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“A Dark Speakyng”: English Translations of 1 Corinthians 13:12 and What We Can See in Them by Curtis Gruenler

First I want to thank Kelly Jacobsma for inviting me to give this lecture, and the whole library staff for helping organize the wonderful exhibit that is its occasion.

The invitation led me into some fascinating research that is still very much in progress. It is all an outgrowth of a book in progress under the title *Riddles, Rhetoric, and Theology: The Medieval Poetics of Enigma in Piers Plowman and Its Contemporaries*, which involves the history of interpretation and literary response to 1 Corinthians 13:12 up through the end of the fourteenth century.

My title comes from passage number 6 on your handout, William Tyndale’s translation of First Corinthians chapter 13, verse 12, “Now we se in a glasse even in a dark speakyng; but then shall we se face to face,” not the much more familiar King James Version, number 12, “For now we see through a glasse, darkely but then face to face.” Tyndale was, as you probably know, the first Englishman to translate the New Testament from its original Greek rather than from the Latin Vulgate that had been in use in Western Europe for a thousand years. His work was so good that later 16th century English translators followed it closely, especially in the New Testament, changing words and phrases here and there. The King James translators were instructed to follow the Bishop’s Bible, passage number 11, which in this instance exemplifies the continuing influence of Tyndale. They were further instructed to work from a specified list of other translations, from Tyndale to the 1560 Geneva translation, “where they agree better with the text.” In the case of First Corinthians 13, St. Paul’s famous chapter on love, the King James sticks closely with Tyndale, but the phrase “through a glass darkly,” is one of two instances where the King James translators adopted innovations made by the Geneva translation, number 10. This decision, I want to argue, cannot be explained by better agreement with the Greek text. Tyndale’s phrase aligns with patristic and medieval interpretation of verse 12, while the Geneva phrase obscures the key term for what I call the medieval poetics of enigma. But, with the affirmation of the King James Version, it has dominated English translation of this verse ever since. The result, I think, is mostly a loss. Why did the Geneva translators make this change, and why did the King James translators accept it? I suggest that this one small instance of translation fits a larger pattern of changes in outlook between the Middle Ages and modernity and between Catholic and Protestant. By exploring these, we can, I hope,

recover the invitation made in the text itself to listen more closely to this “dark speaking.”

Let’s start with “through a glass darkly” though. The phrase certainly has a ring to it, though whether that is because the King James translators used it or helps us understand why they chose it may be impossible to say anymore. It would be high on a list of phrases from the King James Bible that have gained a wide currency even if their origins are forgotten. Wikipedia indicates that it is not only the English title of a film by Ingmar Bergman, but the title of 7 TV episodes, 2 music albums, 2 pop songs, 1 oratorio, 1 song cycle, a chamber symphony, 4 novels, 2 poems, 2 poetry collections, a play, a biography, a short story collection, and a story by Agatha Christie. Pop culture also likes to play with the phrase. The Rolling Stones called the second volume of their greatest hits “Through the Past, Darkly” and the science fiction author Philip K. Dick wrote a novel called “A Scanner Darkly,” which was recently made into a film. Another science fiction author, Isaac Asimov, called a collection of his short stories *Through a Glass, Clearly*, which about captures his sense of the superiority of science to religion. As these plays on the phrase suggest, the focus of its appeal seems to be in the word darkly and perhaps also its euphony with “glass.” These instances of the phrase used as a title are only the tip of a very large iceberg of other uses. A Google search for the phrase, placed in quotation marks, yields about 1,210,000 results.

But what does this phrase mean? By contrast to seeing “face to face,” seeing “through a glass darkly” seems to suggest pure and insurmountable but perhaps tantalizing lack. However poetic it is, it is obscure, an obscure phrase for obscurity, and perhaps this too helps explain its modern appeal. David Norton, commenting on the history of translation that culminates in the King James Bible, notes that language “may even be magical at the expense of meaning,” and I think this phrase is a good example.¹ Something of what St. Paul wrote about how we see now is lost in this translation.

