The Bible of Moissac

James Lawson

In 1880 between periods of dementia John Ruskin visited the great cathedrals of France and felt once again the need to impart enormous truths about history, architecture, and religion. He planned to write ten volumes each of which would take a cathedral as a type of Christian and historical witness. Only one was actually written, *The Bible of Amiens*. But through its drifting clouds of allegory and allusion one can still discover some of his old poetry of perception. The iconography of Amiens was for him a supreme example of that "art of Western nations" which was an "hourly enlarging interpretation" of the "Book of Books". It teaches "the pure, joyful, beautiful lesson of Christianity" before the fall from that faith, and all the corruptions of its abortive practice. "With the subsequent quarrels between the two great sects of the corrupted church . . . no man, woman, or child, need trouble themselves in studying the history of Christianity: they are nothing but the squabbles of men, and laughter of fiends among its ruins. The Life, and Gospel, and Power of it, are all written in the mighty works of its true believers . . ."[1]

Among these works is the abbey church of Saint Pierre at Moissac. It lies on the *via podense*, the pilgrimage road from Le Puy to Santiago de Compostella, close to the river Garonne some forty miles northwest of Toulouse. In the mid-eleventh century it came to belong to the reformed Benedictine order of Cluny, then the most powerful monastery in Christendom. According to the chronicle of Abbot Aymeric de Peyrac (c.1400), it was Abbot Anquetil (1085–1115) who commissioned sculptures for the tympanum, the space between the lintel and the arch, over the south portal. The decoration of the south portal was completed under his successor Abbot Roger (1115–1131). Monumental sculpture, neglected for centuries, reappears there. It is as if the school of sculpture that created it had rediscovered a lost secret.[2]

[1] J. Ruskin, *The Bible of Amiens*, (London, George Allen, 1881), p. 73.

[2] E. Mâle, *Religious Art in France. The Twelfth Century. A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography*, edited by H. Bober, translated by M. Matthews, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978) p. 3. See also, M. Schapiro, "The Romanesque Sculptures of Moissac I & II" in *Romanesque Art*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1977), pp. 131–264. Images of Moissac may be viewed at http://www.vrcoll.fa.pitt.edu/medart/image/France/Moissac/moismain.html

© The Author 2006. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

This south portal is the glory of Moissac. Georges Duby has described the monastic sensibility of those who commissioned it.[3] Confined within close limits by their senses and the pitiable means available to them, in their spiritual lives they aspired to transcend those limits through the experience of perfect fraternity, through the liturgy, through music, and through works of art. In the ceremonial and sumptuous display of the Cluniac liturgy men sought to imitate the glory of the seraphim. In exegesis of the Scriptures and of the created world they sought to grasp the ungraspable, to move ahead *per visibilia ad invisibilia*. Their yearning for God was a yearning for mystery. The goal of all monastic meditation and all monastic art was to rend the veil and contemplate what lay beyond the open sky. As Rupert of Deutz expressed it, they sought to become prophets, heralds of God.

Just as one acquired greater understanding of the Scriptures by bringing out the correspondences between the words, the verses, and the various passages of the Old Testament and the New, just so was it important to discover relationships, harmonies, a certain order amid the diversity of shapes and faces to be found in the visible universe. The historical salvation event was understood wholly within a comprehensive and cosmic context. As William of Conches and Gerhoh of Reichersberg were later to write, the world was, "an orderly collection of creatures." It was *quasi magnum citaram*, "like a great *cithara*." Art existed for one purpose: to make the harmonic structure of the world visible, to arrange a certain number of signs in exactly the right places. Art revealed the divine order of creation. It relied on certain texts containing the divine words, on the images which those words aroused, and on the numbers that marked off the cadences of the universe. A piece of sculpture constituted a gloss on the world, an explanation of it by virtue of its structures, the relative positions of the elements composing it, the numerical relations maintained between those elements, and the patterns they made visible. So, for example, the lintel of the south portal at Moissac is decorated with eight carved rosettes. The number eight was associated with the resurrection, the eighth day of creation, baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, and the eight Beatitudes, for since the Pythagoreans the number eight had symbolized eternity. The lintel marks the threshold of eternity as it marks the threshold of the church.

Art gave substance to the fruits of monastic contemplation of nature and the Scriptures, and transposed them into simple forms so as to make them perceivable by persons who had just begun their

[3] G. Duby, *The Age of the Cathedrals. Art and Society 980–142*, translated by E. Levieux and B. Thompson, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981), Chapter 4 "The Threshold."

