

Baumgarten and the problem of obscure representations

Baumgarten e o problema das representações obscuras

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Abstract: Baumgarten is perhaps the first philosopher to approach the problem of the obscure representations of the soul aiming at discerning in them not obscurity or irrationality, rather a new clarity and hence a new perspective towards a better cognition of the human soul. The objective of this article is to verify how Baumgarten achieves this; namely, by understanding how the philosopher inscribes obscure representations, the “ground of the soul”, within empirical psychology, and hence within metaphysics, as a topic of an aesthetic order; by identifying that which, according to Baumgarten, is the problem inherent to obscure representations, between the necessary and the impossible exteriorization (*chiaroscuro*) of the latter, and to attempt to discern Baumgarten’s solution for this dilemma, which is to be found in the conscious-unconscious *sfumato* of poetry and is occasioned by the inherent poeticity of obscure representations themselves.

Keywords: Baumgarten, obscure representations, aesthetics, metaphysics, poetry

Resumo: Baumgarten será porventura o primeiro filósofo a abordar o problema das representações obscuras da alma tendo em vista nelas discernir algo que não obscuridade, ou irracionalidade, antes nova claridade e, portanto, uma nova perspectiva para o conhecimento da alma humana. O objectivo deste ensaio é verificar como Baumgarten faz isto; a saber, perceber como o filósofo institui as representações obscuras, “fundo da alma” humana, no seio da psicologia empírica, e portanto da metafísica, enquanto tópico de ordem estética; identificar aquele que, para Baumgarten, é o problema inerente às representações obscuras, entre a necessária e a impossível exteriorização (*chiaroscuro*) das mesmas, e procurar ver a solução baumgartneriana para este dilema, a qual se encontra num *sfumato* consciente-inconsciente próprio da poesia, e é suscitado pela própria poeticidade das representações obscuras.

Palavras-chave: Baumgarten, representações obscuras, estética, metafísica, poesia

I. Baumgarten, re-writer of the history of obscure representations as a philosophical problem

Among its akin topics, which from the 17th century onwards begin to be considered as pertinent questions now in the field of Psychology, now in the field of Philosophy, Anthropology and Aesthetics – namely, the so-called imaginative faculties of the human spirit, such as memory, fantasy, wit or genius – *the topic of obscure representations is surely that which stands out for the least favorable reasons*. For, despite its being a real topic; despite

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its being a topic which has its role in the human formation of concepts; and hence, despite its pertinence, even for the superior powers of the spirit, nonetheless the question of obscure representations was the latest and most reluctantly acknowledged of all such topics¹. As a proof of this, well beyond the 18th century many had not yet acknowledged its former attributes, nor the topic itself as a noteworthy problem, and this quite simply because, *throughout most of its existence as a philosophical problem, obscure representations were not even ascribed existence as such*².

The reasons for such a phenomenon are of a varied nature. Because the detailed explanation of such reasons would by itself occupy several articles like this one, we shall tacitly omit it, and add but some general annotations on the topic's history. The most extreme form of this phenomenon, *the total negation of the topic*, has ancestral roots which are due not exactly to the topic itself, but to its dark tonality, which was always connoted with ignorance, dubiousness, obscurity, even evil: in a word, *negativity*; something which therefore almost unconsciously led to the topic's discredit and negation. This, we believe, is not only the oldest, but also the most lasting motive why the topic was neglected as a topic of importance to the study of human consciousness. Until the onset of the 18th century, with exception of sporadic, but never topicalizing references, obscure representations do not exist as a problem of philosophical pertinence, they are altogether *negated*, and hence are left unmentioned by philosophy and science in general. Even later, when the topic begins to

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- 1 For the sake of completeness, let it be stated that, by Baumgarten's time, the remaining topics were long acknowledged as inferior powers or elements of the soul, and hence duly inscribed as philosophical-psychological-anthropological problems. *Memory and imagination (or fantasy)*, usually considered hand in hand, had long been the object of attention by anthropology, psychology or philosophical manuals; the concept of *genius (Genie, génie, genio, génio)*, drawn from the ancestral double stem of *genius* and *ingenium (gigno)*, was long considered in either of its two definitions and was finally coined in its modern designation from the 17th century onwards, by the hands of Huarte, Rabelais, Gracián, Milton or Young; as to the term *wit (Witz, esprit, ingenio, engenho)*, it has a very long and heterogeneous history, ever since Old High German, and, just like genius, it was consolidated into its final, more inventive connotation from the 17th century and the 18th century onwards, respectively in England, by the hands of Bacon, Hobbes and Locke, and in Germany, by the hands of Bodmer, Breitingen, Baumgarten himself and Kant.
 - 2 Such a fact is easily verifiable as an *omission*, which may be noted upon consulting the first modern works of an anthropological, psychological or philosophical nature, be they, as they were in the first decades of the modern formation of such fields of knowledge, of a physiological-anthropological, an empirical-psychological, a medicinal-anthropological or a pneumatological order. Namely, Magnus Hundt's *Anthropologium de Hominis Dignitate, Natura et proprietatibus, de elementis, partibus et membris humani corporis* (1501), though it includes an analysis of the properties of the human soul, makes no mention of obscure representations; nor does Otto Casmann's *Psychologia anthropologica, sive animae humanae doctrina* (1594), or Sigismundus Evenius' *Disputationes Anthropologicae* (1613), or Albert Kyper's *Anthropologia corporis humani contentorum, et animae naturam et virtutes secundum circulearem sanguinis motum explicans* (1647), or even Johann Sperling's *Synopsis Anthropologiae physicae* (1659). And even later anthropological treatises, much more intertwined with empirical psychology than with physiology (as were the latter), still do not mention the topic of obscure representations. The proof of this are Edward Reynolds' *A Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soule of Man* (1647), John Mason's *A Treatise of Self-Knowledge* (1746) or Giuseppe Gorini Corio's *L'uomo. Trattato fisico morale diviso in tre libri* (1756). Only in the 18th century, through the efforts of Locke, Leibniz, Wolff, Sulzer, Reimarus, Meier, Baumgarten and Kant, among others, will the topic of obscure representations be given due visibility and pertinence.

