

THE PERSON AND THE PLACE— I: ABBOT SUGER

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IT has been concluded, on the evidence of the verses that Suger wrote to celebrate his new basilica, that he looked upon it mainly as a monument to his own greatness. But although one admits that he was not without his streak of vanity, this particular manifestation of what at first glance appears to be mere complacency is worth examining more closely. His verses are not simply tombstone bombast; on the contrary, each one has a definite message to convey. It becomes clear that they were written for a purpose more interesting than that of Suger's self-aggrandizement. They were meant, in fact, to provide a commentary on the whole conception and undertaking of the new St Denis, his *opus nobile*, as he calls it.

It is, of course, not easy for us to imagine why Gothic architecture and traditional Christian iconography should require any explanation. It requires a real effort to imagine St Denis making the sort of impact on Suger's contemporaries that Ronchamp makes on ours. But as Emile Mâle points out, Suger offered something that really was new in 1144, and it needed explaining if it was to be fully understood. The feeling for a developed typology in art had somehow been lost. This seems strange when one remembers that this was the age of the Victorines, when allegory in the literary field had reached its zenith, but when one thinks, for instance, of the old testament panorama painted on the ceiling of St Savin, done in the manner of the Bayeux tapestry as a straight narrative and nothing more, one can appreciate the truth of Mâle's observation. The typology was implicitly there, and taken for granted, one supposes, but in no way was it made explicit until 1144 and the consecration of St Denis, after which we find a positive vogue for the sort of thing that Suger introduced.

St Denis was new in every sense. It was the first major building in the 'new French style' (or gothic, as it has since been mysteriously re-named). It was a synthesis of features which, in the

previous style, the romanesque, had been used in isolation. Suger clearly welcomed it, not only because it was so new, so near at hand (it came to birth in the Ile de France), but above all because it presented possibilities of bringing light into a church on a scale which, until then, would have been thought impossible. The windows of the romanesque apse had been few and small, and there was usually a dominant mural. The impression had been somewhat byzantine, but lacking the glitter of mosaic it tended to look heavy, blank, and dark. The romanesque had used 'quiet, stable masses; it was mass at rest'. But the new style was 'an animated interplay of forces, an active process taking hold of the entire building, tending to overcome weight, to expand and soar'. Suger speaks with pride of this *superior voltarum sublimitas*, which must have seemed incredibly daring, giving an impression of danger, a feeling of unease, that such apparently delicate structure should be kept in place by sheer thrust and counter-thrust in the walls and the arches overhead. But his satisfaction was not merely with the architectural feat, but to a far greater degree with the light that could flood in from all sides, now that sheer mass was no longer necessary to support a high roof. Even the mural of Christ in glory was unnecessary, being superseded by light, a symbol far finer than a picture.

'Now that we have the new part added to the old', Suger writes, referring to the new apse built on to the old nave, 'the whole building shines with light, radiating from within. This noble work shines, and light floods it throughout. This was done in Suger's time . . . *me duce dum fieret*.' Suger was the leader in all this, he says, and it is the only credit he takes. But in fact he was more than the organizer who gathered the architects and the decorators together. He provided the whole design, as far as its symbolic pattern was concerned. The reason why he is so proud to write his couplets is because he has a theological message to offer in the 'noble work'. If he is pleased with the work of which he is the *dux*, he is more deeply gratified to think that he has been given the privilege of putting his deepest convictions into stone that will endure, through the ages, for the benefit of others.

Everything in the basilica has significance, and nothing is irrelevant. The first thing that strikes one, even before the impression of light has been caught, is the entrance. The doors, in his couplets, are more lights, that shine to enlighten the minds

of those who enter here. To come through Christ, the true door, is to find the way to Christ, the true light. They are fine doors, of cast bronze overlaid with gold, depicting the passion, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. The tympanum above them shows Christ in glory and enthroned as judge. The whole conception is framed by the five wise virgins on his right, who symbolize the elect, and the five foolish at his left, who are damned. Again, it is a question of those who have the light, and those who are in darkness. Through the redemptive events of Christ's life, the Christian makes his way to salvation, which is seen, above all, as enlightenment, true to the earliest Christian tradition.

