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## **Christian Neoplatonism: Denys, Eriugena and Gothic Cathedrals.**

The works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite came to be a major inspiration for the whole medieval culture, both Latin and Greco-Slavonic. Two outstanding examples of the influence exerted by the Christian neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius upon the western medieval intellectual tradition are works by John Scotus Eriugena and Abbot Suger. In this paper I will attempt a brief discussion of both works. While in the case of Eriugena Dionysius' vision inspired a whole system of philosophy, for Abbot Suger Pseudo-Dionysius' perspective proved to be a source of theological and aesthetic ideas.

We might well begin by asking what constitutes the extraordinary breadth of the Dionysian system, capable of inspiring the philosophico-theological ideas of Eriugena as well as the Christian vision of God's temple as embodied in the aesthetics of Gothic art. According to this vision, the temple is first of all the place for the sacrifice of the Eucharist to be performed and for the Word of God to be proclaimed, but it is also a symbolic image of the cosmos established by God's creative plan. One of the elements of that system that certainly held much fascination for both John Scotus Eriugena and Suger was a dynamic vision of the Universe, vision that opens to man transcendent perspectives and enraptures him, inviting him to participate in the reality of God, spirit, and the invisible. The invisible Universe becomes accessible to man, who in his present condition is immersed in corporeality and dependent upon his body for his cognitive activity. Affirmation of the dynamism of reality finds different expression in each of the above named domains of medieval intellectual life. In the philosophy of John the Scot it appears above all in the idea of the return of things to God and divinisation of man, in Suger's vision this dynamism is manifest in the discovery of symbolic and elevating value of sensible beauty.

Dionysius' thought represents a synthesis of Christianity and Hellenism understood as a pagan outlook. In the language of the late antique philosophy, in the climate of mysticism and otherworldliness, Dionysius constructs his precise vision of the Christian Universe, using and modifying essential points of Plotinus', Iamblichus', and Proclus' schemes. Apophatism, which emphasizes absolute inaccessibility and transcendence of God is counterbalanced by the idea of God's imparting Himself to creatures. Dionysius lays much stress on the fact that

sensible things are ultimately related to the spiritual and incorporeal universe through the intermediary of *paradeigmata* – archetypal essences dwelling in God’s mind, which serve as models and causes in the generation of the lower grades of being in the hierarchically ordered reality. These archetypal models inform God’s theophany in the sensible world and also form the way of *anagoge* – the ascent and return of man to God. Particularly privileged anagogical signs in the sensible world are sacraments, through which God imparts his grace to man. Man living in the sensible world faces the task of interpreting the sensible symbols and grasping their spiritual meaning.

Eriugena accepts late antique apophatism with its affirmation of God’s absolute transcendence, but at the same time follows in Pseudo-Dionysius footsteps in refusing the identification of Christian God with Plotinus’ One. For Eriugena, God is Nothingness, not because of privation and non-being, but, on the contrary, because of His transcendent excellence and elevation (*Nihil per excellentiam*)<sup>1</sup>. God absolutely transcends all that which can become an object of comprehension and knowledge. All things other than God can be comprehended by means of Aristotle’s ten categories, yet God cannot be known through categories, as all kinds of predicates, including the central category of substance, are incapable of comprehending the transcendent reality of His essence. For that reason, Eriugena is fond of describing Him in terms of “superessentiality” and “more than being”<sup>2</sup>. Yet His transcendence, His incomprehensibility by means of human, and for that matter, any other understanding, is but one aspect of the relationship obtaining between God’s supreme reality and the created world. Another aspect is provided by the fact that His being is participable by creatures: Ultimately it is His essence, goodness and life that is the being, goodness, and life of every single thing existing in the world. It is God’s immanence that allows us to establish a necessary connection between any item in the hierarchically ordered Universe and Himself<sup>3</sup>.