be accepted as *real* – which is brought about by Locke³ and Leibniz⁴ – it is formulated not in the sense of a true reflection on the topic itself, but with the aim to ascertain its causes and negative consequences; the causes, so as to identify that which, in such incomplete and confused representations, has ascribed them such an imperfect being, and the consequences, so as to think of possible solutions towards eradicating this inferior stratum of human cognition. Even in Wolff's⁵, and then Rüdiger's⁶ and Knutzen's⁷ view of it – views which no doubt accept the reality of the topic and inscribe it, though *still by omission*, in the theory of consciousness – the problem of obscure representations is not yet centered on *the obscure representations as such*, rather on what they allow one to cognize, on what they contain of human knowledge, or lack thereof (with special focus on the latter); namely, if, upon their perception, they arise before or after our consciousness of things, and not as that which *indeed forms* things in human consciousness, thereby underscoring a possible importance of obscure representations in the constitution of the subjectivity of the imaginative I. And lastly, even after these debates, around the transition from the 18th century to the 19th century, it is evident that the topic of obscure representations, though widely accepted, is not yet a topic of importance, rather it is held as a mere appendix for other questions – something which, in all fairness, is still quite visible even today⁸.

3 See Locke, John (1824), *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chap. XXIX (W I: 383-393).

4 See Leibniz, G.W. (1873), *Neue Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand*, Buch II, Kap. XXIX (NAMV: 255-266)

5 See Wolff, Christian (1738), *Psychologia Empirica*, Pars I, Sectio II, Caput I “De differentia perceptionum formalium” (GW II.5: 20-33).

6 See Rüdiger, Andreas Johannes (1727), “Meynung von den Wesen der Seele”, written as a reply not to Wolff's position on obscure representations in the *Psychologia Empirica*, but to his position on the topic as expressed in his *Vernünfftigen Gedancken von Gott, der Welt, und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (1719).

7 See Knutzen, Martin (1741, 1744), *Philosophische Abhandlung von der immateriellen Natur der Seele*, written as a reply to Rüdiger's position on the topic.

8 The best proof of this is on the one hand the scarce number of works which to this day have approached the history, focus or philosophical pertinence of the topic of obscure representations in any author; on the other hand, and even more so, the apparent indifference with which such a topic was welcomed even in the scope of the work of an author who has changed the history, focus and philosophical status of the topic of obscure representations, such as Baumgarten. There are, however, a few notable exceptions in both cases. As to the first, we would mention: GIORDANETTI, Piero, POZZO, Riccardo, SGARBI, Marco (eds.), *Kant's Philosophy of the Unconscious*, Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012; LA ROCCA, Claudio, “Der Dunkle Verstand: Unbewusste Vorstellungen und Selbstbewusstsein bei Kant”, in *Recht und Frieden in der Philosophie Kants*. Akten des X. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses, Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, Editors: Valerio Rohden, Ricardo R. Terra, Guido A. de Almeida, Margit Ruffing, 2008, pp.457-468. DECULTOT, Elisabeth, “Die Schattenseiten der Seele: Zu Johann Georg Sulzers Theorie der dunklen Vorstellungen”. éd. par Hans Adler et Rainer Godel. *Formen des Nichtwissens der Aufklärung*, Halle, Germany. pp.263-278, 2010; WUNDERLICH, Falk, *Kant und die Bewusstseinstheorien des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2005. As to the second, we would mention: ADLER, Hans (1988), “Fundus animae – der Grund der Seele. Zur Gnoseologie des Dunklen in der Aufklärung”, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 62, S. 197-220; LA ROCCA, Claudio, “Das Schöne und der Schatten. Dunkle Vorstellungen und ästhetische Erfahrung zwischen Baumgarten und Kant”, in *Im Schatten des Schönen. Die Ästhetik des Häßlichen in historischen Ansätzen und aktuellen Debatten*, hrsg. von Heiner F. Klemme, Michael Pauen, Marie-Luise Raters, Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2006; OBERHAUSEN, Michael (2002), “Dunkle Vorstellungen als Thema von Kants Anthropologie und A. G. Baumgartens Psychologie”, in: *Aufklärung*, 14, S. 123-146.

One of the authors – perhaps *the* author – who emerges from this bleak history precisely for the opposite reasons, is Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten; he who, unlike so many of his contemporaries, would *discern in the obscure representations of the soul – precisely in their obscurity, in their sensibility* – a new and very important plane of cognition of human consciousness, and a new stratum of the subjectivity of the imagining I. In this sense, Baumgarten is the author who, until Kant and his *Lectures on Anthropology* (1772-1789), discerns the greatest and best potentialities in obscure representations and in the obscurity of the human soul. To consider how Baumgarten does this, and to ascertain which new potentialities these are, such is the main objective of this article. A main objective which we hereby divide into two secondary objectives, which could be enunciated as follows:

1) First, to attempt to discern the contours of the revolution to which Baumgarten submits the topic of obscure representations, and alongside this topic, and through this topic, *the whole status of sensible cognition*. At the same time, we intend to see to what extent Baumgarten does this in favor of a clearer delimitation of the fields of Empirical Psychology and the Aesthetics, within Metaphysics.

