

THE AREOPAGITE IN THE MODERN WORLD

By

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HE renewed interest in prayer and mystical theology has so far given insufficient attention to the writings of one who, if not actually at the fountainhead of such speculation, at least holds a position very near the source. We mean the writer known to tradition as Denys the Areopagite. So solid and forthright a personage as Ullathorne was able to describe his writings as 'theology in its purest form, divested of controversy and written as if by a spirit with a pen of light'; and to declare that the study of these writings had 'formed a real epoch in the history of his mind'.¹ This small collection of treatises has, in fact, exerted a regular, uniform influence on spiritual writers throughout the Middle Ages down to modern times, and this particularly in England. Here his *Mystical Theology* was for the first time translated into the vernacular by the unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, this latter work itself being largely an exposition of the teaching of the Areopagite.²

It is perhaps through St Thomas that his influence has spread most widely, if more indirectly. This might seem surprising to the lay reader not conversant with scholastic theology, thinking of the Areopagite as Platonist and inclined perhaps to label St Thomas as Aristotelian *tout court*; yet he is quoted frequently by St Thomas. His influence is seen particularly in the discussion of the knowledge of the angels. Here it should be noted that, for St Thomas the mode of knowledge which the angels possess by nature, man on earth enjoys by grace³, and that it is this knowledge of faith, completed by the gifts of the Holy Ghost which, developed to maturity, becomes what is commonly called mystical knowledge.

The question of the relationship between mystical knowledge and that gained through the senses is being extended today to include the problem of the reflection of this higher knowledge in the arts: music, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, the crafts. In all this the central thought of the Areopagite is remarkably enlightening.

Without attempting here an analysis of the writings of this

¹ *Life and Times of Bishop Ullathorne*. Butler. Vol. I, p. 23.

² Edited in one volume in the Orchard Series by Dom Justin McCann, together with Dom Augustine Baker's commentary on the 'Cloud'.

³ *Summa Th.* I. 94, 1. c. *De Veritate* 18, 1 ad 12.

author, a glance at his main thesis may give some slight indication of the nature and extent of his influence on modern thought, or rather of the way in which his thought interprets and clarifies modern tendencies. This is perhaps most easily done by considering first the teaching of his master, Plato, which he presents in a Christian dress. The celebrated simile of the cave may be repeated as a starting point

Imagine, says Plato⁴, a number of men chained immovably since infancy in a cave below the level of the earth, the only light that from a small fire entering through an opening behind them, not able to see each other, aware only of the shadows of things cast on the wall of the cave in front of them. (An absurd supposition, you may well say; but then so is the condition of the people they represent.) Having, then, never known any other world but that of the cave, they would imagine that the shadows thrown on the wall of puppets, for instance, carried across the mouth of the cave, in front of the light were the only real things. Moreover any sounds they heard of men talking, echoed back from the wall of the cave, they would suppose to come from the shadows of the puppets.

If one were now released, turned towards the light of the fire, and shewn the actual puppets, would he not, dazzled by the light of the fire, be unable to see them clearly and, turning his eyes away towards the shadows and seeing these much more distinctly, still believe that they were the real things?

Suppose he were dragged into the world above and told that these very puppets were but imitations of real things and of real people. At first he would be quite blind and able to see nothing at all. Only gradually, by keeping his eyes down, would he become aware, at last, of shadows of people and things cast on the ground and, for instance, of their reflection in water. Only after a long time, as his eyes became accustomed to the light, would he be able to raise them and to distinguish real things. Finally, perhaps, he might be able to raise his head and turn his eyes to the sun itself, the source of all the life and reality possessed by all he had previously seen, and, at the same time, the light in which he saw them.

What if he were to descend again into the cave, in order to communicate his experiences to those still there and draw them too up to the world above? Being now accustomed to the light he would for a time be able to see nothing, but would be awkward and clumsy in his movements and stumble about like a man drunk. When he began to speak his hearers would be convinced that he was in fact mad, and would mock and refuse to believe him, and would choose

⁴ *Republic*, Bk. vii, ad init. Only a brief summary of the argument is given here.

to retain their former opinions. Only after long experience would he find it possible to pass with comparative ease backward and forward between the cave and the upper world. Then only would he be capable of teaching others and of ordering their lives.

