πρὸς ἃ βούλεται), ἢ δὲ φράσις εὐχερῆς καὶ ὁμαλὴ καὶ ἀπλῶς εἰπεῖν Πλατωνικὴ (on this passage, see Mansfeld (1994), p. 151 n. 273). David plausibly depends on Porphyry when it comes to this taxonomy (see *ibid.* 7-8). There are two major species of obscurity: 1) an expressive one (ἀπὸ τῆς λέξεως), which was voluntarily practised by Aristotle (ὁ μὲν εἷς τὴν ἀσάφειαν διὰ τῶν φράσεων ποιεῖν ἐπετήδευσεν); and 2) a content-related one (ἀπὸ τῶν θεωρημάτων), like that typical of Plato's dialogues (ὁ δὲ ἕτερος διὰ τῶν θεωρημάτων). It is interesting to observe that an author who deals with difficult matters is said to be Heraclitus, who is described in Calcidius' account as an example of voluntary obscurity (see also Cicero's *De fin.* 2.15). In any case, type 1) is again divided in two subspecies: 1a) there is an expressive obscurity which depends on the "length" of the wording (like Galen's one: διὰ τὸ μῆκος τῆς φράσεως); 1b) but there is also an expressive obscurity which results from the "quality" of the wording (διὰ τὴν ποιότητα τῆς λέξεως: for example, Aristogenes wrote an expression like καὶ ἡδὺν πόνον καὶ ἐνσεσαγμένον, without explaining *which kind* of πόνος was actually at issue).

¹⁶ Trans. by Mansfeld (1994), p. 150-151.

V

After this very schematic taxonomy, Calcidius puts forward a much more detailed version of it. Case 1) above ends up with being 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 be hidden behind the *obscuritas* of a text. The purpose of such *obscuritas*, when voluntarily pursued, would be to conceal the author's doctrines. In other words, the deliberate obscurity of a work might aim at hiding its content, at least to a certain extent. Calcidius also gives us some examples of authors who have been deliberately obscure: Aristotle and Heraclitus. Sure enough, these examples are already to be found in the exegetical tradition,¹⁷ whence Calcidius apparently takes them. When it comes to Heraclitus, we only need consider Cicero's words in the *De natura deorum* 1.74: *neque tu me celas ut Pythagoras solebat alienos, nec consulto dicis occulte tamquam Heraclitus, sed, quod inter nos liceat, ne tu quidem intellegis*. There is even a passage by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* V, 9.58.1-5), where all the founders of the ancient philosophical schools 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 hint as to which objective might have led the above-mentioned philosophers to make their own texts obscure: they wanted to put “the genuine philosophers” (εἰ γνησίως φιλοσοφοῖεν) among their own students to the “test” (μὴ οὐχὶ πείραν δεδωκόσι πρότερον):

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[T7] Οὐ μόνον ἄρα οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι καὶ Πλάτων τὰ πολλὰ ἐπεκρύπτοντο, ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ Ἐπικούρειοί φασί τινα καὶ παρ' αὐτοῦ ἀπόρρητα εἶναι καὶ μὴ πᾶσιν ἐπιτρέπειν ἐντυγχάνειν τούτοις τοῖς γράμμασιν. ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ Στωϊκοὶ λέγουσι Ζήνωνι τῷ πρώτῳ γεγράφθαι τινὰ, 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 ἐξωτερικά.¹⁸

It was not only the Pythagoreans and Plato then, that concealed many things; but the Epicureans too say that they have things that may not be uttered, and do not allow all to peruse those writings. The Stoics also say that by the first Zeno things were written which they do not readily allow disciples to read, without their first giving

¹⁷ See n. 15 above.

¹⁸ See also n. 14 above.

proof whether or not they are genuine philosophers. And the disciples of Aristotle say that some of their treatises are esoteric, and others common and exoteric.

