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Neoplatonism and English Gothic Architecture

John Hendrix

A letter written by Robert Grosseteste, the first chancellor of Oxford University and later Bishop of Lincoln from 1235 to 1253, illustrates the role that Neoplatonism played in the creative process of the architect in the middle ages. The letter was written from Oxford in around 1200, or closer to 1225, according to Richard William Southern, to Master Adam Rufus, a former student. Grosseteste began, “To make clear how God is the form of his creatures...the meanings of this word ‘form’ must be explained.” The Latin *forma* can be translated as design, form, mould, pattern, or shape.¹ Grosseteste wrote, “It is said that the design is the model (or *exemplar*) to which the craftsman looks to make (or *formet*) his handiwork, in imitation of it and in its likeness.” The distinction between the design as *exemplar* (or archetype) and design as formed (or *formet*), is the distinction made in the Renaissance, as in the writings of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, between *disegno interno*, the design in the mind of the artist, as an intelligible, and *disegno esterno*, the visual design which is the result, or as in the writings of Leon Battista Alberti, between lineament, the geometry in the mind of the architect, and matter, the physical presence of the materials of the building. At the Accademia di San Luca, the imitation or likeness of the *disegno interno* is the *segno di dio in noi*, the sign of God in us, in the *scintilla della divinità*, the spark of the divine fire which occurs in the mind of the creative artist, as for Grosseteste God is the form of his creatures.

In the classical world, Vitruvius, in *De architectura*, called the *disegno interno* the *significatum*, or that which is signified, while the *disegno esterno* was the *significans*, that which signifies, as the demonstration unfolded in systems of precepts. For Plotinus in the *Enneads*, *disegno interno* corresponds to the Shaping Principle, or the Intellectual Principle, or the Idea, a simple substance in the *anima rationalis*, in opposition to matter and the constituents of the *anima rationalis*. In the *Enneads* V.9.3, in the *anima rationalis* or soul there is

something representing matter and something else representing form. The form is represented by the Intellectual Principle, as the *species apprehensibilis* or intelligible form of Grosseteste, which corresponds both to the shape of the work of art or architecture, and to the artist creating the form. Plotinus described how the artist or architect acts as the *architectus secundus deus*, as the work of the artisan is the product of the mind of the artisan in the same way that the elements of matter take their pattern from the world soul of the cosmos through the Idea, which has been received by the soul from the Intellectual Principle, both in the cosmos and in the mind of the artisan. The Intellectual Principle is both the pattern of the soul and that which gives it its form or pattern, in the same way that the form of the work of art exists already in the mind of the artisan.

Grosseteste continued, “Thus the last [or a block shaped like a foot], to which the cobbler looks to form the sole accordingly, is called the pattern of the sole.” The philosophical basis for the design of the architecture is the philosophical basis for the activity of any artisan, any urban professional of the era, from the most banal to the most exalted. “Thus too the lives of good men, which we regard in order to form the manners of our life in their likeness, are called our pattern of living.” Grosseteste likens good design to ethical and moral behavior, on the model of the Platonic Good; the philosophical basis for all artistic activity is also the philosophical basis for the ethics and morality of the era.

In his *De Libero Arbitrio*, Grosseteste compared the light shining through the stained glass window of the cathedral to the operation of divine grace through free will. In his *Epistolae*, Grosseteste compared his relationship as Bishop to the clergy of the cathedral, and the relationship between the Pope and his prelates, including Grosseteste, to a mirror reflecting light into dark places. The Bishop illuminates the minds of the clergy by reflecting the *species apprehensibilis*, the intelligible form provided by the *lux spiritualis*, the spiritual light, into the *oculus mentis*, the mind’s eye which perceives the *species apprehensibilis*, of the clergy, so that the *species apprehensibilis* can become the *species sensibilis*, the sensible, visual form, as a tangible rule of operation, or the model for behavior can become the rule for behavior, in the correct operations of the Church, and the Bishop can assert his authority. “That is also called a pattern,” according to Grosseteste, “to

which material to be shaped is applied and, by its application to it, receives the imitated shape of that to which it is applied.”