Which things are said by an allegory. The ascent from the cave is, for Plato, the ascent of the soul into true reality, true being, in which he will contemplate all other things in their due order and harmony. It is the ascent of man from the material world, possessed of the very least degree of reality, to reality and being itself; from the mere shadow of life to life itself, from the mere shadow of opinion to truth; the approach of man, in fact, to the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Such is the thought of Plato, Similarly for the Areopagite the ascent towards God is an increase in the soul of the life of God, which, for the purpose of this explanation, is best described as light; and so a progress upwards through ever higher degrees of clarity. Leaving behind the lower degrees of knowledge (and life), detached more and more from the things of the lower, material world, he comes gradually by grace, to enjoy the knowledge and life which is that of God himself; and this by virtue of the light and life which is God. Being accustomed, however, only to the comparative darkness and death of the material world, which seems to most men light and the only true reality, the closer he approaches to true light and being, the more does the light appear to his ordinary sight as darkness, and the things of the upper world at first as less substantial than the mere shadows of them below. If he does eventually become accustomed in some degree to the light, even so his progress becomes more and more an ascent into the 'cloud of unknowing', in the sense that it becomes less susceptible of interpretation, even to himself, in human words and concepts. With St Paul he may have heard 'unutterable words'. So, if he should attempt to interpret what he has seen in terms of the material world, to those who know only that world, he will normally fail miserably, and expose himself to the jeers and ribaldry of his associates.

In the language of the scholastic man has by nature no knowledge but that which comes through the senses, from the created things of the material world, from the objects on the lowest degree of the scale of reality, the puppets in the cave. By grace he enters a new world, the beginning of eternal life, and acquires by faith a new mode of knowledge given by God, throwing new light on the things of sense. As grace itself is a created participation in the divine nature, so the gifts of the Holy Ghost are descriptive of the effects produced in the soul by the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity.

The effect of grace is to make the soul like God, the 'deification' of the soul, making it an image and reflection of God and its operations a reflection of the operations of God. As the life of grace develops so the soul, 'transformed from glory to glory', becomes progressively a less inadequate image of God, its mode of operation reflecting more faithfully that of God himself. Its knowledge therefore becomes, in proportion, simpler and more comprehensive, more universal, each act taking in more at one glance, with less need of division and distinction into particulars and details. So, conversely, each single created thing is seen as a reflection and image of ever higher and higher regions, of ever deeper mysteries, as opening up a magic casement into the infinite which, being infinite, man may never hope to fathom; yet, with increasing clarity, he comes gradually to see with the poet 'the world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower'.

Thus the least ray of the divine light is more than sufficient to contain all created things, and so we are told that St Benedict, from the tower of his monastery on Monte Cassino, saw the whole world 'gathered as it were together under one beam of the sun'. For, as St Gregory told the importunate Peter, 'all creatures be, as it were, nothing to that soul which beholdeth the Creator, for though it see but a glimpse of that light which is in the Creator, yet very small do all things seem that be created'.⁵

We have touched on the difficulty of conveying in terms of the material world the knowledge received from faith. So mystics of whose sincerity there can be no reasonable doubt have been known to give an objectively false teaching, apparently through a mistaken interpretation of what they saw. There are, however, means other than words of expressing, portraying, interpreting the unseen realities, means less inadequate because less material. Man can not only contemplate the world of nature in the light of this higher knowledge; he may also, through music, poetry, the arts, by a significant arrangement of form, colour, sound, movement, convey a clearer idea of some aspect of the unseen world, give to others a new glimpse of it. It is today what may be called the mechanism of these arts, 'how they work', the manner in which they produce their effects, which is being investigated with renewed interest. Here too the Areopagite is illuminating.

In Plato's parable the man, in his ascent towards the light, knows the things of the spiritual world by a kind of kinship with them.⁶

⁵ Dialogues of St Gregory the Great, Bk. II, ch. 35.