This makes it clear how a certain degree of obscurity - or, at the very least, opacity - was usually detected, and even expected, in the works of the “founding fathers” of each philosophical tradition. The Middle Platonist Plutarch, for example, strongly believed in Plato’s voluntary obscurity.¹⁹ The crucial point is the following: the authoritative value of the Master’s words necessitated some form of “immunisation” from banalisation and from being divulged indiscriminately. Therefore, some kind of obscurity, be it even superficial, ensured the exclusion of a public unsuited to advanced philosophy. Moreover, the obscurity of the more representative texts of a specific school was likely to act as a unifying factor for its members as well: in other words, anyone who did not succeed in demonstrating comprehension of those writings, was consequently shown unworthy of playing any part in the correspondent philosophical community.

Be that as it may, with regards to Calcidius’ passage at issue in this paper, it is also worth considering Cicero’s *De finibus* 2.15:

[T8] 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.

And even supposing that I do not understand what Epicurus says, still I believe I really have a very clear knowledge of Greek, so that perhaps it is partly his fault for using such unintelligible language. 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

¹⁹ See Plut. *Is. et Os.* 370e-f, *Def. orac.* 420f and *Quaest. Conv.* VIII 2.719a.

instance of this is Plato's *Timaeus*. But Epicurus, in my opinion, has no intention of not speaking plainly and clearly if he can, nor is he discussing a recondite subject like natural philosophy, nor a technical subject such as mathematics, but a lucid and easy topic, and one that is generally familiar already.²⁰

In the text, Heraclitus is said by Cicero to have been accused of obscurity (*consulto dicis occulte tamquam Heraclitus, cognomento qui σκοτεινός perhibetur*), which was taken to be deliberate. This is exactly the same as Calcidius maintains. But there is more to it than this, when it comes to the existing analogies between the two authors. Even though Aristotle is not mentioned in the *De finibus*, a sort of taxonomy of *obscuritas* (like that in Calcidius's commentary) is to be found in this writing too. Apart from 1) that kind of obscurity typical of Heraclitus, which results from a precise choice by the author, Cicero also mentions 2) a 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*): as will become evident, 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 is that which is typical of Epicurus, and which stems from a poor style of writing (*vide ne [...] sit aliqua culpa eius, qui ita loquatur ut non intellegatur*). Therefore, the latter form of obscurity is undoubtedly guilty and defective, and it might be compared to the *imbecillitas sermonis* which is mentioned by Calcidius as a form of *obscuritas iuxta dicentem*. When it comes to Epicurus, any "objective" or content-related matrix behind his lack of clarity should be ruled out; and in the same way, also the author's will should be left out, as Epicurus would have certainly, *si possit, plane et aperte loqui*. 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, in light of some aetiological research, obscurity is shown to stem from an expressive inability or deficiency on the part of the author. Hence, similarly to Calcidius, also in Cicero's text obscurity turns out to be interrelated with either the author's strategy (*de industria*, [T8]; *studio dataque opera*, [T1]), or the content (*rerum obscuritas*, [T8]; *ex natura rei*, [T1]), or even the weakness of the author's style (*ita loquatur, ut non intellegatur*, [T8]; *ex imbecillitate sermonis*, [T1]). But unlike Calcidius, Cicero undermines the role played by the pupils or the public in the genesis of obscurity. As will become evident later in the paper, this element of Calcidius' taxonomy is to be traced back to Middle (see [T6] above) and Neoplatonic scholastic literary production, where both the

²⁰ Trans. by Rackham (1931).

Master's and pupil's role in the educational process turns into the privileged topic of a standard and stereotyped treatment.²¹

It is possible to trace back to the Hellenistic Age, and particularly to the Garden, another two intriguing texts dealing with *obscuritas*. First of all, the need for Epicureans to solve the absence of perspicuity in Epicurean texts was something which they perceived as an urgent and necessary task. As a result, since the very first generation after that of Epicurus' last direct disciples, Epicureans used to practise a philologically based exegesis of the *ipsissima verba* of their Master (or even of their *kathegemones*).²² 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 (δι[δά]σκου|σι καὶ [τ]ὰ τῶν ἐπιτετη|δευκότων ἀσάφειαν ἐξ|ευρίσκειν καὶ ὁμοειδῆ)"²³:

[T9] δ[ὲ] | ναυ[ται] μ[ὲν] τοῖς [β]ιβλίοις | παρακολουθεῖν οἱ καὶ | τετυ[χ]ότες ἀγωγῆς Ἑλλη|σι καὶ [ο]ὐ [Πέρσαις] πρεπού|σης καὶ παι[δευθ]έντες | ἐν μ[α]θήμασι, δι[δά]σκου|σι καὶ [τ]ὰ τῶν ἐπιτετη|δευκότων ἀσάφειαν ἐξ|ευρίσκειν καὶ ὁμοειδῆ | γ', εἰ μὴδὲν ἕτερον, ἐκ παι|δίου μέχρι γήρωσ φ[ι]λο|σοφήσαντες καὶ τοσαῦ|τα καὶ τοιαῦτα ταῖς ἀκρι|βείαις συντεθεικότες ...

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Those who can comprehend these books have received an education suitable for Greeks and not for Persians and have been trained in the disciplines; as a result, they teach to rediscover both the thought of those who have dealt with the obscurity of things, and similar thoughts. Those people have practiced philosophy since their childhood till old age, and they have composed so many and such valuable works with accuracy ...

Now, according to Anna Angeli, in this column the term *asapheia* should be given an "objective" semantic value, as it refers to the obscurity peculiar to the topics, or the things dealt with. Hence, she proposes to translate it with the

²¹ Mansfeld (1994), p. 161-166.

²² Capasso (1987), p. 39-59; Blank (2001); Erler (1993, 1996, 2003, 2011); Ferrario (2000); Puglia (1980, 1982, 1986, 1988, p. 49-106); Roselli (1991); Sedley (1989, 2003), Tulli (2000).

²³ Trans. after Angeli (1988); see also her translation of the whole fragment: "Possono comprendere i libri coloro i quali, conseguita un'educazione che conviene a Greci e non a Persiani, ed educati nello studio delle discipline, insegnano a riscoprire sia il pensiero di quanti si sono occupati dell'oscurità delle cose, sia, se non altro, pensieri affini: essi filosofarono dalla fanciullezza sino alla vecchiaia e hanno composto tante e tali opere con rigore scientifico."

expression “obscurity of things”.²⁴ If this reading is correct, Philodemus would therefore be maintaining that the fulfillment of *paideia* could be beneficial when it comes to retrieving those doctrines regarding complex and hence obscure realities. Were that to be the case, the reference would be to doctrines belonging to the Epicureans themselves; consequently, 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 theoretical assumptions and concepts of Epicurean philosophy.²⁵ In this case, the general overtone of this column would be interscholastic polemics. Furthermore, it is again Philodemus who puts forward a schematic presentation of two types of *asapheia* in the *Rhetoric* (IV = *PHerc.* 1423, coll. XIII 15-XVI). One of the two genres reveals itself to be similar to that obscurity which is usually imputed to Epicurus’ own writings – namely, the obscurity stemming from a lacking mastery of both the subjects and the Greek language:

[T10] εὐθέως γὰρ ἀσάφεια
 τὶς μὲν ἐπιτηδεύμα-
 τικῶς γίνεται, τὶς
 δ’ ἀνεπιτηδεύτως·
 ἐπιτηδευματικῶς
 μὲν, ὅταν μῆθὲν ἀγα-
 θὸν τις εἰδῶς καὶ λέ-
 γων ἐπικρύπτῃ τοῦ-
 το διὰ τῆς ἀσαφείας, ἴ-

²⁴ Nonetheless, according to Erler (1991), p. 86-87, the expression *epitedeuein asapheian* might have another meaning here. In the works by some late commentators (Simplicius, Philoponus etc.), this *tourne* tends to refer to the voluntary use of obscurity as expressive means. Were this to be the correct reading of the expression, the writings at issue in Philodemus’ text could not be Epicurean: *sapheia* was an essential value for the members of the Garden (see De Sanctis (2015), Tulli (2000)); rather, Philodemus would 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 pupils. Besides, according to this interpretation, the students praised by Philodemus would show a striking intellectual flexibility, as they would end up with teaching to discover the thoughts of philosophers belonging to *other schools*.

