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1

THE PROBLEM OF THE DARK SIDE OF A LOVE POET: AN INTRODUCTION AND REASSESSMENT

Ever since the publication of the *Délie* in 1544, Maurice Scève has been considered by many readers and critics to be the most difficult, anguished, and perplexing love poet of the French Renaissance. The purpose of this book is to question our understanding of this long-standing critical view, one that has always been for me problematic and unsatisfying, and to offer another interpretive possibility which has to do with poetry, struggle, and the pursuit of love's paradise. I intend to explore how Scève's love lyrics, largely perceived as dark and anguished, can be associated with a more positive poetic tradition whose primary feature of struggle always accompanies intense, diaphoric poetic creations of light and life so essential to a transcendent paradisaical perspective. I shall argue that it is Scève's primary quest to come to terms with and portray the ineffable that constitutes the central and unifying concern of his love lyrics. This study runs counter to the prevailing critical view of Scève as a poet painfully preoccupied with the lamentation of unrequited love. It offers instead the view of Scève as a remarkable and persevering and successful poet of the ineffable intent on giving a more positive, higher meaning to the love experience and its expression. In the final analysis, this phenomenologically oriented reading of the *Délie* will seek to demonstrate that Scève's greater achievement is ultimately to be found in his poetics of ineffable love, not of lamented love.

These notions may appear at the outset perverse to some readers, since indeed, as I have indicated, posterity has quite often found it difficult if not impossible to give a favorable interpretation to the *Délie*, as we see especially in the more recent criticism of this work. If we continue to accept the current and prevailing interpretation

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The love aesthetics of Maurice Scève*

of Scève and his engaging body of Renaissance love poetry, then we would indeed have to continue to view him as the opposite of a paradisaical poet: as the dark poet-lover exhibiting psychological confusion and even torment which translate in his lyrics into textual obscurity. This negative view has existed from Scève's own day to the present and has in large part conditioned the reader's response to the *Délie*. One of the earliest critics of Scève's poetry, the humanist Estienne Pasquier, helped to set the tone. He disliked the "obscure," "dark" symbolism of the *Délie* which, according to him, was written "avec un sens si *ténébreux* que, le lisant, je disois estre très content de ne l'entendre, puisqu'il ne vouloit estre entendu."¹ This early assessment of Scève's willful quest for darkness was carried over into contemporary criticism at the turn of this century by Ferdinand Brunetière and Gustave Lanson. Brunetière considered Scève just as "unreadable" as he thought the symbolist poets were of his day: "C'est un curieux poète que ce Scève *obscur* et prétentieux d'ailleurs, à peu près illisible aujourd'hui, et que pour ce motif je m'étonne que nos symbolistes et nos décadens n'aient pas essayé de le remettre un peu en honneur. . . . Ni M. Paul Verlaine, ni M. Stéphane Mallarmé n'ont rien écrit de plus difficile à interpréter, sinon précisément à comprendre, car j'ai peur de les avoir quelquefois compris."² Lanson's often-quoted assessment of Scève is similar: "Maurice Scève, compliqué, savant, singulier, *obscur* . . ."³

An impressive number of critics working today on the *Délie* have responded to it in the same terms: they see there primary thematic and structural patterns of overt complexity and obscurity which they in turn have tried to associate, unsuccessfully in my view, with a modernist aesthetic whose purpose it is to highlight psychological anguish and artistic crisis. Furthermore, they stress the tortured uncertainty and general hermetic strain underlying Scève's dark vision of love as well as its disorienting and disoriented articulation in his poetry. Among others, Michael J. Giordano speaks of *Délie*'s "ambiguous language, tortuous and involuted syntax and the poet-lover's fragmented perception" and also of "the narrator's own admission of verbal paralysis and his tendency to obfuscate the realities of painful dissonance."⁴ In another very recent piece ("The Curing Text: Maurice Scève's *Délie* as the *Délie*"), Gregory de Rocher recognizes the fact that "the [*Délie*] holds fast to its reputation of proving difficult if not impenetrable to hosts of readers" (p. 10), and carries Scève's so-called verbal paralysis and painful dissonance to the point of mental neurosis and textual chaos in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The problem of the dark side of a love poet*