⁶ His final proof of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, for instance, seems to turn on this.

The sun, besides being the source and origin of all else, and containing everything else within it, is at the same time the light by which man sees and understands them, a light communicated to his own soul. It is through the possession of this supreme light, in however limited a degree, that he sees everything else. The higher he goes the clearer and more comprehensive does his knowledge become and the deeper and wider his life. Yet even the shadows of the puppets and the light from the fire are real images, in their extremely inadequate way, of the true Reality from which all take their origin.

The Areopagite enlarges on this. Not only does he see running through creation an ascending scale of truth and reality, right up to him who is Being, Goodness, Beauty, Reality; he sees in addition everything in the scale as a pattern for that immediately below it, the lower as a reflection, on a restricted scale, of what is contained more fully in the one immediately above. In God he sees the ultimate pattern and exemplar of all created things, and in creation a perfectly harmonious order and subordination. So he discusses in *The Divine Names* the attributes of God and arranges in a regular order or hierarchy the main line, so to speak, of the images, reflections, participations of God in the spiritual and material worlds, 'The Celestial Hierarchy' and 'The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy'. These created participations in the divine perfections form for him a series of steps or degrees of being, reality, thought, life—however we may care to describe in material language the life and being of God—each lower degree being contained in the one preceding it, and so on right down the scale. Each is thus a true image of God, becoming more and more inadequate as we proceed down the ladder and, of course, the lower in the scale it is—so the more material and concrete and easier to understand—the more inadequate it is. On the other hand, very soon after entering the spiritual sphere such material images cease, through their sheer inadequacy, to serve any useful purpose as means of interpreting what is seen; consequently the intellect encounters sheer darkness, 'unknowing'. Starting, then, with the highest orders of pure spirits and descending the scale down to the material creation with no conscious life of its own, we pass through regular orders or hierarchies of being, the very lowest of which may yet contain a sufficient reflection of the divine beauty to merit being called, in the language of the poet, 'a thought of God'.

So, in particular, the Church on earth is a model and reflection of the Kingdom of heaven, the earthly Jerusalem of the heavenly, the hierarchy of the Church of the hierarchy of heaven. The degrees of membership of the Church are images of degrees in the spiritual

world, according to degrees of proximity to the divine light.

In the language of St Thomas the life of the soul by grace is a participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity. It is through God, in God, that we know God in the supernatural order; our knowledge of him is our sharing in the knowledge he has of himself, our supernatural activity a sharing in his activity. So man is able to share also, to some extent, in the creative activity of the Blessed Trinity. Within the Trinity God the Father contemplates the perfect image of himself in the Son, bringing forth this image in the contemplation of himself. Outside the Trinity God diffuses, by creation, a series of limited, created images and reflections of that which he contemplates in its fulness in the Son, varying in perfection according to the degree in which they reflect and express outwardly the inner, infinite, transcendent, uncreated beauty of the Blessed Trinity. So man, too, sharing in this creative activity, may impart some reflection of the light which is his soul, something of his own spiritual nature, to created things. He may transmit to lower things some of the light he has received, as the orders of angels, for the Areopagite, transmit their light throughout the hierarchy. He may embody it in material things, where it can be perceived by others possessing some degree of the same light; in other words he may transmit in earthly, material form, something of himself, of the life of his own soul. Since the life of his soul is itself an image of the divine, this reflection of his own soul will be, in its own degree, a reflection of the divine. He may be said to share in the creative activity of the Blessed Trinity.

In other words, man has to live in both worlds, to pass continually between the cave and the upper world. Only after long experience will he be able to pass from one to the other with comparative ease; the things of the material, visible world will always, to some extent, hamper and distract him from giving his full attention to the things of the spirit.⁷ Still, having once seen, in some degree, how the things of the material world are images of the higher reality, having seen the lower things in this light, he may, by a skilful manipulation of material things, convey new aspects of spiritual realities, fuller revelations of the beauty of the unseen world, of the life which is in him. This is the function of the arts,⁸ of music, poetry, dancing, painting, sculpture, the crafts. To develop Plato's allegory, the man returning to the cave from the world above may design new and

⁷ Cf. *Summa Th.* I. 94. 1. c.