To find it, let us start, as Tyndale and his successors did, with St. Paul’s Greek, number 1 on your handout. The two key words are “esoptron,” which Paul uses in the genitive case with the preposition “dia” meaning “through,” and “ainigma,” used in the dative case with the preposition “en” meaning “in.” There are interpretive difficulties involved with both words. “Esoptron” means mirror. The interpretive question is how good the

¹ *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (Cambridge UP, 2011), 12.

ancients thought their mirrors were. Does seeing in a mirror mean seeing an indirect but otherwise good image, or does it also mean seeing a distorted or blurry image? Patristic and medieval commentators, apparently thinking that ancient mirrors, like their own, were pretty good, took St. Paul's metaphor as a matter of indirectness. Early modern commentators, however, may have developed a darker view of ancient mirrors, which were made of metal, by contrast to the much superior plate glass mirrors backed with mercury invented in Venice in the 16th century. Thus they may have assumed that the mirrors known to Paul were so poor that the metaphor, even without the reference to an enigma, already implied obscurity. Recent scholars have come to agree, however, that the ancients thought their mirrors were quite good, especially in Corinth, "famous as a producer of some of the finest bronze mirrors in antiquity."²

Why Tyndale and other translators down to the King James used the much broader term "glass" is a bit puzzling, especially since the Wycliffite translators in the late 14th century, passage number 4, had already used "mirror." Perhaps "mirror" sounded too French, or perhaps they were influenced by the Latin "speculum," used in the Vulgate. "Speculum" also means primarily mirror, but its meaning seems to have broadened with early modern technological developments so that it is borrowed into English to refer to various medical and scientific devices for looking at things. To an early modern reader, "glass" might have brought to mind first a looking-glass, but what St. Paul was thinking of would not even have been made of glass, and now "a glass" refers mostly to a container for liquids, as it could have already in the 16th century. The 1881 revision of the King James Bible known as the English Revised Version, number 13, changed to "in a mirror," as have all later English translations, but it kept the word "darkly."

The greater puzzle, then, is the other key word, "ainigma." One of the strange twists of this story, however, is that translating this word need no longer be a puzzle at all. "Ainigma" was borrowed from Greek into classical Latin, and as you can see in number 2 on the handout, Jerome used it in the Vulgate, the only time it occurs in the New Testament, though it also occurs several times in the Old. From Latin, the word was borrowed into English during the early modern period. To Tyndale "enigma" would not have sounded like a naturalized English word yet, and probably not to the Geneva translators either. Shakespeare uses it in *Loves Labours Lost* as a synonym for riddle, but puts it in the mouth of Don Armado, who prides himself on fancy vocabulary, and it is

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 647-8.

apparently an unfamiliar word to the rustic he is addressing. Occurrences in English pick up through the 17th century until the word becomes quite common in the 18th century, along with the popularity of the literary riddles to which it often refers. By then enigma had come to mean something quite similar to what it meant in ancient Greek: a riddle, but also something more extended like an obscure allegory or a parable. Greek and Latin each had other words for riddles of the sort that depend on tricks and were often part of after dinner entertainment. The difference was much like that between riddle and enigma in modern English. An enigma implies mysterious depths to be contemplated even once the riddle is solved, like the enigma of the Sphinx answered by Oedipus or an oracle given by the priestess of Apollo at Delphi. Indeed, the word seems to have been borrowed by Latin and then by English in order to make just this distinction. Yet even though there is good reason to think that St. Paul was drawing on precisely this sense that “enigma” has carried into Latin and English, I have not found a single English translation of 1 Corinthians 13:12 that uses it.

You may have noticed that the original printing of the King James Bible, as shown on your handout, includes a marginal note that reads “in a riddle.” One instruction to the King James translators reads: “No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew and Greek words, which cannot without some circumlocution so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text” (Norton, 88). “Darkly” is briefer than “in a riddle,” certainly, but how could it be seen to be more fit? For its time, Tyndale’s “in a dark speaking” would be better than either to capture the sense of verbal obscurity that is more serious than the word “riddle” might imply. In order to see where the translation “darkly” might have come from and why the Geneva and King James translators might have preferred it to Tyndale’s, we first need to get an idea of the interpretive tradition that had grown around the Latin Vulgate translation.

The best witness to mainstream medieval understanding of the verse is what’s known as the *Glossa Ordinaria* or *Ordinary Gloss*, compiled around 1100, at the beginning of the scholastic era, under the leadership of Anselm of Laon, who himself did the work on the Pauline epistles. Anselm’s procedure was to summarize the work of patristic commentators, and his glosses became the usual starting point for interpretation through the rest of the Middle Ages. Nicholas of Lyra, for instance, the great 14th-century Franciscan whose commentary was the first to be printed in the late 15th century and whose work was used by Luther, includes the *Ordinary Gloss* within his own

commentary. The library of William Branthwaite, one of the King James translators, includes a six-volume Latin Bible with the *Ordinary Gloss*.