need of Lacanian–Freudian psychoanalysis, which he attempts to provide. He sets out to study “the concept of free-floating signifiers in the unconscious” (p. 10) and “the generation of meaning in terms of *the subject’s ‘neurotic tendencies’*” (p. 11).⁵ The conclusion of yet another recent article seeking to uncover the “obscure” meaning of the *Délie* suggests that it has something to do with the mathematical solution of the double of the cubical altar of Apollo – that is, the cube root of two!⁶ And another reader of Scève reduces the meaning of the *Délie* to “le baratin d’amour”: the obscure, incomprehensible, and in fact meaningless babble of a lover: “Ceci revient à dire . . . qu’il n’y a ni sens ni message à proprement parler (ni contenu ni forme, etc.) par ce baratin d’amour.”⁷ Finally, to conclude for now this overview of the critically perceived dark side of Scève, of his poetic obscurity and anguished experience in love, I wish to quote the following passage from such a devoted contemporary critic of Scève as Dorothy Gabe Coleman: “To Scève the important things are *Délie* and himself. There is only one theme, constantly renewed and contradictory and made up of approximations – love: the continual presence of *Délie* within the poet and more particularly in his memory (which is a leitmotif of the whole cycle), *the permanence of the torment* assured by her occupation of his whole being.”⁸ For Coleman too, the eternal suffering of human love, and especially of the existential condition of unrequited love, is what best defines the experience of Scève’s poet in love.

In this introductory chapter, I propose to look further into the complicated matter of Scève’s poetic anguish and obscurity. I wish to suggest that, far from representing the dark, final picture of psychological and artistic crisis which some have come to associate with a modernist aesthetic, these poetic qualities are purposefully and strategically and productively involved in the poet’s ongoing struggle towards creating a different kind of love aesthetic that actually seeks to reconstruct order and harmony out of chaos. Scève’s poetic undertaking in the *Délie* is a reconstructive one, not deconstructive. *Délie’s* poetic of struggle culminates in the triumph of *difficulté vaincue*. We shall analyze this difficult aesthetic progression by looking closely at the artistic meaning which Scève gives to the all-important revelatory concept of “virtue,” one of the most frequently used words and concepts in the *Délie*. Our ultimate goal will be a reassessment of Scève’s “dark” side and a better understanding and appreciation of what I see to be his other concern with defining and moving towards a transcendent paradisaal state. The

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The love aesthetics of Maurice Scève*

main points of the interpretive revision presented in this chapter will be developed more extensively in subsequent chapters of this book.

Clearly, this dark legacy and anguished side of Scève surveyed above are a formidable obstacle in the interpretive dilemma confronting students and readers of the *Délie*. As France's major Renaissance "metaphysical" poet,⁹ Scève's reputation, like that of John Donne, has acquired a certain notoriety, and the poems of the *Délie* are often thought of and responded to as primarily and (in my view) as unnecessarily complicated and anguished. Stressing Scève's dark side in and of itself represents an inadequate and unfair reading of him. As his readers, we should keep in mind certain notions involved in Renaissance views of obscurity prevalent when Scève was composing his dizains. During the Renaissance, obscurity was thought of as a necessary artistic means to an end, not as the poetic end itself of artistic failure or crisis. Poetic obscurity was considered by many humanists an essential condition and prerequisite for literary creativity and excellence. In addition to having a writerly (creative) usefulness, obscurity was also viewed as having a readerly (interpretive) usefulness. Renaissance writers inclined towards obscurantism held that a reader who misunderstood their works had only himself to blame, or, as Du Bellay put it metaphorically, the latter preferred to eat acorns after the invention of wheat:

Quand à ceulx qui ne voudroient recevoir ce genre d'escriture, qu'ilz appellent *obscur*, pource qu'il excède leur jugement, je les laisse avecq' ceulx qui, après l'invention du bled, vouloient encores vivre de glan. Je ne cherche point les applaudissemens populaires. Il me suffit pour tous lecteurs avoir un S. Gelay, un Heroët, un de Ronsart, un Carles, un Scève . . .¹⁰

Du Bellay is echoing here the notion on obscurity as developed by Horace in *Carmina* (Book III, Ode 1) of the *odi profanum vulgus et arceo*. Scève will likewise support this view. As he tells us in D414 when he speaks of the solitary environment in which he must compose his "durs Epygrammes," he is more interested in pursuing the demanding and fulfilling potential of poetry and its "bien inuentif" than the "vil gaing" sought by the rest of the world: "Ce lieu sans paour, & sans sedition / S'escarte a soy, & son bien inuentif. / Aussi i'y vis loing de l'Ambition, / Et du sot Peuple au vil gaing intentif."¹¹

Of much more importance to Renaissance poets, however, is

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Jerry C. Nash

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The problem of the dark side of a love poet*

their belief that obscurity can play an even more useful role in the creation of a certain kind of poetry, as both classical and modern advocates of this view throughout time have recognized. What I have in mind can be seen by turning to the notion of obscurity as poetic principle so clearly and so fervently expounded by such seemingly diverse writers and theorists of poetry as Boccaccio and Valéry. In spite of their distance in time and literary canon, both of these geniuses share common ground on the crucial role of obscurity in poetry and they can enlighten us on this same problem in Scève.