⁸ For Plato, of course, the arts were merely imitative, not of the Ideas, but of the concrete things in the material world, mere imitations of imitations. Hence his desire to abolish them from his ideal state.

better puppets, paint pictures, by mime, word and music try to convey to the prisoners more and more of what he has seen.

Space permits only this bare indication of the point at which the teaching of the Areopagite touches on recent theories of the arts and crafts. Rather than develop this it would perhaps be more profitable to consider briefly the whole spirit underlying these and similar theories and enquiries in the light they receive from this teaching.

There has been emerging for some time, side by side with the prevalent materialism of the age, a spirit destined in time to act as a leaven on the whole, absorbing into itself and transforming from within the material progress and gains of the past four hundred years. This spirit might be described most summarily as a growing appreciation of the reality of the unseen world as something actually present here and now, in the material world, of permeating it rather than as outside and opposed to it; of God, while infinitely transcendent, yet at the same time intimately present to the least of things. It tends to think of God and the world of the spirit not only as something to soar and aspire after, with all the straining intensity of the great Gothic cathedral, but as that which 'has become flesh and dwelt among us' in the repose and majesty of the Roman basilica, the 'tabernacle of God with men', absorbing into its architecture the whole of creation, where every bird and flower and fish in the jewels of the mosaic is a reflection of him who is the 'image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature' (Col. 1, 15).

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!⁹

The new spirit emerging is seen reflected particularly in the little world of the school. We use the phrase 'little world' deliberately, since its very tendency to assume this form is charged with the same significance. It shews itself here especially in an increasing sensitiveness to the spiritual nature of the child. So modern educational practice tends to begin with the child rather than with the subject matter; to assist the child to his own development from within, rather than to impose from without a rigid order and pattern and knowledge abstracted from the material world. It is more inclined to consider that there is within the child a whole world extending into the very depths of the divinity, and a knowledge by grace compared with which any knowledge gained by reason from the material world is but the crude, pale imitation of the real thing.

⁹ Francis Thompson: *In No Strange Land*.

It realises that the child often has a clearer view of essential truths than the grown-up; that, though the mind of the child is from one standpoint a *tabula rasa*, yet, from the other point of view, it is in possession by grace of the life of the divinity, of the Word of God, of Wisdom conceived before the foundations of the world. So it is prepared to concede with Aristotle that poetry is true in a higher way than history, and with Plato that a fairy-story or a myth may convey a truth that eludes logical formulation.

The school thus tends to consider its task rather as that of assisting the child to effect his own development, much as a wise spiritual director assists a penitent to recognise and follow the guidance of the Spirit rather than impose his own ready-made pattern. In this way it is following the definition of Pius XI of the end of education: to *co-operate with divine Grace* in forming the true and perfect Christian.¹⁰

It is, then, as guided consciously or unconsciously by this spirit that the better schools seek, by a 'creative activity', to help the child to realise, 'actualise' for himself in material form, the upper world of the spirit and by so doing both to develop his power of spiritual sight and to forge a link between this and the lower world of the cave, to enable him to realise for himself the full meaning and significance of the outer world as symbolic of something infinitely higher.

Similarly with the growing emphasis on the value of 'cultural' subjects and the 'training of the emotions'. Here they are apparently seeking, or at least preparing the ground for, that 'loving knowledge' which for St Thomas is the fruit of Wisdom, a knowledge which is at the same time experience and possession of the object known.

The cumulative effect of all this, when rightly ordered, is to assist the child to see everything he meets here below as but pointing to something higher, and that again to something higher still; to regard life in this world as a series of increasingly greater adventures, leading on beyond this world to adventures greater still. No matter how far he goes, there will still be infinite distances and unfathomable wonders and mysteries waiting to be explored. So, as he goes on his way, is he 'transformed from glory to glory', from a world of shadows to one in which ever new vistas and horizons are unfolded to his astonished gaze

Within the Church itself this spirit is seen in the new emphasis given, in theological studies, to the central doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ with as its necessary complement the liturgical

¹⁰ *Divini Illius Magistri*, para. 97.

revival and the increase in frequent communion. Here again it is a fuller realisation of the meaning of Emmanuel, (God with us, of the fact that the life of a Christian here and now is a sharing in the life of Christ, that life of heaven has in a sense already begun here below. The external expression of this spirit may be seen in the increased devotion to the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, seen in Benediction, Exposition, the Forty Hours, Perpetual Adoration, Processions of the Blessed Sacrament.