2) Lastly, we propose to analyze the dilemma which underlies a possible positivity – a truth – of obscure representations. Through this we shall attempt to understand the problem of a simultaneous necessity, and yet impossibility of such a truth, and the (double) role of poetry in untying such a Gordian knot.

II. Obscure representations: their real existence as “the ground of the soul”

At first sight, and just like other authors, Baumgarten does not seem to approach the question of obscure representations very thoroughly, or even expressly, as a question as such. The topic arises without exception as a complement, or an appendix to other topics, namely, as a proof of the “Reality of the soul”, in his *Metaphysik* (1739), between the sections on “The aesthetic truth” and “The aesthetic falsehood” in his *Ästhetik* (1750-1758), or in direct relation with poetry, in his “Meditationes philosophicae de Nunullis ad poema pertinentibus” (1735). In compensation, the topic is patently recurrent in Baumgarten’s works, and is invariably inscribed in the previous different, yet interrelated theoretical frameworks.

Taking as a starting point the *Metaphysik*, §§ 510-518, Baumgarten’s considerations on obscure representations seem to exemplify the veiled importance of the topic. Indeed, if one considers § 510, one concludes that it could have been extracted from any other researcher of the topic, inasmuch as there, as in other authors, obscure representations are presented as *minor* representations, and their knowledge as *inferior*, when compared to that of clear representations: “Hence, under equal presuppositions, a clear cognition is greater than an obscure one. And so, obscurity signifies a lesser degree of cognition, clarity a greater one” (*Metaphysik*: 9)⁹. Namely, just as Leibniz, Rüdiger, Knutzen and others before him, Baumgarten dissociates obscure from clear representations, by saying that obscure representations

9 Due to reasons of a greater completeness, which could not be present in the first edition of the *Metaphysik* (1739), this citation, as well as the one in annotation 15 of this article, are extracted from the text of the seventh edition of the same work, dated 1779, as it is found in BAUMGARTEN, Alexander Gottlieb, *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, hrsg. von Hans Rudolf Schweizer, Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2013, pp. 1-66, and therefore shall be identified differently, as *Metaphysik* (See bibliographical references).

are characterized insofar as their attributes are not distinguishable, they are confuse and generate confuse thinking; clear ones, quite conversely, by the exact opposite of this. And so, it is indeed an incontrovertible necessity that obscure representations come to clarity; but, as it seems, this is necessary only because, until such clarification takes place, nothing may be discerned in obscure representations apart from incompleteness, inanity and obscurity, which renders them *the last stratum of the inferior powers of cognition – almost as low, one could say, as sensibility*.

However, §§ 511 and 514, while not contradicting¹⁰, completely alter this vision, and elevate the topic of obscure representations to *a whole different condition* – one which henceforth, and not just in Baumgarten, would be its own. Immediately prior to these §§, then, Baumgarten seems to designate obscure representations as *the lowest state of human cognition*; that is, obscure representations are herein described as being *the least active, and hence least influent of the elements which compose the power of human imagination*. From § 511 onwards, however, obscure representations are no longer presented in such terms, rather in *new, unheard-of terms*; in Baumgarten's own words: "There are obscure representations in the soul" (Met.: 118)¹¹, and "The sum of which will be designated as the ground of the soul (FUNDUS ANIMAE)" (id.)¹². Namely, according to Baumgarten, *there are indeed obscure representations in the human soul* – "There are (...) obscure representations" (ibid.) – and this fact is beyond any doubt, as is for Baumgarten their role in human consciousness. But furthermore, not only is there such a thing as obscure representations, but they are "the ground of the soul [FUNDUS ANIMAE]" (ibid.): a statement which therefore is not depleted in its declaration of existence, rather forces us to see the existence of obscure representations with different eyes, in what is to be taken as *a true shift in the paradigm of their vision*. For if we know that obscure representations *exist* – despite their attribute of confusion and obscurity, and our unawareness of them – and if we know that they are the "ground of the soul" (ibid.), that is because, according to Baumgarten, the obscure representation no longer can be, as it was before, a representation viewed in its isolation, which in that same isolation, must generate a clear one; nor is it therefore the last of the human powers of cognition. Quite on the contrary, according to Baumgarten, the obscure representation is part of a whole, a sum [*complexus*]; a totality which, in its very own introversion and concealment – and hence obscurity – nonetheless exists as the original ground (i.e., the fundament) of all that is clear in the human soul; so much so, that upon depicting this new cartography of the soul, Baumgarten adduces, §514, that "A sum of representations in the soul is a complete representation" (ibid.), "and the sum of the obscure representations amid these is the field

10 That is to say: though Baumgarten was to discern new potentialities in obscure representations, he *did* believe that it was the destination of obscure representations to be clear, and that no clear thinking could come from obscure representations (§ 510). This, however, did not contradict the fact that obscure representations are at the origin of clear representations, and hence play an important role in human cognition, which is precisely that which is stated in §§ 511 and 514.

11 All citations, not only Baumgarten's, but also from other authors, will be presented in the traditional manner (Abbreviation of work, Volume of work, number of page(s)). The abbreviation of each work cited finds correspondence in the final bibliographical section. All citations have been translated from their original Latin language into English, and included in their Latin original only in case of special necessity. All citations are of my own translation, and therefore my own responsibility.

