

Two Directions of the Medieval Aesthetics. The Beauty of Proportions and the Beauty of Light

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The medieval aesthetics (especially the Gothic one) is dominated by two directions. The first direction associated the beauty with the geometrical proportions and the second, with the light and luminosity.

The first current of medieval aesthetics is analyzed at length in Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz's work, “The history of aesthetics”, which begins right from the aesthetics of Gothic cathedrals. The Gothic cathedrals were made with certain geometrical constant proportions – “in medieval architecture the same geometrical figures and the same geometrical proportions appear invariably as much in the building as a whole and in all details of the building”.¹ This situation had a philosophical basis and an aesthetical interpretation.

Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz said that the fundamental geometrical conceptions which stood at the basis of designing of a cathedral were the triangle, the use of triangles, and the square. Those were the principles of the designing and also principles of building the cathedrals. This is to be regarded as an important distinction because in Middle Ages the engineering, architecture and the building methods were yet rudimentary. “In medieval architecture, the geometry had also a practical function. The architects of those times had no proper equipment to transpose a design at the scale of a real building. They had not theodolites, set squares, compasses and instruments for precise measurements. They were achieving a correspondence between the design and the building because they applied the same geometrical method to fix some points and to establish some proportions. Their main instrument was a pair of compasses (usually made by ropes). The medieval architects drew their designs and raised their cathedrals by using those instruments in triangulation and applicable squares.”²

The geometrical proportions (fundamental for raising a cathedral) had a symbolical interpretation and a philosophical explanation in Gothic aesthetics. In

¹ Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *Istoria esteticii* (Esthetics History), vol. 2 (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1978), 236.

² *Ibidem*, 240.

1st century A.C. Vitruvius (“De architectura”) transmitted to the Middle-Ages, and to the Renaissance, the geometrical principles of rising-up buildings. From the Pythagoreans and from Platon (Timaios), the Gothic epoch inherited a mathematical interpretation of the universe. Boethius, in “De arithmetica” asserted – “All the things which were born by the primordial nature seem to be formed with a reason of numbers. This reason found the main model, after all, in the very soul of the Creator.”³

Drawing after nature or drawing in a geometrical manner was the same for the medieval artists – the nature is mathematically shaped and the harmony of the universe is geometrical. Villard de Honnencourt, the gothic author of a renowned medieval sketch-book said – “Here it starts the art of drawing after nature, the same way the art of geometry teaches us for a easy work.”⁴ All the drawings have geometrical proportions and could be bordered by geometrical figure, but, as Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz specified – “The Greeks were calculating the real proportions of man for applying them in art, but the medieval artists elaborated the proportions which had to apply in art, even if the proportions did not correspond with the reality. The ancients measured while the medieval architects built. So, the ancients founded their calculations on measurements, and the medieval artists founded them on directions and schemes.”⁵

One can presume that the symbols of the numbers, of the symbols of the geometrical figures and the proportions were very important regarding the constructions requirements. Umberto Eco notices the importance of the pentagonal structures in Gothic art and considers them a symbolical and mystical allusion. The mystic and symbolic importance of the mathematics and of the geometrical proportions stands together with medieval art and aesthetics.

I emphasize that in the Middle Ages the artist neither did not resume the proportions of the Greek art and Roman art nor the mathematical symbols of the Pythagoreans and of Platon. The significations of numbers and also the significations of the geometrical figures and proportions came from the Bible. The model of Gothic architects was not the Greek temple, but the Solomon’s temple. The number five was very important in medieval symbolism and mysticism (the five wounds of the Saviour) and some mystics (as Hildegard from Bingen) spoken about pentagonal structures.

³ Umberto Eco, *Istoria frumuseții* (Beauty History) (Bucharest: Enciclopedia RAO, 2005), 77.

⁴ *Apud* Tatarkiewicz, *Istoria esteticii*, 253.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 243.

The importance of numbers and geometrical proportions in Middle Ages rise up sustained by a biblical sentence (“And You put all in order with measure, with number and with balance”, “The wisdom of Solomon” XI, 20) “which was invoked continuously is fundamental for the way of thinking in Early Middle Ages”⁶ and afterwards. The Creation is ordered by geometrical and mathematical principles, not because in this way the Universe would be harmonious (this is an antique conception), but according to the mystical, biblical and moral symbols of numbers and geometrical figures. The numbers were associated to the geometrical figures – 10 was triangular, 9 was square, 12 was rectangular. The order of Creation was biblical, symbolical, moral and mathematical, all the same.