A translation of the main part of the *Ordinary Gloss* on our verse is number 15 on your handout:

Speculum. Is the soul, through the force of which we know God in some way, but obscurely. *Enigma*. Is not every allegory, but an obscure one. Whence just as through “mirror” he signified an image, so by the term “enigma” he signified a likeness that is, however, obscure and difficult to comprehend.

This commentary can give us a starting point for exploring medieval answers to three questions about this verse, questions we will return to in looking at a sixteenth-century interpretation that might be behind the Geneva translation. First, what were *speculum* and *enigma*, mirror and riddle, taken to refer to? Second, why was the obscurity emphasized here taken as a good thing? And third, why was the verbal nature of an *enigma* seen as important?

Identifying the mirror as the soul and an *enigma* as an obscure allegory comes directly from the most important source behind this gloss, Augustine’s great treatise *On the Trinity*. In the final book of the treatise, Augustine gives extended attention to this verse. His treatise begins by interpreting everything he can find in Scripture that might help expound the doctrine of the Trinity. It then, more famously, turns to the human soul, created in the image and likeness of God, as another source for exploring the depths of this mysterious doctrine. He considers various possibilities before settling on the activities of remembering, understanding, and loving as his favorite analogy for the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is through this sort of analogy that he sees the soul working as a mirror of God, but his focus in the last book is on why St. Paul would add that we see also in an *enigma*.

Drawing on his expertise as a former teacher of rhetoric, Augustine gives the standard, textbook definition of *enigma*. The most widely read of these textbooks, from Augustine’s time, through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, was by a grammarian named Donatus and has roots in Greek sources. Donatus classifies *enigma* as a species of allegory distinguished by obscurity. Aquinas’s commentary on this verse, following both Augustine and the *Ordinary Gloss*, goes as far as to include the

example of enigma given by Donatus: “A mother gave me birth, and then the same one was born from me.” Any guesses? Another ancient grammarian calls this a children’s riddle, and all give the answer of ice.

The fact that the book of Galatians uses the term allegory to explicate the story of Isaac and Ishmael confirmed for Augustine that St. Paul was using both allegory and enigma as technical terms from rhetoric. Following this lead, Augustine also applied the term enigma to the text of scripture and discussed in various places how to interpret the enigmas of the Bible and why it is especially valuable to pay attention to such places. Hugh of St. Victor, one of the great twelfth-century architects of the scholastic educational program, in passage 16 identifies enigma particularly with the Bible: “But what is the enigma and what is the mirror in which the image is seen until the thing itself can be seen? The enigma is Sacred Scripture. Why? Because it has obscure meaning. The mirror is your heart, if, however, it be clean and clear and clarified.” Yet for Hugh, as for Augustine and the other medieval thinkers who followed him, both mirror and enigma could refer to a wide range of things, indeed, ultimately to anything. Augustine and Hugh understand the whole created order to be full of mirrors and riddles that point to the nature of their Creator and all of history to be a theater of divine action in hidden form. The enigmatic depth of the Bible, then, has largely to do with the way it can teach us to read nature and history.

Augustine writes, near the beginning of his treatise on the Trinity, passage number 17, “The divine scriptures then are in the habit of making something like children’s toys out of things that occur in creation, by which to entice our sickly gaze and get us step by step to seek as best we can the things that are above and forsake the things that are below.” In order to do this, he says, it draws names from created things “to form into figures of speech or weave into riddles” (trans. Edmund Hill, 1.2, p.66). Thus the Bible’s use of a combination of the literal and the figurative, the clear and the obscure, gives instruction in how to read the mirrors and riddles of nature and history. This idea of the creation as a second book in which God is revealed inspired many of the bestiaries, lapidaries, and various other encyclopedic works of the Middle Ages, which often have the word “speculum” in their titles. Medieval poets even took this idea of the enigmatic as an opening for their own work of seeking, and helping their readers seek, glimpses of the divine to be found in ordinary experience. The fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*, in passage number 3, refers to itself as an enigma and a starting point for

finding Christ in other places when its narrator quotes, half-translates, and daringly alters this verse:

Clerkes kenne me that Crist is in alle places;
 Ac I seigh him nevere soothly but as myself in a mirour:
Hic in enigmate, tunc facie ad faciem. (B.XV.161-162a)

Langland changes the Vulgate's "Nunc," meaning now, to "Hic," meaning here, to refer in part to the poem a reader is holding. His narrator goes on to learn to see the Trinity in many riddling images.