Eriugena follows Pseudo-Dionysius in accepting the scheme of reality as hierarchically ordered. In his vision reality as a whole is a dynamic totality which emerges from a unique, absolute source and is deployed in a series of grades, the lower grades being

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Periphyseon*, III, 634 a, ed. E. Jeaneau, Turnholti 1999.

<sup>2</sup> “Thus, if it is accepted to call Divine Nature Non-Being, because of ineffable sublimity and incomprehensible infinity, is this not related to the fact that this Nature is absolutely nothing; if Non-Being is predicated of Superessentiality for no other reason than that common sense does not allow to rate this nature either among things that are or those that are not?” Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The problem of God’s participability, as discussed in Dionysius’ writings, found development in the debate that took place between St Gregory Palamas and Barlaam of Calabria in the 14th century in the Byzantine Empire.

contained in and emerging from the upper ones as from their cause. Thus developing into ordered multiplicity, reality loses its original unity, only to regain it in the process of the return to the Beginning, which thus is viewed as the supreme End, the ultimate Objective of the whole dynamism and movement of reality. This cosmic return is the universal odyssey which forms the innermost content of the world-process. It consists in a return to the primeval unity of all the elements within the actual world which have separated and which individuated from the plenitude of the primal reality. The outflow of material reality from the spiritual Universe is the consequence of sin perpetrated by primeval Man, and attendant thereon are infinite division, individuation, death and decomposition. However, owing to the process of cosmic return the primeval unity will be restored and all things will regain their original, ideal mode of subsistence in primordial causes, without losing thereby their individuality. This process of return will materialize through a restoration of Human Nature to the primordial perfection of the image of God. Then the elect, those who will participate in the *reditus specialis*, will not only achieve all the goods which by nature belong to human nature, but they will overstep the limits of nature and be united with God through divinisation and transformation of all that is material in them into spiritual and intelligible nature. The lower being will be reabsorbed into the higher reality (material body will be reduced to vital movement, vital movement to sensible nature, sensible nature to intellect, intellect will be transformed into spirit) in order ultimately to reunite the whole of the human nature in mind. The process of reduction will continue further; thus mind in its turn, will be transformed into Universal Knowledge, and Universal Knowledge into Wisdom contemplating the Truth; finally the realm of pure spirit will be reunited with God Himself.<sup>4</sup> Eriugena affirms: ‘And this is the end of all things, visible and invisible, for all visible things will be transformed into intelligible, and intelligible, in a miraculous and ineffable union will be transformed into God; all this – as we often affirm – without confusion and destruction of essences and substances’<sup>5</sup>.

The conception of the ultimate return of all things to the Principle is the element of Eriugena’s philosophy, in which the Neoplatonic sense of the dynamism of the world finds its expression. Yet there is more to this conception than a mere repetition of Neoplatonist emanatist metaphysics. The idea of the universal return, as conceived by Eriugena, has the potential of incorporating the truth of the salvation through grace. The whole of reality originates from one single source which is God. The return to God means reestablishing the original unity that has been lost. The fall of man resulted in disintegration of the original unity

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. Kijewska, *Eriugena*, Warsaw 2005, p. 105 – 115.

<sup>5</sup> PP V 893d – 894a, translated A. Kijewska.

of all creation, for it is in man that God created all things as ideally existing. It is also through man that created reality will finally return to the original unity; this will take place through man's deification.

The return to God means for the creatures a return to their cause, however it does not mean the essences of things dissolving in God's infinite essence, nor is there implied any blurring of the borderline between God and creatures. On the contrary, the primordial unity in God is achieved without losing the identity that things have acquired. "The return of things to God is enriched by all that which has been acquired in the process of development. The reunion with the primary cause means not just overcoming multiplicity, but also preservation of the whole richness of multiplicity"<sup>6</sup> – so professor Kijewska sums up her discussion of Eriugena's conception of return.

This conception appears to express profound affirmation (allowing for the essential imperfection of things resulting from man's turning away from God and from the inescapable privation that is necessarily inherent in any kind of multiplicity and diversity) of the dynamism and transformation, which opens the possibility for man achieving salvation and rising to mystical union with God.