²⁵ With regards to Epicurus, it is perhaps worth pointing out that an Epicurean philosopher, Lucretius, used to describe his own verses – along with the Epicurean system – as obscure (besides, he was perfectly aware of Heraclitus’ type of *obscuritas* too). But such evaluation was not negative in his opinion, as the obscurity of the poem resulted from the complexity of the themes dealt with. Nonetheless, according to Lucretius, poetic expression could and should shed light on such obscurity (see I. 933-934, IV. 8-9, I. 136-137, I. 921-922, along with Piazzzi (2011), p. 174-175).

να δόξει τι χρήσιμον
γράφειν καὶ λέγειν
[...] ἄνευ δὲ
ἐπιτηδεύσεως ἀσά-
φεια γίνεται παρὰ τὸ
μὴ κρατεῖν τῶν πρα-
γμάτων ἢ μὴ διελημ-
μῆνως, ἢ παρὰ τὸ μὴ
φιληδεῖν ἢ μὴ προσκαρ-
τερεῖν τῇ περιωδευ-
μενῇ προφορᾷ καὶ
γραφῇ, καὶ κοινῶς τε
παρὰ τὸ μὴ καλῶς ἐλ-
ληνίζειν ἐπίστασθαι -
καὶ γὰρ σολοικισμοὶ
ποιοὶ καὶ βαρβαρισ-
μοὶ πολλὴν ἀσάφειαν
ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἀποτε-
λοῦσι - καὶ παρὰ τὸ συμ-
φανῆ τὰ ῥήματα τοῖς
πράγμασιν νομίζειν
εἶναι [...].²⁶

Immediately, a form of obscurity occurs intentionally, while another one does so unintentionally. It is intentional when one, without knowing or saying anything, conceals this fact by means of obscurity in order to get the impression of knowing or saying something useful. [...] Obscurity without intentionality takes place when one is not able to master the content, or if one is not able to do it precisely, or when one does not enjoy, nor perseveres with, the expression or the writing treated, or more generally also if one is

²⁶ See Angeli's translation (1988) of these columns: "Immediatamente, infatti, un'oscurità si verifica intenzionalmente, un'altra senza intenzionalità. Si verifica intenzionalmente quando uno, non conoscendo né dicendo nulla di buono, nasconde ciò mediante l'oscurità affinché sembri che conosca e dica qualcosa di utile [...] Oscurità si verifica senza intenzionalità quando non si dominano gli argomenti, non distintamente, quando non ci si diletta né si persevera nell'espressione che è stata esaminata e nella scrittura, e in generale anche quando non ci si sa esprimere in buon greco - e infatti certi solecismi e barbarismi producono molta oscurità nei discorsi - e quando si crede che le parole siano tanto chiare quanto gli argomenti"

not able to express himself well in Greek – specific solecisms and barbarisms bring about considerable obscurity in discourses – and also if one believes that words are as clear as the arguments themselves.

First of all, it is necessary to highlight the discriminating factor between the two forms of obscurity which are identified by Philodemus: intentionality and unintentionality. Were the obscurity to be intentional by the author (ἐπιτηδευματικῶς), according to Philodemus, in that case there would be the willingness to conceal his ignorance (ὅταν μηθὲν ἀγαθὸν τις εἰδῶς καὶ λέγων ἐπικρύπτῃ τοῦτο) and to bring about a sort of disorientation on the part of the reader. In other words, a particularly complex - and hence obscure - expressive form might make the reader believe that in the text there is much more, in terms of content, than there actually is (ἴνα δόξῃ τι χρήσιμον γράφειν καὶ λέγειν). Now, also Cicero and Calcidius take *industria* – in other words, intentionality – to be a causal and typological factor with regards to *obscuritas*; but, unlike Philodemus, they tend to evaluate it not negatively (as in the case of Calcidius), or even positively (*sine reprehensione*), as Cicero does. In other words, the deliberate obscurity mentioned by Cicero and Calcidius does not equate to Philodemus' deceptive and misleading *asapheia*. To conclude on this point: there is a categorical similarity between these authors – i.e. intentionality taken as a causal factor; but its function and value turn out to be radically different from one author to another.