It is fortunate indeed that Suger wrote so detailed an account of what he did at St Denis, in his two works on the administration of the abbey and the consecration of the church, for without it we would know very little of the marvels which are no longer there to be admired. Most wonderful of all of them, without any doubt, was the great golden cross that marked the site of the martyrdom of the patron saints, Denis, Rusticus and Eleutherius. Standing about twenty feet high, it was visible from all parts of the building. Mâle reconstructs it thus, with the help of Suger's verses and the only faithful copy that still exists on anything approaching the scale of the original. 'A gold figure of the crucified Christ shone among countless precious stones, and the wounds on the body were made with rubies. A high, square pillar made a pedestal for the cross, decorated on its four sides with enamels, each of which depicted a mystery from the life of our Lord, paralleled by one from the old testament. The original foreshadowing of the cross was to be seen in the brazen serpent of Moses, and the sign of Tau written on the foreheads of the elect. Abel appeared with his lamb, Abraham with his ram, and Melchisedech with bread and wine. The sermon on the mount was juxtaposed with the giving of the law on Sinai, and the tongues of Pentecost with the tower of Babel. Other important symbols were the widow of Sarepta with her cross of firewood, the bunch of grapes from the promised land, Jonah and the whale, Samson carrying off the gates of Gaza, the Jesse tree and the mystic mill, with St Paul grinding the corn of the old testament for the new believers.' One can still get quite a good idea of Suger's designs from the ambulatory windows, where these same types appear in compositions of a clarity and harmony that

speak volumes for the lucid and convinced mind that conceived them.

Now the purpose which Suger claims for every part of the *opus nobile* is offered, from the start, in the couplet on the bronze doors. *Mens hebes ad vera per materialia surgit*. The mind, being of itself a poor, limited thing, must be carried up to the true by means of these material images. The soul is, on account of the fall, abject and downcast, and it must be uplifted by the sight of the divine light. The mind must of necessity be led to pure truth by means of symbols. Between the human spirit and the pure idea, Suger sees always the need for an intermediary something, and in this case that something is art. In every page of his *Administration* and *Consecration* we can perceive his love of beauty, and his faith in the power of art.

Suger needed to explain what he had done, as we have already noted, because the work was new and unfamiliar. But there was a second motive, no less important. He had his critics to contend with, and their strictures were based, not on a lack of familiarity with his artistic purpose, so much as a disapproval of any sort of decoration in church, whether significant or irrelevant, and a horror of anything over and above the basic and essential, even in the building of the church itself. The purists were saying that there was no longer any need for types and figures, since these belonged to the old testament. Now that we have the dispensation of the new law, they would claim, we have in effect the reality which these prefigured, therefore they are useless. 'How is it', asks St Aelred, for instance, 'that we still have music on pipes and the clash of cymbals in our churches, now that the types and figures have passed away, and the Church is fulfilled in her stature amongst us?' This was the sort of thesis that St Bernard imposed on the general Chapter at Citeaux, where no doubt he caused quite a flurry among those of his fellow abbots who were fond of the type of gay manuscript illumination which St Stephen Harding, their founder, had favoured. To serve God with a pure heart and a contrite spirit was the one thing necessary for the purists, as they eschewed external beauty and with it, one fears, much of the significance of worship.

Suger, of course, concurred with the critics on the primacy of pure heart and contrite spirit, but these in themselves were simply not enough, he argued. 'Let every man think what he

will', he wrote. 'My belief is this—that whatever is most precious and most sought after belongs by right, first and foremost, to the administration of the most holy eucharist. If God, in the old testament, commanded that the blood of goats and heifers should be dispensed from golden vessels, how much more are golden vessels, and precious stones, and all rich and rare things, required for the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ? Nothing that any of us can offer is worthy of that sacrifice. Even if we were all turned into angels, we should still be unworthy to serve at the offering of that ineffable victim, so infinitely great is the propitiation that we have for our sins.

'I agree that a holy soul, a pure mind, and a faithful intention are the main and essential things to offer, but it is still necessary to offer external things, vessels and ornaments. We must serve with purity in the inward part, and nobility in everything external. In every way we must serve our Lord with what is becoming, since he in his goodness has denied us absolutely nothing. He has joined his nature to ours, to make in himself one wonderful individual, and he has placed us at his right hand, and promised us his kingdom.'