The medieval art which considered the proportions and geometry at a high importance, had a moral and biblical symbolism. “Consequently there are parallelism and solidarity, on one hand, between Pythagorean tradition followed by Boethius and, on the other hand, the exegesis which insisted on the allegorical significations of numbers in the Bible. The Augustin`s authority was decisive in this field”⁷, said Guy Beaujouan. Alcuin, Ioan Scottus Eurigena, Raban Moorish, Hincmar from Reims did exeges on hidden significant of the numbers in the Bible.

The cathedrals and other manifestations of medieval art correspond not only with fundamental proportions, but also with fundamental symbols. The antique aesthetical theories about proportions are adopted by Middle Ages with a symbolism tied with the allegorical exegesis of Bible. The importance of antique influence cannot be deny, but the numbers, the geometrical figures and proportions had in Middle Ages, a symbolical importance.

Another direction which came from Plotin`s work and especially from an idea of the Dionisie Areopagit`s work was the identification between holy and the light and the identification between the beauty and the luminosity.

The Gothic cathedrals are much more bright than the romanian ones. But the beauty as light (claritas) was a characteristic especially of the miniatures. The stained-glass windows had not a aesthetical interpretation in Middle Ages.

The light has a mystical signification known in the whole Middle Ages. “In his works, Heavenly Hierarchy and Divine Names, he (Pseudo-Dionisie Areopagit) spoke about Got as light, fire and bright well. The same images are found again in the works of the most famous representative of medieval

⁶ Jacques Le Goff, and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Dicționarul tematic al Evului Mediu occidental* (The Western Middle Ages Thematic Dictionary) (Iași: Polirom, 2002), 553.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 553.

neoplatonism, Johannes Scottus Eriugena.”⁸ It is hard to understand the luminosity as a characteristic of beauty at a work of art (excepting the use of gold for the art figures and the use in miniatures of pure colors without shades). The rule of luminosity (*claritas*) was also a philosophical rule, not only an artistic one. In Middle Ages this meant the connection between beauty and holy. Umberto Eco analyses the luminosity of colors in medieval miniatures, the use of gold and precious stones with artistic aims and considers that the luminosity about which the medieval philosophers spoke was well sustained. Even Thomas d’Aquino spoke about “the luminosity of suitable color”.⁹ Anyway the luminosity (*claritas*) is the colour or the ornament from precious metals.

The light and the luminosity are artistic and symbolical criterions of the works of art and of the Creation. Suger, from abbey Saint-Denis (the first gothic cathedral) stated that the beauty of Saint-Denis cathedral and of the holy things was a starting point to the understanding of the Divine Beauty - “And because the silent knowledge of the eyesight can not be easily understood by description of variety of materials used: gold, precious stones and pearls – it is a joining that only the scholars understand – I explained in written words all the shining of those pleasant allegories (...) I could raise up analogically from one inferior world to the superior one.”¹⁰ The reference was to the New Jerusalem as it is described in Apocalypse.

The constant rules of medieval aesthetics were the proportions and the luminosity. They crystallized because all the philosophers in Middle Ages considered them as allegories, symbols and mysticism which came from the allegorical and mystic interpretations of the Bible.

Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253), a philosopher, tried to unify the two aesthetical rules. “In Grosseteste’s philosophy the concept of light played an important role the same as the geometrical concepts. He was one of the philosophers who developed a so-called “metaphysics of light.” He affirmed the material world had appeared for the first time as light. The form which the world had taken resulted from the radiation of the light. Because the light radiates in right lines, it conferred to the world a geometrical form. This way it has the beauty of the form. The beauty in itself consists in geometrical form. So, the metaphysics of light ties with its geometrical cosmology and both tie with aesthetics.”¹¹

Such attempts had been done before, but not so coherent.

⁸ Eco, *Istoria frumuseții*, 102.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 100.

¹⁰ Tatarkiewicz, *Istoria esteticii*, 252.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 325.

The medieval aesthetics was not a continuation of antique aesthetics. It is a symbolical and allegorical aesthetics which was created on the basis of the medieval sensibility of man.

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