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

initiation. The aesthetics that underlay monastic art were devised for the initiate, but the Romanesque sculptures placed at the thresholds of abbey churches on the pilgrimage roads also enabled the throngs of believers to contemplate the absolute. The door of the monks' church opened onto the mystery of God and prepared all the baptized for their Resurrection.

The Christ depicted on the tympanum of the south portal at Moissac is not derived from the Gospels. He comes straight from the Book of Revelation, from the heart of light. The ogival shape of the arch seems to confer on the entire portal a calm, ascending tendency, like that of a candle flame burning motionless. The play of shadows moves around the motionless center of the *Maiestas Domini*; it is from Christ in Glory that all brightness seems to flow. At the same time the attitudes of the four and twenty elders surrounding the Lord and turning their heads to gaze on him lead the eye from all sides to the motionless center, suggesting a kind of rhythmic movement. The Lord appears at the height of his glory, accompanied by the four Living Creatures and two seraphim, at the end of time, at the Second Coming; immense and majestic on the throne of his power, robed in imperial purple, such that a breath from eternity ripples the silk of his tunic. His powerful lips remain sealed; his impassive look probes the mysteries from beyond; his brow bears the diadem of Byzantine majesty and his cruciform nimbus overlays the shining of the stars. His right hand generously blesses while his left hand rests upon the book of life.[4] Heaven opens on the tympanum as on the Day of Judgment, offering a direct vision, face to face. The door becomes a passage from one world to another.

The relief represents the vision of Saint John the Divine written in the fourth chapter of his Apocalypse. *And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat upon that throne . . . and round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold . . . and round about the throne were four beasts . . . And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast was like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was a flying eagle . . . and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come*. The source for its iconography was long sought among manuscripts of the Commentaries of Beatus on the Apocalypse. But the various components are not found together either in manuscript illuminations or in the Scriptures themselves. The two seraphim represent the vision of Isaiah (6.2), and Christ,

[4] M. Vidal, *Moissac*, (La Pierre qui Vire, Zodiac, 1976), pp. 49–50.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

enthroned and surrounded by the Living Creatures and the Elders, represents the Second Coming (Revelation 4.4; 7–8). The Living Creatures however are not depicted according to the description of the four beasts of the Apocalypse, but with books as symbols of the Four Evangelists. Taken together, the components of the image of Christ, the throne, auriole of glory, and the four Evangelists, comprise an image of Christ in Majesty, a theme of triumph. The seraphim signify that this appearance of Christ in Majesty is a vision. The symbols of the Evangelists should be interpreted as symbolic representations of the Gospels; the Elders, of the Old Testament; and the whole as a vision of Christ in the midst of the Scriptures. The apparition of the Son is then conceived as a revelation of the Holy Mysteries and of the hidden realities of which Scripture is only an allegorical transposition.[5]

Below the tympanum the *trumeau*, the central doorpost, offers a gloss upon the world in all its wild vitality. The outer face of the *trumeau* is made up of six rampant crisscrossing lions and lionesses and the *trumeau* and the lintel together make a letter, the letter T, in Greek *tau*. The animals are conspicuously male and female, conspicuously sexual and sensual. They strain apart though knotted together by their tails. Their dynamic has organic force. Rather than the *trumeau*'s verticality being compromised by these bent forms the chiasmic crossings seem to express energetic support, like breathing or the flexing of a muscle. The six animals strain upwards towards the tympanum evoking the six days of Creation and the vision of Saint Paul; *For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God . . . Because the creature itself shall also be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now* (Romans 8.19–22).[6] The promise of salvation contained in the sacrifice of the cross extends to the entire cosmos, and the *tau* sign of Ezechiel 9.4–6 made by the *trumeau* and lintel is a figure of the cross.[7] The cross is the tree of life, a symbol of Paradise found again, and this symbol is associated with monstrous beasts in the Persian or Arab textiles that were sources for the *trumeau*'s iconography. Within the *trumeau* are carved elongated figures like caryatids bearing the *Maiestas Domini* above. They are Paul and the prophet Jeremiah, witnesses to the New

[5] M.F. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture. The Revival of Monumental Stone Sculpture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, (Oxford, Phaidon, 1981), p. 174, summarizing the earlier studies of L. Grodecki and Y. Christe.