So, in answer to the question of what *speculum* and *enigma* in our verse were thought to mean, the *Ordinary Gloss* identifies "speculum" with the soul only as the most important and penetrating of any number of possibilities that could even include human artworks. The definition of *enigma* as an obscure allegory, while similarly broad, was identified especially with the Bible as not only a source of obscure texts, but a guide to interpreting the whole creation and even one that a poet might imitate.

Next, why the emphasis on obscurity? Of course there is a recognition of how far all these mirrors and riddles fall short of the transcendent unknowability of God. But there is also a sense of opportunity because the interpretive work that obscurity requires is itself beneficial. As Augustine implies when he talks about the scriptures fashioning something like toys, the obscurity of the enigmatic invites playful contemplation with the promise of an elevation that is both cognitive and affective. It exercises the mind in a way that not only leads to further understanding but also builds desire for the things of God. The value of this kind of exercise became a cornerstone of the *lectio divina* practiced in monastic life and of medieval exegesis, which often piles up as many doctrinally defensible and ultimately compatible meanings as it can find in a passage. Riddles are a sort of folk paradigm of texts that, while they have right and wrong answers and can't mean just anything you please, can also be the beginning of a playful process that multiplies good answers without end. For Augustine, in book 12 of the *Confessions*, participating in a community of interpretation that endlessly finds more meaning in scripture, generated by the combination of clarity and obscurity and ultimately convergent on the truth, is a sort of foretaste of heaven.

The idea that riddles invite healthy interpretive effort also provides a good start toward a medieval answer to our third question: Why is the verbal nature of an *enigma*

important? To be asked a riddle engages interpretation more than it does just to see an image in a mirror. But Augustine, at the end of his treatise on the Trinity, goes much farther with St. Paul's choice of a metaphor drawn from language itself. Language as itself a metaphor for God has a supreme authority because of the beginning of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Prior for Augustine to a spoken word is the mental word of rational thought, so that in speaking a word he finds an analogy of the Incarnation. "But," he says in passage 18, "we must go beyond all these and come to that word of man through whose likeness of a sort the Word of God may somehow or other be seen in an enigma" (15.20, p. 410). This central enigma of our word's participation in the divine Word grounds all capacity for true speech and implies a special potential for the enigmatic. "So," he continues,

when that which is in the awareness is also in a word, then it is a true word, and truth such as a man looks for so that what is in awareness should also be in a word and what is not in awareness should not either be in a word. It is here that one acknowledges the *Yes, yes; no, no* (Mt 5:37; 2 Cor 1:17; Jas 5:12). In this way this likeness of the made image approaches as far as it can to the likeness of the born image, in which God the Son is declared to be substantially like the Father in all respects. (15.20, p. 410)

The clear and wholehearted yes or no that express perfect integrity of knowledge and word are not a minimal representation but a maximal affirmation. It is both full and precise: "And the reason this Word is truly truth is that whatever is in the knowledge of which it is begotten is also in it; and anything that is not in that knowledge is not in it" (15.23, p. 415). Augustine's inquiry here is primarily into the nature of God and the human mind, with the goal of further activating in himself and his readers the potential to participate in the divine life. Along the way he lays out a theory of language which includes an ideal of truthfulness—not just lack of error but fullness of meaning—that is modeled on the relation between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity.

Thus there are two reasons verbal nature of enigma is important in order to see what is lost when "in an enigma" is translated as "darkly." First, it implies a quality of signification that we understand through language better than through images because language is our richest experience of signification. Even in language there is a trade-off between open clarity on one hand and hidden fullness on the other. But there is an

enigmatic sweet spot in the middle that partakes of both. An emphasis on clarity that is suspicious of hidden fullness characterizes communities oriented toward the didactic, while an emphasis on hidden fullness that is unimpressed with clarity characterizes communities oriented toward the esoteric. In between them, maintaining an interplay between clarity and fullness, between openness and hiddenness, and also between word and image, are communities oriented toward the enigmatic, the mysterious, and the sacramental.

Second, Augustine's understanding of language grounds our contemplation of mysterious truth in our participation in the divine. If the primary enigma is our own mental, inner word that participates, however imperfectly, in the divine Word, this authorizes a playful dialogue with the mirrors and riddles of the two books of Scripture and creation (including history) from which truth, and even new truth, may emerge.