Grosseteste continued, “we say of the silver seal that it is the pattern of the wax seal; and of the clay in which the statue is cast, that it is the mould of the statue.” The wax seal occurs consistently in the commentators on Aristotle as a metaphor for visual perception, in the transference from the a priori *species apprehensibilis* of an object to the form of the object as perceived, the *species sensibilis*, in the same way that the pattern of the *exemplar* is transferred to the craftwork. Alexander of Aphrodisias, in his *De anima*, described sensation, or sense perception, as that which “takes place by means of the apprehension of the forms of sensible objects without their matter,” which “must be conceived of as taking place in the way in which a piece of wax takes on the impress of a signet ring...” (Alexander’s *De anima* 83).² In his *Paraphrase of the De anima*, Themistius compared the *species apprehensibilis* to the seal of a wax block on air, the wax block being the *phantasia*, the mechanism of forming images in intellect, “just as though the wax received the imprint of the seal right through itself, and after receiving the imprint and being enfolded in it had gone on to stamp the same imprint on the air” (92),³ the result being that “even though the wax and ring had gone away, the surrounding air had acquired a structure,” the intelligible structure of the active, creative intellect as processed by the agent intellect, through the mechanisms of material intellect.

Following Alexander and Themistius, Alfarabi, in his *Risala*, or *De intellectu*,⁴ used the analogy of the wax seal to describe the difference between the intelligible and the material, the *species apprehensibilis* and the *species sensibilis*. The essence of matter is that element of matter in which “form comes to be,” the potential for matter to be understood by intellect as form, in the same way that the essence of potential intellect is its capacity to understand the form. When a seal is stamped on a piece of wax, the seal takes possession of the matter, and the matter becomes the form in its totality, as an intelligible or archetype. Even the part of the wax which does not take the seal is defined in relation to the seal: there can be no *species sensibilis* without the *species apprehensibilis*, or work of art without the design first in the mind of the artisan. The totality is especially complete if the seal on the wax transforms the wax in three dimensions, in the form of a cube

or sphere, as in architecture. In that case, there can be no distinction between the quiddity or essence of the wax in its material existence and the quiddity of the form of the wax. Architecture, more than any form of expression, reveals the relation between the *idea* and the material presence.

Thus for Grosseteste, “when the artist (or *artifex*) has in his mind the likeness of his work of art (or *artificii*) and regards only that which he has in his mind [as in the seal stamped on air], in order to shape his art in its likeness, that likeness of the work in the artist’s mind is called the design of the work of art (or *forma artificii*).” Grosseteste’s letter exhibits a familiarity with the *Enneads* of Plotinus. In the *Enneads* V.8.1, Plotinus compares two blocks of stone, one of which is carved into a statue by a craftsman, so that in which “the form is not in the material; it is in the designer before ever it enters into the stone...”,⁵ the *forma artificii* of Grosseteste. In the soul for Plotinus there is “something representing Matter [the *species sensibilis* of Grosseteste] and something else representing Form [the *species apprehensibilis*, the wax seal without the wax], namely, the Intellectual Principle within it [or the Aristotelian agent intellect; *intelligentia* or *virtus intellectiva* of Grosseteste], this corresponding both to the shape on the statue and to the artist giving the shape.” (V.9.3). The craftwork, “the handwrought, with its metal or stone or wood, is not realized out of these materials until the appropriate craft has produced statue, house, or bed, by imparting the particular Idea [or intelligible] from its own content.”

It would be the same for Alberti in the Renaissance: architecture is defined by the lineament which is applied to the matter. The building is only architecture in the mind of the viewer, as the *idea* has been communicated by the architect, as according to Grosseteste, nor “does this sense of design differ much from the sense of pattern first mentioned.” The architecture communicates an idea insofar as the lineament in the mind of the viewer corresponds with the idea in the mind of the architect, more or less, in a shared matrix of signification through language.

Grosseteste then uses the analogy of architecture: “So imagine in the artist’s mind the design of the work to be made, as in the mind of the architect (or *architecti*) the design and likeness of the house to be built; to this pattern and model (or *exemplar*) he looks only that he

may make the house in imitation of it.” The material of the building is organized in imitation of the idea in the mind of the architect; like the forms of nature in relation to the archetypes of the Platonic demiurge, the building is only a shadow or reflection of the architectural idea. In the *Enneads* I.6.3, Plotinus asked, “On what principle does the architect, when he finds the house standing before him correspondent with his inner ideal of a house, pronounce it beautiful?” In the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino compared the architecture of the building to the design of forms in nature. In *De amore*, or the *Commentary on the Symposium of Plato*, Ficino proposed, “If anyone asked in what way the form of the body can be like the Form and Reason of the Soul and Mind, let him consider, I ask, the building of the architect” (V.5),⁶ expressing the core idea of Renaissance Humanism, that the human mind corresponds to the workings of nature, an idea which played a role in medieval Scholasticism, but which is untenable in a scientific era. “Who will deny,” asks Ficino, “that the house is a body and that it is very much like the architect’s incorporeal Idea, in the likeness of which it was built?” As for Grosseteste, “In the beginning the architect develops a Reason or Idea, as it were, of the building in his soul. Then he builds, as nearly as possible, the kind of house he has conceived.”