Dionysius and his theory of sensible world as a manifestation and symbol of spiritual reality, as well as Eriugena's commentaries on Pseudo-Areopagite's writings, provided a rich vein of inspiration for Abbot Suger. This inspiration came to magnificent fruition when the great abbot and dignitary conceived the idea of building an edifice whose beauty and grandeur would proclaim the glory and power of the Capetian kingdom. Thus construction began on the new chancel of the abbey church of Saint-Denis near Paris. Novel architectural solutions were applied, making it possible to let much more light into the interior and to raise the vaults to previously unheard of heights; thus foundations were laid for a new building style, that came to be known as gothic style. Abbot Suger's conception of architecture and of art in general was based on the Christian Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius; he became a proponent of a new approach to religious art in the West, which came to compete against older theories.

The earliest paradigm of understanding religious art in the Latin West was the conception that inspired injunctions contained in the *Libri Carolini*. What epitomizes this conception is a decidedly anti-intellectual approach to art<sup>7</sup>. It appears that for Theodulf of Orleans, the thinker whose ideas lie behind the theories contained in these books, the work of

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<sup>6</sup> A. Kijewska, *Eriugena*, Warsaw 2005, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> PL 98, 999-1248.

art could by no means constitute a vehicle for any sort of intellectual message.

Representations of art cannot elevate us to contemplation of the spiritual world and eternal verities, in fact they cannot open to us anything beyond an immediate sense experience. The value of a work of art is no more than the worth of precious materials out of which it is made. A valid judgment passed on a work of art can only concern its aesthetic aspect and the workmanship, it does not relate to the truth of the message that may be carried by it; thus a work of art can be pretty or ugly, it cannot be true or false. This assertion of a non-intellectual character of art is illustrated in the *Libri* with a well-known example: a picture of a young woman will never inform the onlooker whether it represents the Virgin Mary or Venus. The informative function can only be performed by a caption under a sculpted or painted representation; the image itself can carry no theological, narrative, or any intellectual information. The conception of religious art operative in the *Libri Carolini*, which reflects the official views of the Carolingian court, represents an extreme approach to art, especially religious art. The minimalism and materialism inherent in this theory never enjoyed wide approval: both craftsmen and the public stuck to the view, that figural representations act as carriers of information; they convey intellectual messages, they illustrate religious truths, and for the uneducated serve as means of instruction, replacing for them the lecture of the Scriptures. This classical conception of art as carrying intellectual, educative message was formulated by St. Gregory the Great, who called religious representations produced by the visual arts the *Biblia pauperum*.

Suger goes beyond that traditional framework towards an entirely new understanding of art: art makes it possible for man to fulfill the yearning after mystical contemplation while still remaining in the physical body. In Pseudo-Dionysius he found the interpretation of sensible things according to which they are not really an obstacle in man's ascent to the contemplation of God, on the contrary, even though, or rather because of the fact that they are so radically unlike God, they can become the means by which we elevate our minds to God. Sensible symbols, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, manifest their ambivalent character as they fulfill a twofold role in our spiritual journey to God: they reveal and conceal at the same time their divine foundation. The very fact that sensible things which serve as signs along our path are corporeal, imperfect objects makes us reject their immediate and literal content in order to discover their spiritual meaning, which elevates our minds to the transcendent realm of the invisible and the unimaginable.

Dionysius' doctrine provided Suger with sure guidelines for his endeavor to elevate human aesthetic experience and enjoyment of sensible beauty and transform it into cognitive

and spiritual *anagoge*. Unlike Theodulf, far from confining human aesthetic contemplation to sensual pleasure, Suger believed, that experience of art enraptures the viewer and carries his mental faculties above the realm of matter and the senses and right into the domain of the divine and the transcendent.

If we consider the essence of a work of architecture in the light of this theory, then the interpretation given by William Durandus will appear overly simplified, not to say simplistic.

