

The Person and the Place—VII: Thierry of Chartres

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For many of us, as for the Maritains, the impact of Chartres is a cumulative experience that reaches its climax at suitable altitude, perhaps halfway up the *clocher neuf*, or circling at some point those 'outer balconies, high above ground, through an unbelievable entanglement of arches and buttresses'. From that scaffolding that suspends one between roofs and towers, there is nothing left but the final admiration . . . 'the unity and harmony of so much lofty beauty could have as its foundation only the unity of truth'. Having left beneath one the particular beauties of stained glass, of proportions, of sumptuous effects, here, it is the anatomy of *the Church*, spread out beneath one as it might be for the blessed Damosel, that impresses the memory with something absolute.

One of the incidental privileges of that moment of truth in mid-air, is that it throws a sudden light on the one thing that tends, at first glance, least to impress us. The Portail Royal cannot compete, of course, with the great porches of the north and south sides, which intentionally improved upon it. It was dwarfed by later re-arrangement of the west facade, and it has inevitably aged through being unprotected. Its first aspect is a little sad and battered, and the attention is quickly transferred to its thirteenth century rivals, to the sheer bravura of their lines, and their more developed theological patterns. It is only afterwards when, as so many Frenchmen have done before and since Péguy, one sees Chartres not simply as just another splendid building, but as an image of the one Church, that the Portail Royal proclaims itself as the nearest thing of all to the foundation of truth. Everything in the cathedral speaks of the imagination and the brains, as well as the faith and the brawn that made it what it is today. But the Portail Royal has something more. We may consider the observations of a recent writer, Peter Kidson, in his *Sculpture at Chartres*:

Calm is the keynote of the composition . . . the figure of Christ has been reduced from the terrifying apparition at Moissac to the stature of a judge, no less impressive in his severity, but far more human . . . We are made to feel, not the omnipotence of the divine

judge so much as the appropriateness of his authority, and the unquestioned righteousness of his judgments. The End itself now seems less of a doom from which men shrink in instinctive horror, and more of a fulfilment which commands their assent.

'Fulfilment' is the word. 'Integration' might perhaps also be used. There is that about the central Christ in the mandorla that makes each curve connote the next curve, connecting with it into a spherical, spiralling movement, such as Rublev used in the Trinity ikon. The conception is of a harmonic round. On either side, at Chartres, are two further images of fulfilment, the Ascension, and the Majesty of our Lady, who enthrones on her lap in the old, stiff, Roman fashion the child who makes her Mother of God. Beneath them, leading into the great fulfilment, go the ranks of Old Testament figures, anonymous with age, and smiling their ageless *kouroi* smiles. One has to see them in the light of evening to capture their poignancy in its deepest relief. Above them, in three gentle waves, rise the close-packed lines of the *voussoirs*, where the signs of the zodiac are so jumbled with the seasons' labours and the liberal arts, that the question once again poses itself—did the Romanesque artists ever think in terms of a real pattern, even in this last transitional phase? And here, perhaps, the question is most clearly answered. Jumble the composing elements as capriciously as you like, the pattern is inescapable in that graceful framework that holds them and moulds them into a unity.

This is St John's vision of the world, not as destruction but as fulfilment. The eagle at Moissac is a vulture poised over a battlefield, whereas the evangelists' beasts at Chartres are affectionate pets, trembling with devotion. These are not the *tempora pessima* of Bernard of Morlaix; the damned have already been disposed of. *Spes in rem transit*, in Augustinian language—when hopes become realities, 'the things we believed in we shall see, the things we hoped for we shall possess, and charity, which could only be partial here below, will be made perfect.' *Omnia et in omnibus Christus.*

Kidson suggests that it was Thierry, the chancellor of the school of Chartres, who provided the conception of the Portail Royal. And it may well be so, for at least the dates are right. Thierry's first claim to fame was his defence of Abelard at the Council of Soissons, where he backed up one of the queried points with a neat quotation from the Athanasian creed. His bishop furiously told him to be silent, which only provoked him to further quotations, like the one from Daniel, '*Sic fatui filii Israel, non judicantes neque quod verum est cognoscentes,*

condemnantes filiam Israel? Abelard, for all his innocence, must have been a little surprised to find himself being compared with Susanna. It was probably in 1141 that Thierry came to Chartres as chancellor, by which time he was already a well-known master at Paris. In the *Metamorphosis Goliae* one of the attractions of that city is that

*Ibi Doctor cernitur
ille Carnotensis
Cujus lingua vehemens
truncat velut ensis*

This was an important moment in the history of scholasticism. Abelard had only known two of Aristotle's treatises, the *Categories* and the *Interpretations*. By 1142 Thierry was introducing the further three treatises for the first time—*Analytics*, *Topics* and *Sophistics*. The figure of Aristotle was being fitted into its *voussoir* on the Portail Royal as Thierry was putting the finishing touches to his *Heptateuchon*. The philosophers of Chartres could call themselves Aristotelians at last.