As much as I might be inclined to celebrate the medieval, Augustinian interpretation of our verse and the culture that saw in the enigmatic an enticing and even salvific potential to enter further into sacramental mystery, and as much as I might mourn what is lost in "through a glass darkly," I want to turn now to trying to understand more sympathetically where that translation might have come from and how it could have made sense to its translators. The task mostly has to do with figuring out what was going on in Calvin's Geneva between 1557 and 1560, so the library of a college founded by the Reformed Church in America seems like a good place to get some help toward a sympathetic view.

In 1557, the last full year of the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, William Whittingham, one of the English Protestants living in exile in Geneva, published an English translation of the New Testament. Whittingham went on to lead the team that worked on the New Testament for the complete Geneva Bible of 1560. His 1557 New Testament is in many ways an intermediate draft between the work of Tyndale, as lightly emended by subsequent translators, and the more thorough revisions of 1560. As you can see from number 9 on your handout, our verse is one in which his 1557 translation follows Tyndale. The intriguing question, then, is what Whittingham and his collaborators might have encountered in Geneva between 1557 and 1560 that led to the new translation. The possibilities are enormous, and here my research is only at a beginning. Geneva was a hotbed of international scholarship, not just on the Bible and theology, but on everything having to do with the classical languages. Henri Estienne

was beginning work there on what would become the standard Greek dictionary for the next three centuries. Theodore Beza, who would shortly succeed Calvin as the leading scholar and theologian in the Geneva church, published in 1556 a new Latin translation of the New Testament, which replaced Latin translations from earlier in the 16th century, including one by Erasmus, that were in turn meant to supersede Jerome's Vulgate. At least 22 French Bibles were published in Geneva in the 1550s, as well as Bibles in Italian and Spanish. Questions of translation must have been common conversation over whatever they were drinking in Calvin's Geneva. And of course presiding over them all was Calvin himself, at the height of his authority, who in 1558 founded what would become the University of Geneva, with Beza as its first rector, and who lived another six years until 1564. Most important for our purposes, Calvin had in 1546 published a Latin commentary on First Corinthians, which, when it comes to chapter 13 verse 12, stands in stark contrast to the medieval interpretive tradition and is the closest thing I have found to a smoking gun that would explain the 1560 Geneva translation.

Before we turn to Calvin, however, let's look at the translations into other languages that might have influenced the English translators. Beza continued to revise and annotate his Latin translation in successive editions until 1598. Van Wylen Library owns two of the deluxe editions in which his Latin is printed in parallel columns with the original Greek and the Vulgate Latin, as well as Beza's detailed notes on matters of translation and interpretation. One is a 1565 first edition on display in one of the cases upstairs, and the other is 1598 fourth edition. Latin was the international language of scholarship in which those gathered in Geneva would likely have carried on their discussions. It would also have been seen, by English speakers at least, as more capable of capturing the nuances of meaning in biblical Greek. The most interesting thing about Beza's translation of our verse, number 8 on your handout, is that he adds "et," the Latin word for "and," between "per speculum" and "in aenigmate." This echoes what patristic and medieval authors often did when they quoted the verse, probably from memory. This addition, as well as Beza's notes, show that he takes these two prepositional phrases as separate metaphors, one visual and the other verbal, rather than seeing "in enigmate" as more of an adverbial modifier of "per speculum." Which is to say, it does not support the translation "through a glass darkly."

We can start to get an idea of where this translation comes from, however, by looking at a French Bible, number 7 on the handout. This is the first French Protestant translation,

done by Pierre Olivetan, a cousin of Calvin, published in 1535, and often republished. As far as I can tell it would still have been the main French translation in Geneva. The phrase “en obscurite” follows the ancient definition of enigma as an obscure allegory. But this phrase also moves away from the verbal metaphor and toward being merely an adverbial modifier of “through a mirror.” A fair English translation of “en obscurite,” that is, would be “darkly.”

I don’t want to accuse Whittingham of merely revising his translation to accord with the French, though it is interesting to compare Olivetan’s French with Luther’s German, number 5 on your handout, which Tyndale seems here, as often, to have taken as a guide. The Geneva translation, however, generally shows careful attention to the Greek text rather than dependence on work in other languages. This is where Calvin’s commentary provides a clue to an interpretive framework that might have guided the Geneva translators. Calvin’s comments overturn the medieval answers given to the three questions I framed earlier. The third of these concerned the importance of the verbal metaphor of a riddle. Calvin, in quotation number 20, begins by eliminating the verbal metaphor:

The mode of knowledge which we now have is appropriate to our imperfect state, and what you might call our childhood; because we do not yet have a clear insight into the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, and we do not yet enjoy the unclouded vision [*claro intuitu*]. In order to bring that out Paul uses yet another comparison, viz. that the only way we see now is as in a mirror, and therefore blurred [*obscure*]. He conveys that indistinctness [*obscuritatem*] by the use of the word ‘enigma’ [*nomine aenigmatis*].