What did he associate architectural features with allegorical significance, for instance: the walls of a shrine are meant to represent the four Evangelists, stained glass windows – Holy Scripture, an ogive curve – mystical exegesis of the Scriptures. This quasi-metaphorical understanding of the symbolism of a shrine has little correspondence with the Neoplatonic and Dionysian program of Suger. Durandus' interpretation resembles rather Hieronymus Bosch's puns and does not bring us any nearer to correct understanding of gothic interior.

By contrast, the inner dynamism of the architecture of the gothic cathedral, which corresponds to the dynamism of the world process in Pseudo-Dionysius' vision, seems to have been well captured by the art historian Jan Białostocki”

“Owing to the height of the nave and dense spacing of pillars the church came again to form - as in an early Christian basilica – a unified whole rather than a series of segments laid out in space. Yet gothic interior formed a whole that was charged with dynamism. The rhythm of pillars is not bound and balanced here by semicircular arches, or softened by a flat, neutral wall and a flat ceiling as in an Early Christian basilica. In a gothic church interior the pillars form a dynamic element: they soar above the head of a visitor who walks past them, they disappear in the perspective of elusive and yet organized space”<sup>8</sup>.

“All the structure of a gothic church appears as a set of vertical supports: there is nothing horizontal, even the vaults form a row of pointed arches and inclined cruciform surfaces which account for alternating light and shadow. This is as if a long line of baldachins hovered in the air, reposing on walls which are not really walls. For the walls of a gothic cathedral do not really close the space, instead they all radiate with light; light filters through them, permeates through the whole surface, and it is colored, for the windows are filled with stained glass. The world of a gothic church is fantastic, but not phantasmagoric, it lacks the bizarreness of a grotesque ornament or the disquietude of Romanesque sculpture. Here the dynamism and irreality are framed within mathematically clear, logical order”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Białostocki, *Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto*, t. I, Warsaw 1991, p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> J. Białostocki, *Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto*, t. I, Warsaw 1991, p. 176.

The central theme in Pseudo-Dionysius' thought, which strives to capture the energy and movement of reality, the essence of all-conquering beauty and, in so far as this is possible, the very reality of God, is the image of expanding light. Knowing is a sort of light, yet what is meant here is more than just discursive knowing, broken into multiple concepts and a multitude of propositions, each of them giving only partial and imperfect insight into the truth; the true knowing is the one that escapes the labyrinth of multiplicity and ultimately leads to the darkness of unknowing, to suspension of judgment, to mystical union with God. The theme of light, enthusiastically taken over by Abbot Suger, resulted in the striking features of the architecture of gothic interior, with light playing central visual and symbolic role. In his work on the construction of Saint Denis Suger mentioned a semicircle of radiant chapels "thanks to which the entire sanctuary is thus pervaded by a most wonderful and continuous light entering through the most sacred windows"<sup>10</sup>. The great abbot does not hesitate to put his ideological program on the bronze door of the new church:

"Whoever thou art, if thou seekest to extol the glory of these doors,

Marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship of the work.

Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work

Should brighten the minds, so that they may travel, through the true lights,

To the True Light where Christ is the true door.

In what manner it be inherent in this world the golden door defines:

The dull mind rises in truth through that which is material

And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion."

Thus the visible, material beauty of a church should possess anagogical power, the power to elevate the human mind to spiritual beauty, visible light is an image of intelligible light, that is to say of divine knowledge. Thus visible light makes us ascend to contemplation of eternal

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<sup>10</sup> Quotation after J. Białostocki, *Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto*, t. I, Warsaw 1991, p. 176.

truths. Suger himself left an account of a mystical rupture that he experienced, when “out of his delight in the beauty of the House of God” he was “called away from external cares” and “transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner”<sup>11</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Holy Trinity Chapel which adorns Lublin Castle is the place of a unique encounter of two distinct mediaeval traditions; both of them having had a separate course of development, yet both of them going back to the same source which was Pseudo-Dionysius’ symbolism of light and the idea of hierarchical ordering of the Universe. These two currents are: Latin Western tradition, which informs the gothic architecture of the church, and Eastern Byzantine influence as represented by the Russo-Byzantine fresco paintings commissioned by King Władysław Jagiełło, which cover the walls and the vault of the edifice.