The dates make it possible for Thierry's to have been the guiding mind of the Portail Royal. His own philosophical system makes it even more likely, with its fundamental intuition of the unity of all being in God, its Platonic ideas of emanation and return. For Thierry, the author of Genesis is *prudētissimus philosophorum Moyses*, whose intention was, in the first place, to show the creation of man and of all things from one God alone, to whom alone reverence is due. The purpose of Genesis is to know God from his works. The allegorical and moral meanings of the book have already been exhausted by the 'holy expositors'. Now it is the task of the four kinds of reasoning to lead man to knowledge of the creator. The quadrivium, of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy are 'instruments that theology uses for finding out how the working of God is manifested in creation'. This was not to deny the value of the allegorising school; rather would it bear out what was valid in the old symbolism, confirm the traditional intuitions. Absolom of Saint Victor was distressed to think that nature *could* be considered as important as the Chartrains made it out to be, and that man might be examined from the point of view, not of God, but of nature. But the argument of the school of Chartres was simply that God respects natural laws—after all, he made them—and we have to understand them in order to understand what he made. Such considerations would in fact bring one nearer to the realisation that man is God's image, and all else in creation God's 'vestiges'. To seek for the reality of things is essentially to look for the relationship between nature and

God, and to find in what way God is in nature, and nature in God.

Chaos, or *hyle*, are just two more names for what Moses calls 'heaven and earth', according to Thierry, and these are the four elements, so slightly differentiated among themselves as to make one prime matter. Form comes upon this undistinguished matter as the Spirit of God moving over the waters. Here he quotes 'Mercury in his Trismegistos' as saying that 'there was God and *hyle*, as the world is called in Greek, and the spirit accompanied the world, or indwelt it'. All is included in the highest intelligible, which is God, the governor of all visible creation.

All things are changeable that are not eternal, but their multiplicity and otherness must be preceded by unity, and since unity precedes every creature, it must be eternal. (Thierry thinks too quickly to bother about syllogisms). The eternal is nothing other than divinity, so unity is divinity. Divinity is the form of being of all things, and so, obviously, God is wholly and essentially everywhere. So it is truly said that everything that is in God, is, because it is one.

He adds: we do not mean, of course, when we say that divinity is the *forma essendi* of everything, that divinity is a form in matter like a triangle or some other geometric figure. We mean that the presence of divinity in every creature is its whole and unique being (*totum et unicum esse*). There is only one substance of unity and unique being, that is divinity itself, and supreme goodness. Unity multiplied, making number, or the unities of which numbers are compounded, are simply participations in unity—thus the existence of creatures. As long as a thing participates in unity it remains, and is abiding. If divided, it is destroyed. Unity is the form and the preservation of being. Division is the cause of destruction.

There is, however, another factor in being besides the rather loose notion of a presence of divinity. Thierry considers that unity produces by multiplying first by itself and then by a number different from itself. By itself it produces an equality *within* itself—the Word, in which all things were made. This Word is the notion, the predetermination of things, thus their very existence. The equality of unity is the mode outside of which nothing can exist. The notions of things are contained in the same place from where the forms and modes of all things draw their being, for the concept of a thing is contained in its equality. Divine unity produces things by its presence and divine idea produces the forms. The equality of unity, the Word of God, produces from itself all proportions and inequalities of things, and into this same Word all

things return. Thus it is the Word, the equality of unity, which is in fact the *forma essendi* of all things, the eternal formal cause.

It is the Word of God, the *equalitas unitatis*, who sits in the centre of the tympanum, drawing to himself all the manifold that went out from him, and that owes him all its being. There is the peasant dressing his vine, the harvester among the sheaves, the October labourer knocking down acorns for the pigs to eat under the sign of Scorpio. There is Harmony ringing her chimes, Rhetoric declaiming, Grammar with pupils at her knee, Ptolemy tracking the stars, Donatus, Aristotle, Pythagoras surrounded by their books and pens. Every one of the great tympana, Romanesque or Gothic, concentrates on some particular aspect of the End, and here it is the welcome of 'Come ye blessed of my Father'. The broken hand of Christ seems only to emphasize the way the arm is raised to greet the return of a saved and loved creation, 'to bless you as you enter his kingdom,' as Henry Adams felt. This is the resolution, the peace and the fulfilment of eternity. To unite is all. To divide is to destroy.

The postscript to Thierry's career was written down in 1148, at the Council of Rheims, where Gilbert de la Porrée withdrew his statements on the Trinity. He accepted the judgment that he had there applied arithmetical notions that were not relevant. He was dividing in the Trinity, and so, in a sense, destroying. It was Thierry who was singled out by Adalberon, the Bishop of Treves, as the theologian par excellence on that occasion, and little wonder. Thierry could only unite, it was his one fixation. No one seemed to regard his pantheism as having the smallest danger in it. To unite all things was to save the day from nominalism, even though he was more or less identifying, in ways that clearly needed clarification, all things that God made with God who made them. But for Adalberon it was such a pleasure to hear Thierry arguing, that he insisted on having him and Gerland of Besançon dispute at his side all the way back to Frankfurt, just so that he should have the pleasure of listening to them. At the end of the journey he loaded them with presents and sent them back, only regretting that the discourse could not go on indefinitely.