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When it comes to that kind of *asapheia* which happens *anepitedeutos*, the similarity between Philodemus, Cicero and Calcidius is undeniable. According to Philodemus, were the author to lack the linguistic (καὶ κοινῶς τε παρὰ τὸ μὴ καλῶς ἐλληνίζειν ἐπίστασθαι) and content-related (παρὰ τὸ μὴ κρατεῖν τῶν πραγμάτων ἢ μὴ διειλημμήνως) expertise, an *unwilling* obscurity would take place:²⁷ but also Cicero and Calcidius distinguish a voluntary obscurity (*de industria*, [T8]; *studio dataque opera*, [T1]) and an involuntary one, which might result from also the style-writing deficiency of the author (*ita loquatur, ut non intellegatur*, [T8]; *ex imbecillitate sermonis*, [T1]: even though this kind of obscurity is not explicitly said to be involuntary, it is likely to be largely implicit).

VI

It is necessary now to look at the case of Aristotle, who happens to be the other author mentioned by Calcidius as an example of voluntary obscurity. In

²⁷ Cicero finds this kind of *obscuritas* due to the author's inability in Epicurus' writings. As a consequence, one might suppose that Cicero's criticism is particularly efficacious precisely because it makes use of an Epicurean category (presumably elaborated by Epicurus' disciples against other schools) against Epicurus himself.

the Aristotelian exegetical tradition,²⁸ there was a well-documented debate regarding the nature of Aristotle's *obscuritas*, which was rather unanimously accepted (see Cic. *Top.* 1.2: *a libris [scil. Aristotelis] te obscuritas reiecit*).²⁹ It was even the case that the objective of such obscurity was one of the classical issues to deal with in the Neoplatonic *Isagogai*.³⁰ One need only quote the following passage from Simplicius (*In Cat.* 8.7.6 ff.):

[T11] Ἀριστοτέλης δὲ τὴν ἀσάφειαν προετίμησεν, ἴσως μὲν καὶ τὴν ἀόριστον τῶν μύθων καὶ τῶν συμβόλων ὑπόνοιαν παραιτησάμενος (ῥαδίως γὰρ ἄλλος ἄλλως ἐκδέχεσθαι 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 λόγῳ παρακολουθεῖν δυνάμενοι, ὅτι πολλὴν ἐμφαίνει λεκτικὴν δύναμιν ἢ Ἀριστοτέλους ἐρμηνεῖα, ὡς δι' ὀλίγων πολλάκις συλλαβῶν παραδιδόναι ὅσα οὐκ ἂν τις ἐν πολλαῖς περιόδοις 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 τοὺς ῥαθυμότερους ἀποκρουόμενος.³¹

Aristotle privileged obscurity, plausibly because he tried to do without the indefinite allegories of myths and symbols (for anyone is likely to read them in a different way from any other), or plausibly because he considered such obscurity as even more suited for the exercise of sagacity. [...] That Aristotle's obscurity affected his writings not because of any deficiency of discourse, is known even by those who manage to follow reason only modestly, since Aristotle's style exhibits remarkable rhetorical skills: often, by means of a few syllables, he could express what anyone else would have taught not even in many phrases; but this is clear also in light of what he taught with extreme clarity in the books where he wanted to do so, as in *Meteorology*, *Topics* and in his genuine *Politics* [...] In the achromatic writings, he practiced obscurity since, by this means, he could keep the most lazy away from them.

²⁸ Erler (1991), Barnes (1992).

²⁹ Barnes (1992), p. 267-274.

³⁰ Barnes (1992), p. 268, n.4 and also Motta (2019).

³¹ See also *In Phys.* 8.18-20 (n. 14 above).