Having thus stated his mind, Suger lost no opportunity for acquiring the best of everything. 'You would have seen kings and princes', he tells us, 'and many other great men doing as we ourselves did, taking off all their rings, their gold, jewels and pearls, to be put in the golden shrine of the relics of our patron St Denis.' For the patronal altar alone he gives a catalogue that intentionally recalls the heavenly Jerusalem, with sardius and topaz, jasper and chrysolite, onyx and beryl, sapphire, emerald and carbuncle. And as if all this were still not enough, his whim on major feast days was to have the altar further embellished with the fabulous cross of St Eloy, and the *escrin de Charlemagne*, of which the votive crowns of Cluny with their hanging crystal drops give us, perhaps, a slight idea.

If we find the picture dazzling in conjecture, we can imagine how St Bernard must have felt on that day in June 1144, when the stone was still white, and the gold had only recently left the goldsmiths' hands. Fortunately there must have been many others to praise and admire, and to feel as Suger felt. When he saw all this display of splendour and beauty at the service of the saints, he confides, his meditation became a kind of ecstasy. He seemed to

be transported somewhere . . . *sub aliqua extranea orbis terrarum plaga*, a place remote from this base world, even if it were not quite in heaven. He felt lifted up, *anagogico more*, he says . . . *Deo donante*. It was a gift of God, this contemplation, and it was an anagoge, a 'moral' meaning in a breathtaking collection of jewellery, another instance of the inadequate human spirit being lifted up to the true by means of material images.

Suger's justification for treating a hierarchy of symbols as objects of contemplation, like his defence of 'external nobility' and his conscious re-introduction of typology to art, are all explained by his conviction: *Mens hebes ad vera per materialia surgit*. And as Panofsky was the first to observe, these words are a faithful echo of a passage from the pseudo-Denys to the effect that 'it is impossible for our minds to rise up to the imitation and contemplation of the heavenly hierarchy, without being taken thither by the material things that are commensurate with our nature'. It was Suger's great good fortune that the author of those words, a fifth-century Syrian, should have been popularly identified with the patron saint of Paris, thanks to his assuming the name of Areopagite. This composite saint, so much more than a box of relics for Suger, was an authoritative theologian, a brain, a living voice. Suger had absorbed the doctrine of the pseudo-Denys completely, and when the time came to put it into action, what could be more fitting than to do so in the service of St Denis's own shrine?

As Panofsky says, Suger found in the very words of his patron a Christian philosophy that permitted him to greet material beauty as a vehicle for spiritual beatitude, instead of forcing him to flee from it as from a temptation. He incarnated the very thesis that was most opposed to St Bernard, who condemned art, not because he did not feel its charms, but because he felt them too keenly not to consider them dangerous. St Bernard, like Plato, banished art because it belonged to the wrong side of a world that was seen as an unending revolt of the temporal against the eternal, of human reason against faith, of the senses against the spirit. But Suger, thanks to 'saint Denis', could reinstate art in the harmony of Christian tradition, and make it lead the minds of men to God. The explanatory verses which he wrote, his Dionysian commentary on the new French style, reveal him at the stage of gratification when all the incidental pride in him, of organizer,

theologian and artist, has deflated to the point where there is left only a humble and wondering gratitude . . . *Magne Dionysi, portas aperi Paradisi.*

REVIEWS

INFANT BAPTISM IN THE FIRST FOUR CENTURIES. By Joachim Jeremias.

Translated by David Cairns. (S.C.M. Press; 12s. 6d.)

Infant baptism became once more the object of vigorous debate among protestants with the publication in 1943 of Karl Barth's book firmly rejecting it. The present book by the eminent scholar, Professor Jeremias, will be regarded by many—and rightly so—as a decisive contribution to the controversy. Not that it is a polemical work; in fact, it is simply an exhaustive, dispassionately scientific examination of the relevant data available from the first four centuries. But the conclusion emerges clearly: from the beginning the Church baptized infants.

The new testament does not expressly mention infant baptism, nor do the first Christian writers before Tertullian, although Irenaeus's remark about the rebirth of infants is a direct enough reference to their baptism. There are, however, converging indications. Professor Jeremias gives no impression of forcing the evidence, but, with great scholarship, he draws on every source that illustrates the bearing of the various indirect references, so that his penetrating commentary leaves the reader with the conviction that the probative value of these is greater than is often supposed. This is so with the *oikos* (household) formula of Acts and Paul, the analogy with proselyte baptism and circumcision, and the baptismal significance given by the early Church