12 "Sunt in anima perceptiones obscurae (§ 510). Harum complexus FUNDUS ANIMAE dicitur." (Met.: 118).

of obscurity (darkness): this is the ground of the soul” (id.: 119) (or, as Baumgarten will then describe it, in § 518, “regnum tenebrarum” (id.: 120)). And hence, if not immediately as such, then at least indirectly, through their real effects, Baumgarten elevates *obscure or sensible representations, as a whole, to the singular condition of an object of consciousness*: an object of consciousness so important, that from it arises the whole of human imagination [Einbildung] and hence the whole of human knowledge – an apparent nuance, but which indeed meant *a true revolution in the study of the topic*, one through which obscure representations, and also sensibility, transcend their previous subaltern role in the theory of consciousness, and acquire a primordial, for grounding role¹³ not only amid the latter, but also amid the theory of human representation.

Let us then, in Sections III-V of this article, attempt to think the contours of such a revolution in the topic of obscure representations, as it is fragmentarily presented by Baumgarten in the aforementioned works; and let us try to discern that which, in such a tripartite presentation of the topic, may contribute towards understanding the topic’s new, superior condition from the 18th century onwards.

III. The position of obscure representations within the inferior power of cognition, and within Empirical Psychology. The aesthetic nature of obscure representations

According to Baumgarten, obscure representations exist; they are real and as such exert grounding influence on clear representations and on the human soul, and hence have a prime position in the ladder of the formation of ideas of cognition. That is, they have an inaugural position in a ladder which departs from the senses and passes through memory, the faculty of imagination, wit, genius and at last the understanding and reason, the ladder of the process of human imagination [Einbildung]. And hence, it is no mere chance that 1) in the *Metaphysik*, the paragraphs on obscure representations (§§ 510-533) *directly precede* those on sensibility (§§ 534-556), on fantasy (§§ 557-571), on memory (§§ 579-588) and the faculty of poetizing (§§ 589-594), or that, in the *Ästhetik*, they are directly related not only to the latter, but also to wit or genius; or even that, in the “Meditationes”, obscure representations are considered as a topic of great importance to poetry. Furthermore, it can be no mere coincidence 2) that in the *Metaphysik*, obscure representations are gathered under a section entitled “Facultas cognoscitiva inferior” (“Of the inferior power of cognition”), and that 3) this latter section is included in a chapter entitled “The Empirical Psychology”. For that is, according to Baumgarten, the position of obscure representations within the human spirit; namely, that, as the ground of the soul, they are at the fundament of the process of human imagination.

However, this double framework of the *position* of obscure representations – namely, as an element of the inferior power of human cognition (i.e., as a founding member in the

13 This is why, along with Baumgarten, we must stress that obscurity, that is, obscure representations are not at all confused clarity, that is, clear-confused representations. Yet, Baumgarten suggests, due to their fundamental, grounding character, the first ones are at the origin of the latter, as well as of distinct ones; which is why clear-confused representations are clear-*confused*. And hence, as shall be proved, what obscure representations and clear-confused representations have is a veiled, creative, organic connection amid their visible, dull, mechanical difference (See Annotation 16).

process of human imagination), and as a topic of empirical psychology – tells us something more about Baumgarten’s real vision of the topic. Let us then see what this *something more* may be, and how each of these frameworks may help us discern it.

Now, *the relation between obscure representations and empirical psychology* seems to be evident, and it is in itself symbolic of the new-found importance of such representations. By empirical psychology understood Baumgarten that special part of metaphysics which, departing from real phenomena (that is, *pro positu corporis*), attempts to *prove the intellectual reality of the soul*. Obscure representations, as *real* representations, can therefore help prove the intellectual reality of the soul; precisely due to this are they summoned as such in the *Metaphysik*. One could say, then, that as real representations and as an integrating part of empirical psychology – as the ground of the soul – obscure representations can and should, regardless of their fragmentary character, help explain the process of realization of human representations, or further still the procedure of other faculties, even the understanding and reason, in their contribution towards the birth of human ideas. And provided that they are held in the special point of view proposed by Baumgarten, as approached in section II of this article, they may help cognize the relation between body and soul. This much is acknowledged by Baumgarten himself, when he states, § 512: “From the position of my body in this world may be acknowledged why I represent these things more clearly, those things more obscurely, others more distinctly, that is: My representations are directed according to the position of my body in this world” (Met.: 118).

As to *the relation between obscure representations and the inferior power of cognition*, this is equally evident – and yet, even more revealing of the new functions and potentialities of obscure representations. For the inferior power of cognition is surely inferior; but, despite being inferior, it is first and foremost *a power of cognition*; and hence, to this property – *cognition* – must be entitled obscure representations, as the founding form of human knowledge, as well as the remaining inferior imaginative capacities, such as genius, wit, the faculty of imagination, which are here repercussions of obscure representations. And this, on its own, could surely stand for the integration of obscure representations in the inferior power of cognition in general. But such an integration requires a whole transformation; it requires the inclusion of the product of obscure representations among such imaginative capacities, and hence not just a casual, but a powerful influence of obscure representations upon such capacities, and vice versa; in a word, such an integration requires not only a new relation between obscure representations and the inferior power of cognition, but, in a word, *a whole new redistribution of the inferior power of cognition in general*, as brought about by the acknowledgment of the founding existence of obscure representations. A whole new redistribution which not only means that sensible representations must have a real, and more than contingent relation with memory, the faculty of imagination, wit, but also that all these inferior capacities – and especially obscure representations, due to their original position – must have a real, and more than contingent connection with sensibility; in such a way that, according to Baumgarten, obscure representations are indeed a link – *the first*, and yet *the last* link – between sensibility and the inferior powers of the spirit, thereby forging between the former and the latter different relations, according to the use the spirit does of them.