The architecture of the chapel is no match of the splendid, forty meter high interiors of French gothic cathedrals, yet in spirit and style it is their kin. The interior of the chapel is simple yet refined; with noble ogive curves; its space forms a one-nave room with a narrow, elongated chancel. In the middle of the inner space a mighty pier supports the vault, the multiple ribs springing from it in a palm-like fashion. The overall effect of the vault spreading overheads is that of a heavenly umbrella. The pointed arches of the vaults and tall windows express the dynamism typical of gothic architecture and instantiate the apparent rush upwards so characteristic of the great western cathedrals, be it on a lesser scale.

The Russo-Byzantine paintings do not change the expression of the gothic lines of the edifice, they do not interfere with the architectural features, but they add a new note to the interior, a new aesthetic and spiritual dimension that enriches our aesthetic perception of this unique sacred creation.

The chapel of Lublin Castle owes its foundation to King Władysław (Ladislaus) Jagiełło, an early fifteenth century ruler of Poland. His rule extended over territories inhabited by Roman Catholics and the faithful of the Byzantine Orthodox Church. Inspired by the idea of a political union between Poland and Lithuania, the king was also favorably disposed to the

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<sup>11</sup> Abbot Suger of St. Denis, *De administratione* XXXIII, p. 60 – 64; translated E. Panofsky.

idea of a liturgical union between Latin and Slavo-Byzantine rites. This concern probably lies behind his decision to commission the Russian painters to execute the frescoes in the chapel on Lublin Castle. Stylistically Lublin frescoes belong to the tradition of the art of the Palaeologi period, more exactly, to the style of icons that were painted before the Hesychast ideas spread in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The art of painting icons was always characterized by stability, once established its principles were closely followed and there was little development over centuries. There was a definite intellectual tradition behind that art, and this was the tradition that formed the ideas contained in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, which, in their turn, contributed more than any other writings to disseminating that tradition. This tradition was shaped in late antiquity and it achieved its maturity in the thought of Plotinus and his followers. Neoplatonism provided the intellectual framework that set the course of development for the late antique pagan art as well as for Christian art. Plotinus inspired the idea that the sensible is but manifestation of the supersensible, spiritual reality. Visual arts, which work with sensible matter ought to strive to represent by their proper means that which transcends the world of sense: the spiritual realm of eternal, intelligible beauty.

As intelligible nature is constituted by invisible light, visual arts ought to omit darkness and shadows and lay stress on light. All objects exist and are of some value only insofar as they participate in light, that is in intelligible design that forms the ontological structure of the Universe. Correspondingly, what characterizes representations in the tradition of icon-painting, both in panel and in wall painting, is the emphasis laid on light, light being identified with the positive, divine presence and operation. Thus it is a well known fact that icon-painting omits chiaroscuro effects and chiaroscuro modeling. The result is that the depicted objects seem characteristically excluded from earthly space and carried over to a timeless realm; they seem to belong to the sphere of divine ideas rather than to our material world.

Lublin frescoes provide a good example of this practice of emphasizing light in the painting, the practice deriving its inspiration from the teaching of Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. They also illustrate Dionysian hierarchical vision of the Universe. Thus the vault of the church, which represents the sphere of the Celestial Hierarchy carries the Deesis and angelic choirs; below, on the walls of the nave and the chancel, there are scenes from salvation history; on the western wall, which is the closest to the congregation, there are images of saint anchorites and martyrs. The author of the *Corpus Dionysiicum* is there

depicted too: in the *Koimesis* (the Dormition) scene, leaning over the Theotokos, thus represented as an exemplar for kings, monks, philosophers and artists.



The chapel of Lublin Castle, *The Entry Into Jerusalem*, Master Andrew, 1418.



The chapel of Lublin Castle, *Theotokos and king Władysław Jagiello*, Master Andrew, 1418.

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