We must note one final aspect in which this question of the relationship between the lower and the upper world, the seen and the unseen, the material and the spiritual, presents itself to the modern mind. Are we, then, in our ascent to so spiritual a heaven, to leave behind for ever the body and all the things it enjoys? Are we to regard the body as the mere prison of the soul, or as the post at which the soul stands, like a soldier on guard, awaiting his relief, however we care to translate Plato? To even the most spiritual and detached of men there come moments of sadness at the thought that all they have known and loved in this world is doomed to pass away, that 'all flesh is grass and all the glory thereof as the flower of the field'. There recurs periodically to many the fear that there will, in the final consummation, be no place for the body and the things of the senses. The point may seem comparatively unimportant, yet its practical effects on human conduct are considerable.

Listen to Mr Belloc at 'The Sign of the Lion':¹¹

'Myself: "Every analogy increasingly persuades us, and so does the whole scheme of things as we learn it, that, with our passing, there shall also pass speech and comfortable fires and fields and the voices of our children, and that, when they pass, we lose them for ever."

He: ". . . for my part, I shall confidently expect throughout that old age, which is not far from me, that, when it ceases, I shall find beyond it things similar to those which I have known. For all I here enjoy is of one nature; and if the life of a man be bereft of them at last, then it is falsehood or metaphor to use the word 'eternal'."

"You think, then", said I, "that some immortal part in us is concerned not only with our knowledge, but with every feeling, and that our final satisfaction will include a sensual pleasure: fragrance, and landscape, and a visible home that shall be dearer even than these dear hills?"

"Something of the sort", he said, and slightly shrugged his shoulders.'

The fact is that, since the Incarnation and Ascension, the distinc-

¹¹ *Hills and The Sea*. H. Belloc.

tion has ceased to have any practical significance. The lowest degree of life in the world of the spirit, the Areopagite would say, contains and includes the highest and best of the whole material world. Faith places us already in possession, veiled beneath material symbols, of that which we still hope for. Moreover we enjoy that life only in Christ, '*reconcilians ima summis*', 'in whom all things consist' (Col. 1, 17). Even as, in this life, while firmly rooted in this world, we are, at the same time by grace 'fellow-citizens with the saints' (Eph. 11, 19), so, after the general judgment, we shall be, what is equally paradoxical, a 'spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15, 44), neither spirit nor body but men. In the meantime the Church continues to pray that we may be '*in utroque salvati*'.¹²

THE WAY AND THE MEANS

ACCORDING TO *THE CLOUD*

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is usually taken as the symbol of the unknown in modern thought. If a man wishes to discover an unknown figure or fact, he begins by positing 'X' as the object of his enquiry and then he proceeds to argue in such a way as to reveal the nature of that unknown. In the 'argument' of the spiritual life the process is largely reversed. Having begun with a 'clear idea' of God, derived partly from reason and partly from faith, the Christian gradually ascends the holy mount until this sun disappears behind the luminous cloud and he finds himself surrounded thickly on all sides by the Unknown. It is in many ways the conclusion of his search.

But having become aware that he is enveloped in this cloud of unknowing, the Christian may well take the opportunity to run over in his mind the way he came into this place and the means he had taken to ensure that he should ascend at every pace. It is not unfitting, therefore, at this point in the study of the Ascent according to the way of the English Mystics to look back summarily with the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to ascertain the path which has been followed to this spot. For the author presents the traditional map of the way to believers in rather unusual colours.

To begin with, the degrees of the spiritual life are here listed in an unusual way. *The Cloud* opens with a fourfold division of the

¹² Postcommunion 11th Sunday after Pentecost.