In his widely read and extremely influential defense of poetry entitled *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, and especially in its Chapter 12 of Book XIV, “The Obscurity of Poetry is not Just Cause for Condemning It,” Boccaccio shows readers how to understand better, and appreciate, poetic obscurity as used by a poet like Scève. In defense of obscurity in poetry, Boccaccio begins his essay:

These cavillers further object that poetry is often obscure, and that poets are to blame for it, since their end is to make an incomprehensible statement appear to be wrought with exquisite artistry. Perverse notion! . . . They should have realized that when things perfectly clear seem obscure, it is the beholder’s fault. To a half-blind man, even when the sun is shining its brightest, the sky looks cloudy. Some things are naturally so profound that not without difficulty can the most exceptional keennesses in intellect sound their depths; like the sun’s globe, by which before they can clearly discern it, strong eyes are sometimes repelled. . . . Yet not by this token is it fair to condemn them; for surely it is not one of the poet’s various functions to rip up and lay bare the meaning which lies hidden in his inventions. Rather where matters truly solemn and memorable are too much exposed, it is his office by every effort to protect as well as he can and remove them from the gaze of the irreverent, that they cheapen not by too common familiarity.¹²

Boccaccio helps pave the way for Du Bellay’s view of obscurity in poetry stated above. It is quite often the “irreverent” reader of this poetry who falls short of full and satisfying interpretation; the “profound” nature of some poetry requires its elaboration through an obscure poetic; truly “solemn and memorable” poetry must be protected and preserved through obscurity. There is, in other words, according to Boccaccio, a very legitimate and positive value in poetic obscurity which must be discerned and appreciated. This value must be sought after and properly understood by both poet and reader. As Boccaccio continues his discussion, we soon realize that this value really involves the reader-response as well as writerly

Cambridge University Press

0521394120 - The Love Aesthetics of Maurice Scève: Poetry and Struggle

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The love aesthetics of Maurice Scève*

process of *difficulté vaincue*, the creative and interpretive effort and struggle required for the proper response to the problematics of poetic obscurity. For Boccaccio, poetic truths can best be revealed only through the ongoing interpretive struggle in coming to terms with poetic obscurities:

Surely no one can believe that poets invidiously veil the truth with fiction, either to deprive the reader of the hidden sense, or to appear the more clever; but rather to make truths which would otherwise cheapen by exposure the object of strong intellectual effort and various interpretation, *that in ultimate discovery they shall be more precious.* (p. 60)

Turning to quote Augustine in the *City of God* and his view on the obscurity of Holy Writ, Boccaccio elaborates on the purpose of this challenging principle of *difficulté vaincue*:

“The obscurity of the divine word has certainly this advantage, that it causes many opinions about the truth to be started and discussed, each reader seeing some fresh meaning in it. . . . There is nothing in it contradictory: somewhat there is which is obscure, not in order that it may be denied thee, but that it may exercise him that shall afterward receive it.” (pp. 60–61)

And turning to Petrarch to support further his notion of the potential strategic value of obscurity in hermeneutics, Boccaccio similarly cites from the Third Book of his *Invectives*:

“Such majesty and dignity [found in poetic obscurities] are not intended to hinder those who wish to understand, but rather propose a delightful task, and are designed to enhance the reader’s pleasure and support his memory. What we acquire with difficulty and keep with care is always the dearer to us.” (pp. 61–62)

Surely these views of Boccaccio, and those of Augustine and Petrarch provided by Boccaccio, on poetic obscurity can enlighten us on this same question which is raised so acutely by Scève’s poetry. These writers begin by deploring the ease and facility demanded by the reading public. For their part, they require a power of *resistance* in a body of great poetry, and the capacity in the reader to match the unique presence and firm design of this poetic resistance with corresponding virtues of patience, deliberate attention, and above all critical endurance. The very efficacy of such poetry depends on its challenge of obscurity and the positive process of interpretation and unraveling by the reader. Rather than being viewed negatively as the failure to attain a state of perfect clarity, obscurity in poetry should be likened to the fundamental

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The problem of the dark side of a love poet*

obscurity found in the actual thought and creative process itself striving for intellectual and emotional unity in any complex experience, especially love. This unity quite often cannot be adequately measured or appreciated by the instruments of reason and logic. But if it seems to have no clear and rational meaning, this kind of poetic understanding derived from obscurity has the indescribable power to suggest *thought and feeling* working together towards the discovery, triumph, and insight of sustained, *unified* experience, of what Boccaccio calls quite simply the poetic triumph of “higher truth” (p. 62). One of the premises of this book is that Scève’s own reader can attain some understanding of this higher truth Boccaccio speaks of if he is willing to pursue the difficult yet rewarding progression undertaken by our own poet in coming to successful terms with *Délie*, *objet de plus haute vertu*. As we shall see, Scève’s ultimate triumph is to be found in this poet coming to an understanding and portrayal of the transcendent meaning implied especially in the second part of his work’s title: both *Délie* the beloved object and *Délie* the love text viewed as *objet de plus haute vertu*.