Now, this is not the occasion to detail such relations, nor to try to ascertain how the representative human being can put them to use. But one thing must be said, at least regar-

ding their *general procedure*: because these relations promoted by obscure representations take place within the inferior power of cognition and have such a close relation with sensibility; because they, as it seems, so actively involve and reconfigure all the capacities which integrate the inferior power of cognition; and because, as such, in their intimate connection with the sensible, these relations have their due place under empirical psychology, *then such relations cannot be of a logical or mechanical order*, which are reserved for the superior spheres of human knowledge (and this, despite the place ascribed to them in the *Metaphysik*). Quite on the contrary, this double position of obscure representations, and especially the relations they forge – in a word, all about them – is according to Baumgarten *of an aesthetic (for sensible) order; and hence, such relations must reveal a whole different source and a whole different sense, a whole different purpose, and hence a whole different vision of obscure representations as an aesthetic instrument of cognition*. This, this affirmation of the *aesthetic character of obscure representations*, and their akin function within human knowledge in general, is that which Baumgarten brings to light through the previous positioning of the topic of obscure representations within the inferior power of cognition and empirical psychology. This, then, is the *something new* Baumgarten brings to question through such a double framework of the topic.

We, in turn, bring this to word under the form of a double conclusion:

First, that, according to Baumgarten, obscure representations, as the ground of the soul, are at the root of the inferior power of cognition, between sensibility and soul, between the senses and the remaining inferior powers of the soul, thereby establishing between both, and also between the superior faculties of cognition, *a linking relation: a link of an aesthetic nature*. And hence, we assume, side by side with Baumgarten, that despite the inherent negativity often tributed to obscure representations, there might be possible to discern in this new aesthetic relation some sort of positivity and even benefit from such representations to the superior spheres of the human spirit.

Second, that, if this, namely, this *aesthetic positivity of obscure representations*, is to be proved right, then such a conviction is so contrary to the previous history of the topic, that Baumgarten must be seen not only as the philosopher who until then most poignantly had reconsidered the influence of wit, the faculty of imagination, genius, and now also obscure representations, on the human soul; but also as the philosopher who first inscribes obscure representations as a valid element in the inferior power of cognition, as well as the inferior power of cognition itself, as a science, in the realm of Aesthetics (which is to say, within empirical psychology). It remains to be seen how Baumgarten does this, in sections IV and V of this article.

IV. The problem of the truth of obscure representations: between the necessary interiorization and the necessary exteriorization of the latter

Upon inquiring the *Ästhetik* (1750-1758), to which obscure representations now seem to be connected, no new indications on the new relations, nor on the new aesthetic status of obscure representations is to be found; and not even upon inquiring the rest of the *Metaphysik* (1739) does one find clear indicators on this, and the matter seems to be confined to the aforementioned paragraphs. However, and despite our knowing that Baumgarten would

never come to expressly (or fully) answer this question, there are certainly *veiled signs*, of not very difficult reconstruction, which may allow us to ascertain the philosopher's definitive position on the aestheticity of obscure representations.

One of those signs, indeed one of the most evident, arises still in §521 of the *Metaphysik*, where, according to Baumgarten: "An indistinct representation is called sensible. Hence, the force of my soul presentifies sensible representations through the inferior power of cognition" (Met.: 120).

Obscure representations, the ground of the soul, Baumgarten says, are "sensible representations" – and if they are so it is due to reasons which are known to us: first, because they are between the rude senses and the remaining inferior powers of cognition, which contact with the understanding and reason; here residing *their hybridity, their unconscious consciousness*, inasmuch as *they are indeed already representations – but still sensible* ("indistinct representations" (id.). Second, because, due to the same reason, in obscure representations there is still a trace of the sensible object which originated them (otherwise, such representations would not be held as such, rather as distinct), but also, and notwithstanding this, already a double tendency for creativity and for intellectuality: for the "presentification" of the sensible through the "force of my soul" (ibid.) (otherwise, they would not be representations, nor would they deal with and have place among other faculties, nor would they originate there should be "other representations). These reasons are as such unequivocal, and more than sufficient to ascribe sensibility to obscure representations, and obscurity to the sensible.

Now, in our view, Baumgarten's two abovementioned, quite hybrid reasons of being of indistinct representations, are at *the basis of the philosopher's new conception of the topic*. This conception, which is likewise double, must therefore unfold as the natural development of said two reasons – a development which we shall now attempt to reenact.

The first reason of being of obscure representations is, quite simply, the truth of their sensibility. For obscure representations are not sensible just because they are sensible, and must remain sensible; and just because they are obscure, and in plain sight fragmentary and even apparently illusory, that does not presuppose that, upon their transition to other faculties, such as the faculty of imagination, wit, memory, these faculties have to purify, or clarify obscure representations in order to extract some use from them and thus present them to the understanding. No; quite on the contrary, Baumgarten says, although this is bound to happen, before this, obscure representations already stand on their own and have truth in them, because they are sensible, because in them still lies the sensation of the object which gave them being. And this because our sensations, Baumgarten adds, are that which is "truest in the world" (see Met.: 128, § 546) and no sensation is endowed with the capacity to deceive our spirit – that capacity must rather be attributed to the faculty of judgment itself, and the judgments it renders: a Leibnizian notion¹⁴ which would be very dear to Kant, and upon which the latter would base his apology of sensibility¹⁵. Now this, in short, must mean that *that which is sensible, is true; and that which is not sensible, is untrue*. And hence, if this is so, then *that which most immediately borders with sensations – precisely the obscure,*

14 See Leibniz, G. W., "Discours de metaphysique", Section 14 (BLA: 167-168).

15 See the first etches of Kant's apology of sensibility in his *Lectures on Anthropology* (AA 25.2: 886-892 e AA 25.2: 1228-1233).

or sensible representations – must still possess in high degree this truth of sensations; a truth which obscure representations feel naturally inclined to preserve, for, as it seems, they cannot gain from their transition to other faculties, rather seem to have to lose in truth upon contacting with them, and this, the more they draw away from original sensations, and their real truth, and closer to the true source of possible error, the faculty of judgment.

