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Emmanuel Bury and Carsten Meiner, eds., *La Clarté à l'âge classique*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013. 282 pp. 28.00€ (cl). ISBN 978-2-8124-0813-7.

Review by Emma Gilby, University of Cambridge.

“Why, may I ask, do people have so many different opinions?,” inquires Gassendi rhetorically in the *Fifth Objections* to Descartes’s *Meditations*, before answering as follows: “Everyone thinks that he clearly and distinctly perceives the truth which he champions.”[1] Descartes responds in turn, and concedes that we need a method to show us when we are simply mistaken in thinking that we clearly and distinctly perceive something. This is what he feels he has provided. As an advocate for the process of understanding clearly that what one might think to be clear is in fact not, Descartes lands himself squarely in the terrain of difficult self-reflection. Such ambiguity is to be found across *l'âge classique*.

The volume under review comprises the acts of a conference held in Copenhagen in 2005 and organized as a three-way collaboration between the University of Copenhagen, the research team *Etats, Société, Religion en Europe Moyen âge-Temps modernes (ESR)* at the Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, and the *Centre d'Etude sur la Langue et la Littérature françaises du XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* at the Université de Paris-Sorbonne. It presents fourteen substantial contributions, including an introduction and overview from the editors. An obvious problem with proceedings that take an extravagantly long time to appear in print is that it is very difficult for them to appear truly fresh and interesting. The field has moved on in the intervening near-decade, doctoral theses have been started and finished, and bibliographies seem out of date. That aside, the fourteen chapters here succeed very well in their common goal of analyzing “les différents discours rhétorique, philosophique, poétique, esthétique et linguistique où figure la clarté” (p. 9).

In rhetorical theory, clarity spans *res* and *verba*, *inventio* and *elocutio*, a quality of expression as well as a heuristic for successful argumentation. The discipline of grammar makes clarity a condition of “le bon usage” and annexes that quality in debates about national identity. Religious discourse makes a space for clarity somewhere between revelation, grace and faith. English-speaking readers may find that the difficulty in translating “la clarté”—“clearness” or “clarity”?—provides in and of itself an introduction to some of the questions that are touched upon in this collection. On reflection, “clarity” may seem to conjure brilliance, lustre, or splendor, where “clearness” references a distinctness of line, a freedom from opacity, a quality of atmosphere, sight, judgment, or style; but such distinctions do not hold. Watching these terms blur into one another in usage, we also observe the vast applicability of visual metaphors to discursive and social constructions, “distinction” itself being an excellent case in point.

In their introduction, the editors are appropriately attentive to the vast semantic field associated with “la clarté”: “le distinct, la lumière, l'éclat, l'évidence, le sublime, le génie, la perspicacité, le discernement, la sagacité, la finesse, la subtilité, la pénétration, l'acuité, la lucidité, la vivacité, etc.” (p. 9). They are keen to emphasize and re-emphasize what they see as the three functions associated with “la clarté.” The first function is to idealize or to valorize (these notions are run together without comment); the second is to use “la clarté” as an objective marker of truth; the third is to designate a clarifying effect or process. But these categories do not obviously structure the edition as a whole, which instead aims to move variously around different definitions of “la clarté”: “les mêmes éléments reviennent mais inscrits dans de nouvelles configurations” (p. 15).

From its first chapters, this volume defines itself by its breadth of reference. J. Schøsler rehearses well-worn debates about Locke's opposition to Descartes's views on innate ideas with a view to adding a further topic for discussion, Locke's reception in France. Descartes's view that our capacity to understand nature rests upon the innate knowledge of reasonable, divinely guaranteed maxims—that what is, is; that it is impossible for a thing to be and not to be at the same time; that the whole is larger than the part—is rejected by Locke as absurd (children, for instance, do not necessarily hold these views, so how can they be innate?). Schøsler gives us an account of how eighteenth-century French thinkers such as Crousaz, Buffier, Condillac, Du Marsais and Quesnay responded to these competing opinions on innateness, with a particular focus on the notion of evidence as it was reinterpreted in the course of the eighteenth century “sur des bases sensualistes” (p. 31). Denis Kambouchner, by contrast, goes back to Descartes's intellectual predecessors, interestingly citing Duns Scotus's theory of knowledge, new developments in optical science, and the contemporary interest in stoic notions of phantasia as three possible, parallel sources for Descartes's interest in the clear and distinct.

