THE EXPLANATION
OF OBSOLETE WORDS
This is the text regularly named in the manuscripts *Fulgentii expositio sermonum antiquorum*. Some add that it was written *ad Calcidium (Chalcidicum) grammaticum*, though who Calcidius, or Chalcidius, the schoolmaster was or where he lived is not known. The work displays in miniature the same antiquarian bent, feeling for elaborate and mystic language, and prolixity of style that characterize the *Mythologies* and the *Content of Virgil*; it also shares some of their earliest surviving manuscripts, and there seems no reason to dispute the regular attribution to Fulgentius. Copies survive from the ninth century and are particularly numerous for the tenth; and many Carolingian and later writers used the work as a mine of verbal rarities.¹

The work consists of sixty-two brief explanations of hard words (assembled alphabetically in the index below) such as might be found in Latin authors of antiquity, from Ennius on, or in more recent ones like Petronius, Propertius, Apuleius, and Martianus Capella, who on occasion affected an antique vocabulary. In a short prologue Fulgentius states that he produced the work to help fulfill the commissions assigned him by his *dominus* or master, and that his aim is to elucidate, not to revive old words for mere decoration—*abdit omen*. Each term is defined and, with one or two exceptions, illustrated by a short quotation, for which the author and sometimes the particular work are named. Miscellaneous scraps of antiquarian lore are occasionally thrown in, ranging from early funerary customs to Etruscan folklore, Greek oratory, and Roman poems, plays, and stories. Tertullian, named in item 16, is the only author of Christian writings; he is not cited in a religious context, and in fact there is no attempt to give Christian color to the work. The order of items is fairly eclectic, though some sign of a grouping by theme may be seen: entries 1–11 deal with terms involved with burial customs, divination, sacrifice, and minor deities, while 12–62 (except for 14 and 48, which may be misplaced and belong in the first category) cover odd words—colloquial and technical terms—for foods, boats, utensils, women of the streets, and so forth, particularly as found in plays, poems, and romances. The explanations occasionally have recourse to transliterated Greek, of the reasonable accuracy found elsewhere in Fulgentius.
The Explanation has thus some slight antiquarian interest, but it is chiefly remarkable for the strong suspicion under which Fulgentius falls of having faked his evidence. In the translation below, an asterisk marks unidentified authors or titles; and it has to be frequently used, even when allowance is made for the undoubted fact that much classical literature, particularly of a minor or more ephemeral kind, is lost to us. What Fulgentius quotes is verifiable for Virgil, Lucan, and some of Plautus and Apuleius, especially their respective Casina and Metamorphoses. Plautus is alluded to more than any other writer, and it may be representative of Fulgentius's general attitude to authorities that reasonably accurate Plautus references are mixed up with citations much manipulated from the received text, one unidentified quotation, and a number found in Plautus but assigned to the wrong plays. Two dubious titles are given to Apuleius, while Petronius is credited with a number of fragmentary passages for which, though they are not un-Petronian in style, Fulgentius becomes the sole authority. In addition, both Greek and Roman writers and writings otherwise unknown are liberally cited, Fulgentius's motive being presumably that by this means his scholarship and authority may be bolstered, at least in the eyes of an uncritical reader. The net result, of course, has been to obscure the fact that he and his contemporaries faced limited literary resources, to discredit him as "that curious and muddle-headed pretender to scholarship," and to brand his work as a near travesty.

Neither Fulgentius nor his contemporaries are in the habit of specifying their immediate sources, but the type of compendium he has assembled bears resemblance to various compilations and epitomes of late Roman antiquity. One may instance the De lingua Latina of the encyclopedic writer Varro, another likely source for Fulgentius's Mythologies, as well as Varro's lost work known as Quaestiones Plautinae, discussions of hard words from the plays of Plautus; the Natural History of the elder Pliny (died 79 A.D.), a storehouse of antiquarian material; the unknown writer Pompeius Festus, who concocted an epitome of the Augustan scholar Verrius Flaccus's De verborum significatu, which was worked over by Paulus Diaconus in Carolingian times; and the De compendiosa doctrina (or De proprietate sermonum), twenty books or sections dealing with the grammatical functions and classes of words, terms for ships, clothing, and so on, by Nonius Marcellus, an otherwise unknown industrious compiler, usually assigned to the earlier fourth century.

From the reference to a "list of commissions" in the opening sentence of
Fulgentius's work it would seem natural to assume that the learned "master" or patron is the same person that is addressed in the Mythologies, the Content of Virgil, and the Ages of the World. In item 16 below, however, a so-called allusion to Demosthenes is prefaced, "Let me give you the quotation in Latin lest one in Greek confuse you," whereas in the Mythologies, 3.1, for instance, a quotation from Homer is given without benefit of a Latin version, as if the patron of that work had some knowledge of Homer's language. But in item 16 Fulgentius may be thinking more of the general reader.

The Explanation appeared in print along with Nonius Marcellus's De proprietate (see above) in a series of editions, some anonymous (Antwerp, 1565, by J. Mercier; Paris, 1583, 1586, 1614, repr., Leipzig, 1825; Sedan, 1614; Basel, 1842, by F. D. Gerlach and C. L. Roth); in the edition of Servius by Pierre Daniel (Paris, 1600; Geneva, 1636); separately in the anonymous Expositio sermonum antiquorum (Basel, 1577); in D. Godefroy's Auctores Latiae linguae (Heidelberg, 1585, 1595, 1602; St. Gervaise, 1622; Geneva, 1622); by L. Lersch, Fulgentii de abstruis sermonibus (Bonn, 1844); R. Helm, Fulgentii opera (Leipzig, 1898), pp.111-26, followed below; and P. Wessner, Fulgentii expositione sermonum antiquorum, Commentationes Philologiae Ienensis, 6.2 (Jena, 1899). A recent work of criticism is: G. Pennisi, Fulgenzio e la 'Expositio sermonum antiquorum' (Florence, 1963), see also its review by P. Langlois, Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire 46 (1968): 188-89. Pennisi, like Wessner, provides full details of the numerous surviving manuscripts; he writes on an additional manuscript of the work, Vatican Reg. Lat. 61, in Helikon (1963), 3: 500-504.

The rendering below is interspersed where necessary with a brief commentary dealing with special terms and allusions.

1. See M. L. W. Laistner, The Intellectual Heritage of the Early Middle Ages (Ithaca, 1957), pp. 202-15, with some details of the popularity of the Explanation in Carolingian times, pp. 209-10. From succeeding centuries, M. Manutius lists among its borrowers: the Polipticum of Atto of Vercelli (died 961); Carmen XVI of Froumnund of Tegernsee (early 11th century); the Glossarium of Aynard of St. Evre in Toul (10th century); the Elementarium doctrinae rudimentum of Papias (early 11th); the Derivationes, or Panormia, of Osberm of Gloucester (mid 12th); the Historiae Cambriae of Giraldus Cambrensis (died 1223); and the Corrogaciones Prometbei of Alexander Neckam (died 1217); see the Geschichte der lateinischen