We could say Calvin explains the logic of the Olivetan French translation that turns “enigma” into an adverbial modifier of a visual metaphor. Behind this, we might see a loss of the whole Augustinian notion of a participation of our own inner word in Christ as the Word spoken by the Father. Todd Billings has shown that Calvin was still in touch with a theology of participation,³ but here at least he seems to show the influence of an Early Modern epistemology that assumes more of a disjunction between the natural and the supernatural. Except for miraculous intervention, we are left to our own natural devices to interpret what we see.

³ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: the Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford UP, 2007).

The resulting caution about our capacity to read the book of nature is reflected in Calvin's answer to our first question above, what does the mirror here (not the riddle, since he has eliminated that metaphor) refer to? This is the next section of his commentary, quote number 21:

In the first place there is no doubt that he is comparing the ministry of the Word, and the aids needed for exercising it, to a mirror. For God, who is otherwise invisible, has appointed these as means for revealing Himself to us. Of course this can also be made to embrace the whole structure of the universe, in which the glory of God shines out for us to see, as we find expressed in Rom. 1:20 and Heb. 11:3. The apostle describes the created things as mirrors in which God's invisible majesty is to be seen, but since Paul is dealing particularly here with spiritual gifts, which are of assistance to the ministry exercised by the Church, and go along with it, I shall not digress further.

He concedes the medieval answer, rather dismissively, that the mirror could be the whole created order. Even then, however, what he seems to think could be found in that mirror is merely God's glory, nothing else about the nature of God or divine action in the world. Rather, making an argument from context, he restricts the mirror primarily to the teaching of the church. The angels, he goes on to say in quotation number 22, look on God openly, "But we who have not yet scaled such heights, look upon the likeness of God (*imaginem Dei speculamur*) in the Word, in the sacraments, and, in short, in the whole ministry of the Church." Given this focus, it might not be surprising that Calvin's response to our second question above, why the enigmatic is valuable, is simply to minimize it. Continuing the same passage:

Paul here speaks of the vision which we have as 'obscure' (*aenigmaticum*), not because there is any question of its being dubious or misleading, but because it is not so clear as it will eventually be at the Last Day.... Therefore we must understand it in this way: that the knowledge of God, which we now derive from His Word, is undoubtedly reliable and true, and there is nothing muddled, or unintelligible or dark about it; but when it is called 'obscure' (*aenigmaticam*) it is in a relative way, because it falls a long way short of that clear revelation to which we look forward, when we shall see face to face.

There is nothing here about useful, much less salvific challenges to interpretation. Obscurity merely results from an unbridgeable gap between present and future

knowledge, with no hope that contemplation could press any further into the gap. Rather, the knowledge we have now is perfectly adequate to get us over that gap when the time comes. Here, I think, is an interpretive basis for “through a glass darkly” as signifying merely a deficit of knowledge, not one that invites further attention.

The shift in the interpretive tradition between the *Ordinary Gloss* and Calvin’s commentary fits a larger pattern of changes in thought between the Middle Ages and modernity that might help explain the Geneva translation and why the King James translators chose to follow it. The medieval church had a sacramental imagination that saw the world as full of hierarchies that mediated a participation of the human in the divine. For medieval theology, any created thing manifests an analogical relationship with the divine and is capable of mediating knowledge of God, however imperfect. Modern theology, one might say, focuses more strictly on getting correct the ordained revelation of God in scripture, recognizing that it is partial, but treating its falling short as more of a quantitative gap than an analogical one. Being addressed by “a dark speaking,” as Tyndale had it, is an invitation to the sacramental imagination to contemplate the mysterious, analogical depths behind appearances. Seeing “through a glass darkly,” however, suggests instead the modern sense of the world as a screen without meaningful depth except for the limited window on the divine provided, as Calvin says, by the ministry of the church.