In his *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics*, Grosseteste defined *solertia*, a term from the *Posterior Analytics* of Aristotle, as translated into Latin by James of Venice, as the penetrating power of the *oculus mentis*, the mind’s eye, which is able to see beyond the surface of an image, such as a form, pattern, or symbol. If the eye sees color, for example, the *oculus mentis* sees the structure of which the color is an effect, as described in geometrical terms by Grosseteste in his *De Iride* (or *On the Rainbow*, or *on the Rainbow and the Mirror*). *Solertia*, involving dialectical and discursive reasoning, is the ability to understand, in perception, the archetypal and intelligible forms that define perception itself, and define the process of intellection of the perceiving subject. *Solertia* is the clarity of the vision of the *oculus mentis* of the intelligibles of the *intelligentia*, the divine intellect, as illuminated by the *irradiatio spiritualis* in the *lumen spiritualis*, the radiated spiritual light, and is thus a faculty of *sapientia* in the *virtus intellectiva*, the higher part of the *anima rationalis*, the rational soul.

In the letter to Master Adam Rufus, Grosseteste asks the reader to “imagine, even though it be impossible, that the will [or *solertia*] of

the same architect wishing to build the house were so powerful that this will alone need be applied to shape the material into the house of the design in the architect's mind, so that by this application will be fashioned into the house." The process of architectural design requires the penetrating ability and clarity of vision of the *oculus mentis* in relation to *intelligentia*, as aided by the *irradiatio spiritualis*, in the intellectual ascension of the *virtus intellectiva*. If the process of architectural design is successful, then the architecture will accommodate the same intellectual ascension in the mind of the viewer. Not only is the form of the idea in the mind of the architect copied in the material of the building, but also the process by which the form is realized.

"Imagine also that the material of the house is fluid [the material substrate as described by Aristotle], and cannot retain the form it has received if it is separated from the design in the architect's mind," if the matter and the lineament do not coalesce, "as water stamped with a silver seal, when the seal is removed, immediately loses the form which is received," as opposed to the seal of the wax block (or *phantasia*, a product of the *solertia* of the *oculus mentis*) on air of Themistius, which is retained as the *species apprehensibilis*. "So imagine the will of the craftsman (or *artificis*) applying the material of the house to the form in the architect's mind, not only that by this application he may fashion it into the house, but also applying the material to the design that, as long as the house remains in being, the house may be kept in being in that form." The building is a finite, material and perishable container for the architecture of it, which is an intelligible idea, not subject to the malleability of the material substrate. If the building crumbles, the architecture remains, as a wax seal stamped on air. This is particularly borne out in the era of mechanical reproduction, where the value of the architecture of a building is defined not by the material presence of the building itself, but by the reproduced images of it.

"In such a manner then," according to Grosseteste, "in which its design, in the mind of such an architect, is the design of the house, so is art (or *ars*), or wisdom (or *sapientia*) or the word of Almighty God [or *logos*] the pattern of all creatures," the imperishable Platonic archetype. "For it is at the same time both the model (or *exemplar*) and the producer (or *efficiens*), and what forms, and what keeps in the form given, while creatures are applied to it and removed from it." As

both the intelligible form and the process of design are mimicked in the form of the architecture, so are both the form and process of the divine *intelligentia* mimicked in both the *nous hylikos* or *virtus cogitativa*, material intellect, and in the forms of nature. There are many instances in Gothic architecture where it is clear that the architectural form is intended to function as the *logos* of the divine.

In his cosmologies *De Luce* (or *On Light*, 1225–1228) and *De lineis, angulis et figuris* (or *On lines, angles and figures*, 1228–1233), written at Oxford, Robert Grosseteste would describe natural bodies as being formed by mathematical and geometrical entities created from light, as reflected from the *lux spiritualis*, the incorporeal, mystical light; and in the *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics* (1228–1235) and the *Hexaameron* (c. 1237), Grosseteste would describe the ascension of the *anima rationalis* from the material intellect, *virtus cogitativa*, to the agent intellect, *virtus intellectiva*, in the apprehension of the divine intellect, *intelligentia*.