Mogens Lærke and Volker Kapp also offer broad chronological overviews of the early modern period. In his article on religious debate centred on the problem of *claritas scripturae*, Lærke takes us back to Erasmus, Luther and the role of the church in the interpretation of scripture, before tracking Protestant controversialists across the seventeenth century and beyond. Kapp takes us from the Pléiade to Voltaire, for whom “le génie de notre langue est la clarté et l'élégance” (p. 87), via a slew of treatises on poetics (Vaugelas, Boileau, Bouhours, Rivarol), and still finds time to study Italian reactions to claims of French exceptionalism. National ideologies and theoretical reflections on style and genre emerge in dialogue with each other. Anders Toftgaard, in “La Contre-attaque des Barbares ou comment rendre une langue claire” (a reference to Petrarch's barbarian Gauls), will illustrate the same point with particular reference to Du Bellay.

Some of the more suggestive contributions dispersed at various points across this volume look explicitly at how “la clarté” spans the visual and the verbal, with writers of the early modern period thinking closely about *ekphrasis* and *enargeia*, the rhetorical terms associated with particularly vivid description, and artists thinking about the clarification of form. Alain Mérot offers his thoughts on what he terms “l'atticisme pictural”—the process of clarification through the use of color and line—while Alain Faudemey looks across a vast range of genres at two competing forms of clarity, the éclat of absolutism and the potentially subversive force of critical discernment. Jean-Marc Civardi, influenced in some ways by Faudemey's earlier work on the clair-obscur, also makes discernment the subject of his excellent piece on “l'accusation de galimatias au théâtre.” Giovanni Baffetti's “Evidence in the Device and Emblem” analyzes the controversy established between Emanuel Tesauro and Pierre Le Moyne on clarity and obscurity in the emblem. It is an odd editorial decision to have a single contribution in English, and this piece suffers from poor proofreading.

The age of enlightenment is well represented, with contributions from John Pedersen, Anne Sejten and Jean-Paul Sermain. For Pedersen, who takes us from Malherbe to Diderot, clarity in the seventeenth century is “un élément strictement grammatical, stylistique ou rhétorique” which gains a certain “complexité psycho-linguistique” over the course of the following century. The contributions of his colleagues in the rest of the volume help to nuance such demarcations. Anne Sejten uses a discussion of Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* to look at the forms of clarity, understanding and perception that emerge when the visual is taken out of the equation. Jean-Paul Sermain's piece works well with those essays earlier in the collection which reference Bouhours and the ingenious simplicity theorized in *De la manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit* (1687). Sermain tracks the repercussions in Marivaux of this form of *ingenium*, which he describes as *clair-ingénieux*.

This is a comprehensive, occasionally repetitive, somewhat workmanlike collection (the gendered adjective is not inappropriate given the profile of the contributors). The editors are right to describe their collection as kaleidoscopic, with the same elements for discussion recurring, merging together and re-emerging in alternative configurations. As one might expect, there are attendant problems

with focus and perspective. The convention of dividing up collected essays into at least nominally discrete subsections is a useful one, and would have served the editors here. Delphine Denis's collection, *L'Obscurité. Langage et herméneutique*, is to be recommended to any reader of this book as a fruitful source of contrasts and comparisons.<sup>[2]</sup> As Bury and Meiner naturally acknowledge from the start, "la clarté" cannot be discussed without reference to its antonym. Overall, though, the editors have succeeded well in their original aim of bringing together an established group of specialists to attempt a "clarification des logiques de clarté" in the early modern period.

## NOTES

[1] Fifth Set of Objections to the Meditations, in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothof and Dugald Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 194.

[2] Delphine Denis, ed., *L'Obscurité. Langage et herméneutique sous l'Ancien Régime* (Louvain, Bruylant-Academia, 2007).

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Emmanuel Bury and Carstein Meiner, "Introduction. La Clarté à l'âge classique: une évidence problématique"

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