These larger differences between medieval and modern also align with differences between Catholic and Protestant positions that would have been much more at the front of the translators’ minds. Makoto Fujimura’s lecture on Monday drew attention to Protestantism’s failure to cultivate beautiful images capable of mediating divine mystery, what he called “visual theology.” It is fascinating, then, to see Calvin interpreting the metaphor in our verse as a purely visual one, but then taking it as a reference to a primarily verbal reality, “the ministry of the Word.” Thus he pretty much excludes any call to give attention to actual visual images, which he would no doubt have associated with Catholic piety. The interplay, on the other hand, between the visual and the verbal of “in a glass even in a dark speaking” suggests a liturgical practice more oriented to the sacraments than to preaching. The leaders of the Church of England who translated for King James, despite their disagreements about many things, were united in opposition to Catholicism, and the appeal of “through a glass darkly” might have much to do with its subtly anti-Catholic bent of marginalizing

visual images and a sacramental orientation. They did include the marginal note with the translation “in a riddle,” and it remains part of the New Revised Standard Version, the most recent direct descendent of the King James tradition. But it’s worth mentioning that the only modern English version I have found that uses the word riddle in its main text, given in passage number 14, is the New Jerusalem Bible, the most recent Catholic translation.

I fear that I have not done a very good job of being sympathetic to the King James translators. I want to conclude by seeking some initial aid from the man who became Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral soon after the translators completed their work, and who manifested one of the best sacramental imaginations of all time: the preacher and poet John Donne. On Easter Day, 1628, Donne preached on our text. As anyone familiar with Donne might expect, he beautifully balances and integrates the medieval and modern, Catholic and Protestant orientations I have tried to identify. As you can see from the final passage, he keeps Calvin’s emphasis on the ministry of the church, but where Calvin had conceded the use of the book of nature reluctantly, Donne embraces and expands it.

And so, for such a sight of God, as we take the Apostle to intend here, which is, to see that there is a God, The frame of Nature, the whole World is our Theatre, the book of Creatures is our Medium, our glasse, and natural reason is light enough. But then, for the other degree, the other notification of God, which is, The knowing of God, though that also be first to be considered in this world, the meanes is of a higher nature, then served for the sight of God; and yet, whilst we are in this World, it is but *In aenigmatē*, in an obscure Riddle, a representation, *darkly*, and *in part*, as we translate it.... And so, for this knowing of God, by way of Beleeving in him, (as for seeing him, our Theatre was the world, the Creature was our glasse, and Reason was our light) Our Academy to learn this knowledge, is the Church, our Medium is the Ordinance and Institution of Christ in his Church, and our light is the light of faith, in the application of those Ordinances in that Church.

The mirror is the book of Creatures, and the enigma is the church founded on Scripture. One gives knowledge, but the other yields faith. Donne goes on to revel in the interplay between the two in order to press as far as possible toward imagining the fulfillment of seeing God face to face. The middle of this passage is one of three places in the sermon where he gives a nod to the Geneva and King James translation of “in aenigmatē” as

“darkly,” but, alas, he doesn’t seem to find it too adequate either. Most of the time he goes back to the Latin phrase. So perhaps there is some affirmation here for the theological orientation that helps explain the translation, if not for the translation itself. I’m afraid that’s the best I can do. Thank you.

“A Dark Speakyng” Handout

“A Dark Speakyng”:

English Translations of 1 Corinthians 13:12 and What We Can See in Them

Curtis Gruenler, Dept. of English, Hope College, March 15, 2012

1. **I Corinthians 13:12a, Textus Receptus:** βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον [blepomen gar arti di esoptrou en ainigmati tote de prosōpon pros prosōpon]
2. **Vulgate** (c. 400): Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate; tunc facie ad faciem.
3. **William Langland**, *Piers Plowman* (c. 1378, B.XV.161-162a):
 Clerkes kenne [teach] me that Crist is in alle places;
 Ac I seigh [saw] him nevere soothly [truly] but as myself in a mirour:
Hic in enigmate, tunc facie ad faciem.
4. **Wycliffite** (c. 1395): We seen now bi a myrroure in derknesse: but thanne face to face...
5. **Martin Luther** (1522): Wyr sehen jetzt durch ein Spiegel ynn eynem tuncckeln wort / denne aber von angesicht zu angesicht.
6. **William Tyndale** (1526, revised 1534): Now we se in a glasse even in a dark speakyng; but then shall we se face to face.
7. **Pierre Robert Olivetan** (1535): Car nous voyons maintenant par ung mirouer en obscurite: mais alors verrons face a face.
8. **Theodore Beza**, *Novum Testamentum* (1556, taken from first parallel text ed. 1565): Cernimus enim nunc per speculum et per aenigma, tunc autem coram cernemus.
9. **William Whittingham**, *New Testament* (1557): For now we se* in a glasse, and in a darcke speakyng: but then *shal we se* face to face. (*The mysteries of God [marginal note])
10. **Geneva Bible** (1560): For now we se through a glasse darkely; but then (shal we se) face to face.
11. **Bishop's Bible** (1568): Nowe we see in a* glasse, even in a darcke speaking: but then (*shall we see*) face to face. (*The misteries of God [marginal note])