As to the second reason of being of obscure representations, it has to do with their need for intellectuality. For, according to Baumgarten, if there is one thing that we have to admit with regard to obscure representations, it is that they are no longer sensations – rather they are representations of sensations – and that hence, despite their ground of truth, they are nonetheless concealment of truth. And why is this? Because even though, due to their proximity to truth, due to their most inferior and hence original position, obscure representations do contain in themselves, *in nuce*, truth, in their appearance, however, the fact that they are in no way sensations will be forever marked in them – and if they are not sensations, they are already representations, and if they are representations, even though obscure ones, then, although their sensible truth has to lose in intensity upon contacting with other faculties, their intellectual clarification notwithstanding demands that they become external: to be presentified by the force of the soul. Indeed, Baumgarten adds with this regard, it is not only a natural tendency of obscure representations, but it must be the wish of their owner that such representations come to be, or enable distinct and clear ones; namely, that obscure representations move on to another field, another kingdom, naturally opposed to that of obscurity: “the field of clarity (of light)” (Met.: 119), the “regnum lucis” (id.: 120), which is greater than its antipode and which “contains in itself the fields of confusion, of distinctness and of completeness” (id.: 119). And this, of course, not only because obscure representations need to be clarified – which nonetheless is true; or because the greater field of light is superior and should always seek to suppress the obscure one – which is also true to Baumgarten; but because, for the philosopher, there is in obscure representations a second, equally strong tendency, namely, a propensity for exteriorization: a propensity to contact with all other faculties, inferior and superior, of the human faculty of imagination, so as to render evident and clear what is obscure in such representations, the obscure truth they convey; which in short means; a tendency of intellectualization, a tendency of revelation of truth, which also is to be ascribed to obscure representations.

Now, these two reasons correspond to two natural propensities of sensible representations, and if seen together, these two propensities signify *two different things*. Namely, *on the one hand*, obscure representations reveal truth, which is transmitted by sensation, and this truth is, so to say, the first and yet most obscure representation we make of objects and ourselves. In this truth must reside, then, a secret about us and objects, and the sensible key on the manner how representations traverse our inferior and superior faculties of cognition, and on the very consciousness which we have of them and of ourselves, must be in obscure representations. *On the other hand*, Baumgarten adds, there is in sensible representations concealment of truth; for they are not sensations, rather representations, and hence it is through the aforementioned path, through the inferior and superior faculties of cognition, and the exposition of the veiled truth to the eyes of reason, that this truth may come to be known and held as such – as truth. For, according to Baumgarten, “True cognition is reality, its contrary, no cognition or lack of cognition, is ignorance, and apparent cognition or error

are negations” (Metaphysik: 7). However – and to resume the previous words – this constitutes a problem; and *the problem is that what these two different, yet simultaneous visions of obscure representations signify is something apparently contradictory – and that due to their simultaneity*. For if, on the one hand, it is their introversion, their self-confinement, as possible sensation, which guarantees the obscure representation the safekeep of its truth, however, it is its exteriorization and clarification, its distancing itself from the sensation, which enables it to validate that truth; for, as sensible representations, obscure representations are not yet intellectual representations and hence they still lack a certain connection to knowledge, as that of wit, genius or taste, or the judgments of the understanding or the ideas of reason.

That is, in itself the obscure representation may have something of truth (*wahr*), but until it exteriorizes itself and submits to the action of the remaining faculties, it is not yet knowledge as such; and yet, upon exteriorizing itself and attempting to bring to light all that is true in it, the obscure representation loses in sensibility and in truth, despite definitively coming to be knowledge. And hence, one could almost say that, due to this new acknowledgment of its importance, and its subsequent new status in the theory of consciousness – which is real and must be credited to Baumgarten – the topic of obscure representations faces in the same author, and for posterity, a complex problem: that, in order to be true, obscure representations cannot be cognizable, and in order to be cognizable, obscure representations can no longer be true. A problem which is something as a final trace of the previous skeptical historical course of obscure representations, but also a first hint towards the final revolution of the topic, of other akin topics, in a word, of the whole inferior power of cognition.

V. The *chiaroscuro* of obscure representations: their *sfumato* between unconscious and conscious poetry

The dilemma of obscure representations, which is in truth that of a hardly soluble *chiaroscuro*, would not be neglected by Baumgarten. The author provides us with a possible solution for it, curiously enough, prior to the *Metaphysik* and the *Ästhetik*. That solution arises in the “Meditationes philosophicae de Nunullis ad poema pertinentibus” (1735), where, with regard to sensible representations, it is said that

Representations which were acquired through the inferior part of the power of cognition are to be designated as [SENSIBLE]. Because the aspiration, as long as it stems from a confused representation of good, is designated as sensible, and because a confused representation, along with an obscure one, are acquired through the inferior part of the faculty of cognition, so can we apply this same name also to representations themselves, so that one may distinguish them from those which are in conformity with the understanding and are in all possible degrees distinct” (Med.: 9, § III).