Plato established that measure and proportion are elements of the principle of the Good, which is defined as the beauty of divine intelligence, and which is manifested as “analogously beautiful and pleasant” (*Philebus* 51)⁷ through geometrical forms, as in architecture. Geometrical figures are absolutely beautiful, “in any situation,” that is, “a straight line, a curve and the plane and solid figures that lathes, rulers and squares can make from them,” according to Socrates. In the *Republic*, mathematics is necessary for “all occupations, practical, intellectual, or scientific” (522). For Plotinus in the *Enneads*, measure and proportion communicate the Good of divine intelligence to the *anima rationalis* through the senses, as in the sensible experience of the architecture. In *Enneads* II.1.7, measure and proportion provide continuity in the order of the cosmos. In *Enneads* II.9.16, “What geometrician or arithmetician could fail to take pleasure in the symmetries, correspondences, and principles of order observed in visible things?” As the matter of the universe is formed in the transference of measure and proportion from the divine intelligence, through the instrument of the Good of Plato, and the Reason Principle of Plotinus, thus the human being is capable of forming matter in the arts by transferring that aspect of the principles of divine intelligence contained in his or her mind to physical form.

Thus Plotinus continues, “Consider, even, the case of pictures:

those seeing by the bodily sense the products of the art of painting do not see the one thing in the one only way,” nor do they in the case of architecture: “they are deeply stirred by recognizing in the objects depicted to the eyes the presentation of what lies in the idea,” the idea in the mind of the artist or architect. In architecture the representation occurs in the use of its basic vocabulary elements, mathematics and geometry, which, as the lineament of the architecture, are already more intelligible, and less tied to the sensible world, than the materials used by the painter or architect.

According to Plotinus, “In the intellectual, the vision sees not through some medium but by and through itself alone,” in the *irradiatio spiritualis*, “for its object is not external” (V.3.8). As the mechanisms of vision are projected onto the sensible world through the *anima rationalis*, in the formation of the *species sensibilis* through the *species apprehensibilis*, in Grosseteste’s terms, so vision itself is not completely dependent on external light, but also on an internal light, which is the source of the truest form of seeing in vision for Plotinus: “there is an earlier light within itself, a more brilliant, which it sees sometimes in a momentary flash.... This is sight without the act, but it is the truest seeing, for it sees light whereas its other objects were the lit not the light” (V.5.7). Such vision is the product of the *irradiatio spiritualis* from the *lux spiritualis*. The vision of the Intellectual Principle of Plotinus depends on its withdrawal from the world of matter, so that it “must have its vision—not of some light in some other thing but of the light within itself, unmingled, pure, suddenly gleaming before it.” The pure light gleaming before it is the light of the Good, the primeval fire of Anaximander, the being prior to matter, the Platonic *archê*. Thus “It is a principle with us that one who has attained to the vision of the Intellectual Beauty and grasped the beauty of the Authentic Intellect will be able also to come to understand the Father and Transcendent of that Divine Being” (V.8.1), in the experience of the architecture of the Gothic cathedral, and in the intellectual ascension that it accommodates toward the *virtus intellectiva*.

The architecture of the Gothic cathedral can be described as hieratic, that is, as representing a reality other than sensible reality, as facilitating ascension to another world, rather than representing the physical world. The architecture can be called hieratic in that it represents the intelligible world of the divine intellect in its intelligible

structure, as opposed to the physical world, and it is a projection of the internal intelligible structure in the mind of the viewer. As Plotinus says in the *Enneads*, “The faculty of perception in the Soul cannot act by the immediate grasping of sensible objects, but only by the discerning of impressions printed upon the Animate [or soul] by sensation: these perceptions are already Intelligibles, while the outer sensation is a mere phantom of the other (of that in the Soul) which is nearer to Authentic-Existence...” (I.1.7). The phantom of the outer sensation is the transparency projected by the extramission of light from the eye of the impressions printed upon the Animate, the *species sensibilis* which has been formed by the *species apprehensibilis* in Grossteste’s terms, and which appears to discursive reason in material intellect to be an immediate perception of the sensible world. The sensible experience of the architecture is a product of the intelligible experience of the architecture, and the source of the sensible beauty and richness of the architecture is its intelligible structure, a product of divine *intelligentia* as it is perceived by the *virtus intellectiva*, as it is diffused from the *lux spiritualis* through the stained glass window into the refracted and rarefacted *lumen spritualis* into the mathematical and geometrical proportions which define the intelligible and physical structure of the architecture.

¹ John Harvey, *The Medieval Architect* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1972), p. 23.

² *The De Anima of Alexander of Aphrodisias*, trans. Athanasios P. Fotinis (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1979).

³ Themistius, *On Aristotle’s On the Soul*, trans. Robert B. Todd (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 113.

⁴ Alfarabi, *The Letter Concerning the Intellect*, trans. Arthur Hyman, in Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, ed., *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 218–219.

⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

⁶ Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love*, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985).

⁷ Plato, *Philebus*, trans. Robin A. H. Waterfield (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).