- 12. King James Bible** (1611): For now we see through a glasse, darkely*: but then face to face... (*in a riddle [marginal note])
- 13. English Revised Version** (1881), also American Standard Version (1901): For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face...
- 14. New Jerusalem Bible** (1985): Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face.
- 15. *Glossa Ordinaria*** (*Ordinary Gloss*, c. 1100): *Speculum*. Is the soul, through the force of which we know God in some way, but obscurely. *Enigma*. Is not every allegory, but an obscure one. Whence just as through "mirror" he signified an image, so by the term "enigma" he signified a likeness that is, however, obscure and difficult to comprehend.
- 16. Hugh of St. Victor**, *On the Sacraments* (c. 1140, 1.10.9, trans. Deferrari, altered): But what is the enigma and what is the mirror in which the image is seen until the thing itself can be seen? The enigma is Sacred Scripture. Why? Because it has obscure meaning. The mirror is your heart, if, however, it be clean and clear and clarified.

Augustine, *The Trinity* (c. 400-420, trans. Edmund Hill)

- 17.** The divine scriptures then are in the habit of making something like children's toys out of things that occur in creation, by which to entice our sickly gaze and get us step by step to seek as best we can the things that are above and forsake the things that are below. (1.2, p. 66)
- 18.** But we must go beyond all these and come to that word of man through whose likeness of a sort the Word of God may somehow or other be seen in an enigma.... So when that which is in the awareness is also in a word, then it is a true word, and truth such as a man looks for so that what is in awareness should also be in a word and what is not in awareness should not either be in a word. It is here that one acknowledges the *Yes, yes; no, no* (Mt 5:37; 2 Cor 1:17; Jas 5:12). In this way this likeness of the made image approaches as far as it can to the likeness of the born image, in which God the Son is declared to be substantially like the Father in all respects. (15.20, p. 410)

19. And the reason this Word is truly truth is that whatever is in the knowledge of which it is begotten is also in it; and anything that is not in that knowledge is not in it. (15.23, p. 415)

John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (1546, trans. John W. Fraser)

20. The mode of knowledge which we now have is appropriate to our imperfect state, and what you might call our childhood; because we do not yet have a clear insight into the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, and we do not yet enjoy the unclouded vision [*claro intuitu*]. In order to bring that out Paul uses yet another comparison, viz. that the only way we see now is as in a mirror, and therefore blurred [*obscure*]. He conveys that indistinctness [*obscuritatem*] by the use of the word “enigma” [*nomine aenigmatis*].

21. In the first place there is no doubt that he is comparing the ministry of the Word, and the aids needed for exercising it, to a mirror. For God, who is otherwise invisible, has appointed these as means for revealing Himself to us. Of course this can also be made to embrace the whole structure of the universe, in which the glory of God shines out for us to see, as we find expressed in Rom. 1:20 and Heb. 11:3. The apostle describes the created things as mirrors in which God’s invisible majesty is to be seen, but since Paul is dealing particularly here with spiritual gifts, which are of assistance to the ministry exercised by the Church, and go along with it, I shall not digress further.

22. But we who have not yet scaled such heights, look upon the likeness of God (*imaginem Dei speculamur*) in the Word, in the sacraments, and, in short, in the whole ministry of the Church. Paul here speaks of the vision which we have as ‘obscure’ (*aenigmaticum*), not because there is any question of its being dubious or misleading, but because it is not so clear as it will eventually be at the Last Day.... Therefore we must understand it in this way: that the knowledge of God, which we now derive from His Word, is undoubtedly reliable and true, and there is nothing muddled, or unintelligible or dark about it; but when it is called “obscure” (*aenigmaticam*) it is in a relative way, because it falls a long way short of that clear revelation to which we look forward, when we shall see face to face.

John Donne, Preached at S. Pauls, for Easter-day, 1628

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