The dilemma is well stressed here; namely, the inferior part of the faculty of cognition “acquires”, seizes representations, representations which, because they are transmitted by sensibility, are sensible (“SINNLICH”), and are to be treasured as such; but even though they have to be thus differentiated from those representations which are in conformity with the

understanding (“*verstandesmäßigen*”) – the distinct ones – however, in sensible representations there must also be a propensity for intellectuality, to be distinct, and hence to *relinquish all obscurity*; for, indeed, obscure representations are for Baumgarten the *foundation of the soul*, and hence they are at the origin of both distinct and indistinct representations. And so is once again expounded our dilemma: obscure representations must oscillate between their necessary sensibility, the guardian of their truth, and their necessary de-sensibilization among the inferior powers of cognition and on its path to the understanding: *obscure representations which, in a word, to be scuro, cannot be chiaro, and to be chiaro, cannot be scuro*.

This modulation, however – it is our view – cannot be seen simply *in black and white*, and behind it lurks a last *chromatic nuance* worth mentioning. Namely, even though we know that such a contradiction takes place in one and the same sensible representation, however, *it takes place in two different planes of the latter*, that of its obscurity and that of its clarity: in other words, an actual plane, that of their necessary existence, *where sensible representations are indeed obscure and confusing to the understanding, but clear to the sensibility*, and another plane, so to say, a potential, or latent plane, *that of their necessary non-existence (intellectualization), where sensible representations are clear to the understanding but obscure to the sensibility, according to which sensible representations, though rendered clear, actually lose in truth*. The latter, Baumgarten designates them as “clear-confused” (“*klar-verworren*”) representations, which are not obscure representations, and are not clear representations – and yet are linked through an internal connection, at least in terms of their organic evolution¹⁶. Now, what this means, Baumgarten concludes, is that this generates hybridity, a chromatic undefinition of such sensible representations, since the exteriorization of obscure representations signifies their realization, but dissimulation, and their interiorization signifies their preservation, but also concealment. And so, sensible representations are never merely obscure but are already also clear, and *are never merely clear, but still also obscure*: “sensible representations [can] be obscure or clear” (Med.: 13, § XII), depending on the point of view from which one considers them. For, from one point of view, obscure, and yet clear representations (“*klar-verworren*”) lose their true clarity as they progress in their supposed clarity – but are actually rendered obscure – and from a second point of view, distinct representations, which hold the truth over obscure representations, do not truly hold it, for they have already lost it – and therefore they are a point of no return, the final de-sensibilization for obscure representations.

And hence, as it seems, until a point of view may be found according to which these two extremes of the *chiaroscuro* of human representativeness are encompassed; that is, a point of view according to which obscure sensible representations may convey their true clarity, which they indeed possess, to clear sensible representations, in such a way that the obscurity, which the latter do indeed possess, may not conceal that truth; in a word, *a point of view according to which obscure representations may transmit what is positive – positively illogical, aesthetic – in them*; until such a point of view is gained, there will be no end to contradiction, and the problem of obscure representations shall remain what it always was throughout its history – a problem of negativity.

16 See Annotation 13.

Now, according to Baumgarten, such a special perspective of things, the much sought *sfumato* between the *chiaro* and the *scuro* of obscure and/or clear sensible representations is possible – and it springs to its inquirer’s eyes not in the moment when one forces himself to suppress the *chiaro*, or the *scuro*, from sensible representations. That is, the solution arises not in the moment when he forces the necessary suppression between obscurity and clarity either in one extreme point of sensibility – that of the existence of the obscure representation – or in the other extreme point of sensibility – that of the non-existence of the latter. For, if devoid of one, obscure representations would forever remain caged in themselves; if devoid of the other, obscure representations would once and for all disappear, and hence be senseless. Quite on the contrary, the *sfumato* arises when one understands the previous problem, and its greatest difficulty, the simultaneous duality of the latter, not as such, but precisely as that which may be *a certain disposition, a certain conception of sensible representations which, instead of seeing the contradiction as a problem, rather sees it, in sfumato, as its solution*. And that occurs through a view of sensible representations, both obscure and clear, as originally poetic representations; and, on the other hand, a counter-view of non-sensible as rigorously non-poetic representations. Something which Baumgarten expounds as follows: “Sensible representations are constituents of a poem, and hence poetic. But because sensible representations may be obscure or clear, so are obscure and clear representations poetic” (Med.: 15; § XIV). To which he adds: “Distinct representations, complete, adequate, throughout profound representations, are not sensible, and hence they are not poetic” (id.).

According to Baumgarten, then, there is a difference between obscure and distinct representations, which is a difference between eminently poetic and non-poetic representations; and this because these are the two extremes of the arch of the human imaginative (*bildend*) process; that is, because, just as obscure representations are the ground of the soul, so are the distinct ones, or clear ideas, the ceiling of the latter. But if one is dealing here with antipodes, but, as was concluded above, with antipodes whose different hues are sometimes mixed, to the point that the obscurity of sensible representations is their clarity, and their clarity also their obscurity, then, either the solution resides in a way of conceiving the problem as was that previous to Baumgarten, or as is that of Baumgarten himself. That is, either the solution is with Baumgarten’s predecessors, who saw in obscure representations a fabrication of the fancy, or an at least doubtful reality, or even something which, despite its existence, could never be reported to the superior spheres of the soul; who saw in obscure representations, in wit, in genius, even in the faculty of imagination, mere forces of the spirit, at the service of the faculty of the understanding; who, in a word, looked down upon the inferior power of cognition, taking it solely as inferior, and deemed it, along with aesthetics, as something impossible to bring to the condition of a science. Or the solution is with Baumgarten, who sees in sensibility, clear or obscure, sheer poeticity, and in the absence of this, sheer non-poeticity; Baumgarten who first discerns in obscure representations not only something existent, but also something [such poeticity] capable of influencing the other faculties of the spirit, and also and especially the superior amongst these; Baumgarten who saw in obscure representations, as well as in other capacities, true faculties of the spirit, surely inferior, but indeed necessary to the understanding; in short, Baumgarten who was the first to elevate the inferior power of cognition to the theoretical level of the superior one, which would elevate its study to the condition of a science, Aesthetics.