Later on, does not Valéry also defend the “obscure” poetry of his symbolist colleague Mallarmé by praising the same notion of obscurity and its challenge of *difficulté vaincue*, which he specifically calls “résistances vaincues”? For Valéry, the most powerful quality of the poetry of Mallarmé, its magical formula of incantation, is derived precisely from what he considers its poetic of obscurity, its pursuit of a *via negativa*, as he believes all great poetry is. The “true glory” of Mallarmé’s poetry is, as Valéry puts it,

plus fondée sur des différences et des *résistances vaincues* [Valéry’s italics] que sur le consentement immédiat à quelque merveille et jouissance commune. . . . Cependant que cette œuvre sans pareille surprenait, à peine entr’ouverte . . . tout de suite elle embarrassait l’esprit, l’intriguait, le défiait parfois de comprendre. . . . Quant à moi, je le confesse, je ne saisis à peu près rien d’un livre qui ne me *résiste* pas.

Thus, for Valéry too, as for Boccaccio, a poetic of obscurity can have a positive, meaning-acquiring value for both poet and reader-interpreter. Textual resistance is what makes possible the triumph of *difficulté vaincue*; it is inseparable from the creative process and from critical reading. In a meaningful way, both poet and reader are involved in the same “diaphoric” challenge and struggle posed by textual resistance.¹³

Scève too shares these ideas on obscurity as poetic resistance

Cambridge University Press

0521394120 - The Love Aesthetics of Maurice Scève: Poetry and Struggle

Jerry C. Nash

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The love aesthetics of Maurice Scève*

and practices them to a high degree in his love lyrics. As with the “obscurity” of Mallarmé’s poetry, that of the *Délie* should function, not negatively to thwart meaning, but positively to mobilize the reader and to effect in him a state of suspended judgment in his ongoing search for purpose and design, as it obviously did for Scève’s poet: “Je me complais en si douce bataille, / Qui sans resouldre, en *suspend* m’entretient” (D78). In fact, it can be said of Scève’s love poetry in general that its poetic worth and power can be fully experienced and appreciated only through the intensity of its obscurity and anguish which challenges the reader to respond to the poet’s own *résistances vaincues*. This highly resistant and challenging process of interpretation, as with the creation of the poetry it is devoted to explicating, is largely based on the diaphoric principle of the *via negativa* – often presented metaphorically and structurally in the *Délie* as having to go down in order to find one’s way back up. This principle connecting the activity of the reader to that of the writer is ingeniously described for us in what I consider to be one of *Délie*’s most important and suggestive poems – D94. The “fall,” struggle, and recovery of Love presented in D94 I see as emblematic of and pointing to the greater meaning of the *Délie* as a whole, of the struggle of great love poetry (and of its interpretation) to overcome the obscurity and obstacles standing in its way to higher definition and meaning:

Si treslas fut d’enuironner le Monde
 Le Dieu volant, qu’en Mer il s’abysma:
 Mais retournant a chef de temps sur l’vnde,
 Sa Trousse print, & en fuste l’arma:
 De ses deux traictz deligemment rama,
 De l’arc fit l’arbre, & son bendeau tendit
 Aux ventz pour voile, & en Port descendit
 Tresioyeux d’estre arriué seurement.
 Ainsi Amour, perdu a nous, rendit
 Vexation, qui donne *entendement*.