With regards to the potential causes for the obscurity “carried out” by Aristotle (ἀσάφειαν ἐπετήδευσε: it is interesting to point out here the typically Philodemean expression τῶν ἐπιτετη|δευκόντων 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 “inept” (τοῖς ῥαθύμοις οὐδὲ τὴν μυθικὴν ψυχαγωγίαν προτείνειν ἀξιῶν; διὰ ταύτης τοῦς ῥαθυμοτέρους ἀποκρουόμενος), thus inducing the more talented ones to experience and improve their own exegetical perspicacity (ἴσως δὲ καὶ γυμναστικωτέραν εἰς ἀγχίνοιαν ὑπολαμβάνων τὴν τοιαύτην ἀσάφειαν). Now, according to Simplicius, that obscurity which is typical of Aristotle 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 has a peirastic value, and even a selective one, in a certain sense. Besides, such a selective aim does not characterise only Aristotle’s works, according to the exegetical tradition; as I have also said above,³² the Middle Platonic Plutarch (*De Is.* 370E-371A) attributes it also to his own Master Plato, plausibly in light of passages like [Plato] *Ep.* II 312D.³³ Therefore, when Calcidius mentions Aristotle as an example of intentional obscurity, this results from a well-established precedent.³⁴

VII

The second form of *obscuritas* – that which derives from the *imbecillitas sermonis* – is anything but uncontroversial. In light of the semantics of *imbecillitas*, which means “weakness” or “insufficiency”, two readings of the expression are 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 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. To solve this linguistic and conceptual difficulty, it is worthy of note that the *imbecillitas sermonis* might be the Latin translation for the Greek expression ἀσθένεια λόγου [see e.g. T11 *supra*]. Thus, on the basis of this piece of evidence, it

³² See n.18 above.

³³ φῆς γὰρ δὴ κατὰ τὸν ἐκείνου λόγον, οὐχ ἰκανῶς ἀποδεδειχθαί σοι περὶ τῆς τοῦ πρώτου φύσεως. φραστέον δὲ σοι δι’ αἰνιγμῶν, ἵν’ ἂν τι ἢ δέλτος ἢ πόντου ἢ γῆς ἐν πτυχαῖς πάθῃ, ὁ ἀναγνούς μὴ γνῶ. See Isnardi Parente (2000), p. 195.

³⁴ According to Galen [T4], Aristotle’s obscurity depends on the quality of his style of writing, and it is hence unlikely that it can be deemed as voluntary, in his opinion; whereas, according to Clement [T7, τὰ μὲν ἐσωτερικὰ εἶναι τῶν συγγραμμάτων αὐτοῦ] and David Elias (n. 15 above, ὁ μὲν εἰς τὴν ἀσάφειαν διὰ τῶν φράσεων ποιεῖν ἐπετήδευσεν), Aristotle’s obscurity is voluntarily pursued (in particular, by means of his expressions, according to the latter: διὰ τῶν φράσεων). As a consequence, these two authors happen to agree with Simplicius [T11].

is perhaps possible to solve the ambiguity of the Latin text. In Simplicius' passage, the weakness of discourse is ruled out in light of an argument which is structured as follows: Aristotle could not have been obscure in some works "due to the weakness of discourse", since Aristotle's prose shows a "notable communicative ability" (πολλήν λεκτικὴν δύναμιν) in other texts. Aristotle often manages to express "in a few syllables" (δι' ὀλίγων συλλαβῶν) issues that other writers wouldn't be able to express "in many sentences" (ἐν πολλαῖς περιόδοις). As a consequence, it is not Aristotle's language (maybe because of its limited capacity) that brings about a lack of perspicuity in his own writings. 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 parallelism of the expressions *ex imbecillitate sermonis* and ἀσθενεία λόγου is to be complete, it is legitimate to maintain what follows: presumably Calcidius would consider the insufficient and ineffective use of language too as one of the main causes of the *obscuritas iuxta dicentem*. Besides, the implicit reference here might be directed towards Epicurus, who was identified as a symbol of linguistic inability by the whole exegetical tradition (we need but think of Cicero).