Now, the first one sees in such inferior capacities, and especially in obscure representations, the previous dilemma, and he cannot, nor does he want to solve it; for, according to him, there is no truth, nor any kind of clarity, to be drawn from the sensibility of obscure representations. And even if from these, or from the treatment that is given to obscure representations by such capacities, there should arise something valid for the understanding, its very acceptance by the latter presupposes that the obscure representation ceases to be – and that the dilemma were undone by means of violence. For sensibility is surely poeticity: but poetry is perhaps the stage of the vivification or realization of obscure representations, but not of the manifestation of any fact of a scientific validity, a true fact; and hence, in his view, the dilemma is so obvious that he prefers to avoid it altogether: for him, the *chiaroscuro* does not even exist, for in no way can darkness come to be light without ceasing to be darkness, and vice versa.

But the second one – Baumgarten – sees this question, all of it, somewhat differently. According to him, sensibility is indeed poeticity, and this is not only due to the fact that *poetic* rhymes with *original*, or only because, as it seems, there might be some sort of affinity between obscure representations and poetry. No. For, indeed, the poetic, or sensible, is original; and indeed, there is between obscure representations and poetry a strong connection. But when he states that *sensible is poetic*, Baumgarten rather wishes to refer to the eminently operational, creative, generative – po(i)etic – nature which lies in obscure representations; a nature which precisely does not create or generate contingently, rather creates purposefully, for it is originally assisted by a truth which pulses in them: a truth which, by inspiring memory, the faculty of imagination, wit, so to say enlivens them and exponentiates their best creative capacities. And likewise, by stating that between obscure representations and poetry there is a connection, Baumgarten means to signify *not just any connection*, nor a remote, casual connection, rather that *obscure sensible representations, because they are in their essence clear, are themselves the commencement of the process of poetic composition, living poetry as such, which is to be adorned, intellectualized, in a word, humanized by the inferior and superior faculties of the soul, under the form of conscious poetry (poetry by words) – clear sensible representations*. Hence, clear sensible representations, because they are in their essence also obscure, are in turn the ideal coming to be of obscure sensible representations, the conclusion of the process of poetic composition. And hence, sensibility is poeticity because obscure representations, all the faculties of the spirit, the very imaginative process and its final result as a science, the Aesthetics: all these are more or less po(i)etic: a creative moment to which only distinct representations, that is, the eminently logic, philosophical manner of conceiving the problem of obscure representations, can put an end.

Now, how to conceive, one last time, the dilemma of obscure representations – now, at last, as *a po(i)etic problem*? We reiterate: according to our view of the problem in Baumgarten, the solution for this problem is not its suppression, but precisely its *acceptance*: the notion that obscure representations hold a veiled truth, and that this has to be safeguarded; but that, at the same time, obscure representations have a propensity to render that truth cognizable, which leads them to extinction. Now, this was surely problematic for those who saw in this an insoluble dilemma. But *the kern of the dilemma is precisely in its preservation, which is its solution*. For if sensible representations are both obscure and clear;

if obscure representations become clear, and clear representations are also obscure, that is, sensible; and if both are truly distinguished not between themselves, but from distinct, non-sensible, non-poetic representations, then two aspects must be underscored. On the one hand, this means that between the obscurity and the clarity of sensible representations there is now a *non-conflictual circularity* – which is achieved precisely due to the fact that both are poetic, and because it is the essence of poetry to expose truth through metaphors (obscure sensible representations = unconscious poetry; clear sensible representations = conscious poetry). On the other hand, this means that, where there was before conflict, namely, in the transition from the obscure, or the clear-confused, to the distinct, that no longer takes place, *due to the very poeticity (clarity-confusion) of the representations in question, which is also at the origin of distinct representations, and hence, even if veiled, at their consummation.*

To put it differently, what does this mean? First of all, that the clarity and obscurity of the message of obscure representations is unified, because it is poetic; and so, the fact that what is obscure – truth – is already representation, does not unfavorably influence clarity; *and this because it is proper to poetry and its metaphors to lend the representation the appearance, the simulacrum of truth, of the original sensation.* Secondly, this means that the difficult transition – the de-sensibilization – of such representations to the superior faculties of cognition, must indeed happen. But because it once again takes place through poetry, then, exceptionally, the faculty of judgment is forced to accept such obscure-clarity (*sfumato*); and by doing so, the dilemma disappears, for here, the sensible character of obscure representations is considered not as that which separates the inferior and superior faculties of the spirit, but as that which also unites them; and hence, because it is not forcefully silenced, rather is at the origin of something, *the sensibility of such representations never truly dies, and as poetry, or as metaphor, it perpetuates the effect and the truth of the obscure representation.* This is how obscure representations reappear in their greatest truth, and with them the objects that gave them being; but above all, this is how the understanding itself is compensated with new truths and hence is expanded – a conclusion which we shall see often reiterated in another reader of Baumgarten, and which shall be at the heart of another revolution of the inferior powers of cognition¹⁷.

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17 Among other occasions in Kant's work, such as the third Critique and the sections on the inferior powers of the spirit in his *Lectures on Anthropology*, especially so in Kant's "Entwurf zu einer Opponenten-Rede" (AA XV.2: 903-935).

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