As in so many of Scève’s perplexing lyrics, this skillful narrative posits meaning only after it has worked its way through obscurity. Scève’s concept of love and of love poetry involves the pursuit of an obscure, negative, and difficult path requiring the fullest exercise of the powers of the poet and the reader; furthermore, this undertaking has the potential of bringing about a far-reaching transformation of those powers. The creative tension resulting in the difficult yet successful poetic portrayal of D94, its process of *difficulté*

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0521394120 - The Love Aesthetics of Maurice Scève: Poetry and Struggle

Jerry C. Nash

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The problem of the dark side of a love poet*

vaincue, is what provides both an emotional and an intellectual enhancement. It occasions, in other words, a restructuring of the inner self – a poetically felt need which is both the source of the difficulty and the measure of the reward when the difficulty is finally surmounted. The paradox which Scève is developing in D94, and one which he will develop in other narratives and images in other poems, is the positive affirmation that insight and understanding can and often must come from a negative and seemingly hopeless perspective. Scève is also telling us here that life and art require some power of resistance, some opposition, some incomprehensibility which can serve as an impetus to call forth our energies and save us from boredom and a life of routine existence. Scève's poet is the creator of a world in which what eludes and even baffles us in the real world is seized and bent to his creative will. One does not ordinarily live in the diaphoric realization (as presented in D94) that life comes out of death, joy out of sorrow, light out of dark, up out of down, or the recovery of Love out of the loss of Love. But to envision in the narrative and imagery of a poem the dissolution that is the prelude to new and greater life, indeed to welcome and bring it about through the individual, strenuous effort requiring ingenuity, development, and fulfillment (which is what I take to be the meaning of the first stanza above culminating in Love's safe and joyful arrival at Port), is to rise above our common level of feeling and understanding and to pursue the diaphoric direction of difficult beauty and art. In the conclusion of D94 ("Ainsi Amour, perdu a nous, rendit / Vexation, qui donne entendement"), the poet is telling us that some experiences in life and in art, such as love, often require us to confront and respond to complexities not wholly familiar and easy for us to assimilate and comprehend. In the end, however, the triumph of insight and understanding can be had from an aesthetic response which develops enlargement of mind, change of habits and perspective, and travail of spirit. It is the spiritual euphoria and enlightenment that can arise out of "vexation" and culminate in "entendement" that Scève is clearly alluding to in D94. This poem enacts Love's recovery from the sea, which is highly charged with symbolic significance involving cleansing, restructuring, struggle, and renewal. The down-and-out direction Love is forced to take in D94 becomes part of an allegory of spiritual quest for a transcendent state, an idea this study intends to develop more fully in its interpretation of the *Délie*. This poem forcefully and dramatically presents a difficult situation translated through reconstructive language and meaning,

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0521394120 - The Love Aesthetics of Maurice Scève: Poetry and Struggle

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The love aesthetics of Maurice Scève*

with a premium being placed on human action and struggle; the result is the poetic triumph over difficulty. The affective quality of a futile world and existence is being invoked as descent and death (“Si treslas fut d’enuironner le Monde / Le Dieu volant, qu’en Mer il s’abysma”), but, through struggle (“Mais retournant a chef de temps sur l’vnde, / Sa Trousse print, & en fuste l’arma: / De ses deux traictz deligemment rama, / De l’arc fit l’arbre, & son bendeau tendit / Aux ventz pour voile . . .”), recovery and insight are what are brought forth (“& en Port descendit / Tresioyeux d’estre arriué seurement. / Ainsi Amour, perdu a nous, rendit / Vexation, qui donne entendement”). Dualism or tension is being resolved in language and imagery. The poet’s definition of reality as a challenge or struggle requiring a restructuring of self and world in the present and luminous – in *entendement* – is a sure and ultimate denial to obscurity and anguish as having a final role to play in the poet’s quest. These resistances do, of course, function meaningfully in a metaphoric way to propel the poet towards that very “entendement.”

One could indeed argue that the higher emotive quality and illumination which Scève sought and achieved in his lyrics, the poet’s pursuit of an intense *entendement*, could only spring from an initially obscure and anguished poetic impulse. In wishing to distance himself aesthetically from other love poets, Scève attempts to rid his poetic treatment of love of what he calls the “veue coustumiere” – of superficiality, facility, the ordinary. He scrupulously avoids a language that might trivialize intellectual and emotive content. Rather he seeks to dignify his poetry by making it capable of expressing a higher and more exclusive meaning and purpose. To this end, poetic discourse through “tensive ambiguities” (Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality*, p. 46) such as the resistant constructs of obscurity and anguish can serve a very useful purpose. Thematically and artistically, the most heightened emotive sense of poetic and psychological luminosity in Scève’s poems (of *entendement*) is often best achieved when he constructs this luminosity through the tensive, aesthetic ambiguity afforded by chiaroscuro: light which is made more visible, more radiant, more meaningful by darkness and obscurity setting it off. The poet’s perception of this central paradox of light in darkness – of the possibility of obtaining clarity from darkness and thus of light triumphant over darkness – goes to the very heart of Scève’s poetic endeavor, as we shall see more fully in Chapters 4 and 5 of this book. This aesthetic paradox is beautifully modulated in his apostrophe to Light in D24 and is another good