VIII

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, or 2a) as a result of the unexpected and even peregrine impression that the reader might have been given from what has been said (*vel cum inaudita et insolita dicuntur*); or 2b) due to the the listener/reader's limited intellectual ability for philosophy (*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 limited to the reader, as a consequence of the latter's inability to rationally come to terms with the content of a text, is contemplated in Middle Platonic documents: one need only consider Galen's text T6 quoted above, which turns out to be paradigmatic in this case. However, the theme of obscurity as a product of the *unusual* and *peregrine* nature of the discourse might be traced all the way back even to Plato's *Timaeus* (48d5-8), where it is possible to read the following:

[T12] θεὸν δὴ καὶ νῦν ἐπ' ἀρχῇ τῶν λεγομένων σωτῆρα ἐξ ἀτόπου καὶ ἀήθους διηγήσεως πρὸς τὸ τῶν εἰκότων δόγμα διασφάζειν ἡμᾶς ἐπικαλεσάμενοι πάλιν ἀρχόμεθα λέγειν.

And as before, so now, at the commencement of our account, we must call upon God the Saviour to bring us safe through a novel and unwonted exposition to a conclusion based on likelihood, and thus begin our account once more.³⁵

Were that to be the case, an internal reference to the dialogue commented on by Calcidius would be at issue; even though in Plato's text obscurity is not explicitly mentioned, Calcidius' *inaudita* might refer to the *atopia* (ἐξ ἀτόπου) typical of Timaeus' discourse, whereas *insolita* might allude to the Platonic adjective ἀήθους, whose meaning is precisely "not in accordance with custom" (like *in-solitus*).

IX

But the type of *obscuritas* which affects Plato's account of the *chora* is not included either in 1) or in 2) above, according to Calcidius. Consequently, Calcidius maintains that *neque Timaeus, qui disserit, instabilis orator nec audientes tardi*; whence it can be inferred that obscurity, in the case under scrutiny, stems from the intrinsic difficulty of the object under discussion – namely, the *chora* itself. 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:

[T13] 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 difficilius ad explanandum; ergo cuncta quae de natura eius dicta sunt mera praedita veritate sunt nec tamen aperte dilucideque intimata.

Obscurity stems from the content, when the latter is like the one which is being dealt with by us right now: it cannot be grasped by means of the senses, nor could it be comprehended with the intellect, as it is deprived of form, quality and delimitation. [...] Nor is there anything more difficult to explain than the *chora*. Therefore, whatever has been said with regards to its nature is genuinely true, but nonetheless it has not been communicated openly and clearly.

Even in this case, it almost goes without saying that an analogous classification of the obscurity peculiar to Timaeus' exposition is already to be

³⁵ Trans. by Lamb (1925).

found in Cicero; hence it is a piece of exegesis - i.e. the obscurity of the *Timaeus* as αὐτὸ δι' ἑαυτὸ τοιοῦτον ὑπάρχον – which is already present in the field of the late Hellenistic exegesis. Thus, at last Calcidius ends up with an identification of Plato's *obscuritas*: it is an objective, content-related phenomenon; but he has also shed light on the problematic relationship which links truth and obscurity of expression in the case at hand: although what regards the content of the discourse (i.e. *chora*) is true (*mera praedita veritate sunt*), the objective complexity of the *chora* negatively affects the perspicuity of the exposition, thus considerably undermining it. Against the background of this analysis, the commentator seems to be making a particular assumption with regards to the form-content relationship: the “congenericity” between *logos* (at least, in terms of its clarity) and the *onta* – a congenericity which happens to be perfectly stated at the beginning of the *Timaeus* (29b4-c2):

[T14] ὅδε οὖν περὶ τε εἰκόνος καὶ περὶ τοῦ παραδείγματος αὐτῆς διοριστέον, ὡς ἄρα τοὺς λόγους, ὧν πῆρ εἰσὶν ἐξηγηταί, τούτων αὐτῶν καὶ συγγενεῖς ὄντας.³⁶

Accordingly, in dealing with a copy and its model, we must affirm that the accounts given will themselves be akin to the diverse objects which they serve to explain.³⁷

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³⁶ See Donini, 1988.

³⁷ Trans. by Lamb (1925).

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