[6] P. Skubiszewski, "Le trumeau et le linteau de Moissac: un cas du symbolisme medieval", *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 40 (1992), pp. 51–90.

[7] P. Verdier, "A Mosan plaque with Ezechiel's vision of the sign Thau (Tau)", *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 29/30 (1966/1967), pp. 17–47.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Covenant, which surpasses the first covenant in making available a new order of salvation through the cross.[8]

These figures evoke plastic art of India. For it is as if they are animated by the rhythm of a sacred dance.[9] Paul and the prophet Jeremiah on the *trumeau* move to the rhythm of the dance.[10] The exaggerated twist of the body and a tilt of the head of this "dancing prophet" give his long flowing figure an extraordinary grace. Just north of Moissac there is another "dancing prophet", Isaiah at the abbey church of Saint Marie at Souillac created by the same school of sculpture responsible for the portal at Moissac.[11] His legs are crossed and his head is swung to the left in the ecstatic movement seen in his flowing drapery. He is placed beside a strange and compelling *trumeau* whose iconography may depend on lost oral traditions, but which seems to depict sin, its consequences, and redemption. The imagery of the first panel suggests the sins of pride, oppression and concupiscence; the second the consequences of sin – revolt, disorder and "ontological violence". It depicts a dense, chaotic mass of writhing devouring animals with a struggling human figure. The last side depicts the sacrifice of Abraham, which prefigures that of Calvary and the resolution of discord in divine harmony, which the jubilant prophet of the Incarnation already hears. Its iconography suggests that the *trumeau* once stood beneath a lost or never completed tympanum depicting the Last Judgment or the Vision of the Apocalypse as at Moissac.[12]

These "dancing" figures have been dismissed as a consequence of the geometrical rules of their makers, which demanded that a picture must fill its frame.[13] Bodies and arms and legs are all flexed so as to touch the surrounding frame at many points, hence the appearance of a dancer. But all the great portals suggest a rejection of this law of the frame.[14] Another explanation relates their posture to the theology of the abbots of Cluny, who were the patrons of Moissac and its school of sculpture.[15] Their conception of how a vision of God should be carved in stone was informed by a theology of theophany and its

[8] Skubiszewski, *op. cit.*, p. 63, citing Jeremiah 31. 31–34 and Hebrews 8. 6–13.

[9] T. Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods*, (Louisville, Fons Vitae, 2002) p. 92.

[10] H. Focillon, *The Art of the West in the Middle Ages*, translated by D. King, edited and introduced by Jean Bony. Volume I. Romanesque Art, (Oxford, Phaidon, 1963).

[11] M. Schapiro, "The Sculptures of Souillac", *op. cit.*, pp. 102–130. The pose of the central figure in the Fauve artist Andre Derain's *Dance* is based on that of the prophet Isaiah at Souillac. Images of Souillac may be viewed at http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/arch/souillac.html

[12] J. Thiron, "Observations sur les fragments sculptes du portail de Souillac", *Gesta* Vol. XV/1 and 2, (1977), pp. 161–172.

[13] Focillon, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

[14] Hearn, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

[15] *Idem*, pp. 187–190.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

aesthetics drawn from *The Celestial Hierarchy* of Denys the Areopagite; the author who, for Thomas Aquinas, seemed to offer a complete explanation of those things that exist beyond man.[16] It was widely believed that Paul himself, after his soul had been *caught up to the third heaven* and granted *visions and revelations of the Lord* must have confided to his Athenian convert all that he had glimpsed on high in ecstasy. A copy of Eriugena's Latin translation and commentary was given to the library of Cluny in the tenth century by Abbot Mayeul, who is recorded as having spent many nights passionately reading it.

The Celestial Hierarchy may thus be a source that influences the iconography of the portal. It speaks directly of dancing and prophecy in a way that evokes these figures, who seem to be not merely in distorted poses but to move as if animated by the rhythm of a sacred dance. In an ancient tradition the Areopagite contemplated the dance in the light of the cosmos and the cosmos in the light of the dance.[17] As Sir Thomas Elyot put it in *The Governour*, "The interpretours of Plato do think that the wonderful and incomprehensible order of the celestial bodies, I mean sterres and planettes, and their motions harmonicall, gave to them that intensifly and by the deep serche of raison beholde their courses, in the sondrye diversities of number and tyme, a forme of imitation of a semblable motion, which they call daunsinge or salutation." The ancient image of the planets and stars engaged in an ordered and measured dance is transposed by the Areopagite into the dance of a sacred hierarchy of angelic and human intellects inspired by the Beautiful and the Good, known in a prophetic glimpse into the order of Heaven, where an invisible chorus dances closest to God. In *The Celestial Hierarchy* 212A-212B he writes of the highest order of angels:

> In the circle of God and immediately around God is established, as far as I know, the first order of celestial beings. Simply and unceasingly their chorus dances around His eternal gnosis [perichoreuousa ten aionion autou gnosin] with an eternal motion and with a stability supreme among the angels. In a pure manner they see many blessed visions and are enlightened with simple and boundless illuminations.

[16] Thomas Aquinas, *In librum Beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio* I.i.1–3, edited by C. Pera, (Turin, Rome, Marietti, 1950), p. 6.

[17] J. Miller, *Measures of Wisdom. The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986), Chapter 9. On the cosmic dance as a motif in the Romanesque sculpture of the monastery of Silos in north central Spain see, J. Blaettler, '"Mourning Into Dancing": Spiritual Conversion At Silos', http://www.worship.calvin.edu/luce/2002/blaettler.htm He notes that Isidore of Seville was commissioned to provide a dance for the church of Toledo in the seventh century. Isidore asserts in his *Etymologies*, at 3.17.1 (Migne *PL* LXXXII), that without music there can be no perfect knowledge, for there is nothing without it. For even the universe itself is said to be formed under the guidance of harmony.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

For the Areopagite it is the circle of this dance expanding outward and downward from the First-Giver, which brings order to the world of the senses and moves the Old Testament prophets to translate the glory of God into sensory images:

> And thus the Holy Scriptures have transmitted to the inhabitants of earth certain hymns of this hierarchy in which is revealed in a holy manner the supreme illumination allotted to them. Some men, translating this illumination into sensible images, cry out in 'a voice of a great rushing, saying, "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place"' [Ezechiel 3.12]; other men lift up their voices in that most celebrated and revered utterance from the Scriptures: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory' [Isaiah 6.3].[18]

The hymns of the prophets come to them from spirits more powerful than the stars as an inducement to soar into the simple and unceasing dance of the spirit. The prophets of Moissac and Souillac seem to feel the rhythm of this dance, the music for the end of time played by the elders who carry stringed instruments on the tympanum. Their God is one before whom we can play music and dance.[19]

Cluniac monks believed that in their *laus perennis* they participated in the cosmic music of this dance. The choir was conceived as what the anonymous author of the life of Hugh of Semur, Abbot of Cluny called a *deambulatorium Angelorum* that joined the music of heaven with that of earth in a concord that reverberated with the harmonic structure of a Platonic universe.[20] Ambrose, in his commentaries on the Psalms, had equated the singing of the Psalter with the harmony of the spheres.[21] He assigned to Christian music the task of embodying the Greek world harmony, in a performance of the music of the universe in which music, words, the echo of the stone, perhaps even gesture and dance all collaborate. In the great eleventh-century abbey

[18] Translated by Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 511. In his treatment of critical elaborations of "the choreia topos" of *Timaeus* 40a-d he compares this passage with the Philonic Hymn of Moses which brought the Jews into harmony with the chorus of the stars and the angels, the Apocryphal Hymn of Jesus which set the souls of the first Christian chorus in rhythm with Grace, the Porphyrian Hymn of Apollo which drew the soul of Plotinus into the chorus of Immortal Love, and the Procline Hymn to Helios which channeled the flood of harmony streaming from the intellectual realm into sense-bound human language.

[19] For Heidegger metaphysics constructs for itself an apprehension of the transcendence of God, but under the figure simply of efficiency, of the cause, and of the foundation. "Ontotheology" posits the dependence of all things on God as an impersonal, self-causing principle. "Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this God. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god." M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, translated by J. Stambaugh, (New York, Harper and Row, 1969), p. 72. Cf. J-L. Marion, *God without Being*, translated by T. Carlson, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991) p. 35 Marion observes that David, on the contrary, dances, naked, before the Ark. And, psalmist par excellence, sings; p. 206, n.17.

[20] C. Scillia, "Meaning and the Cluny Capitals: Music as Metaphor", *Gesta* XXVII/1 and 2 (1988), pp. 133–148.

[21] Ambrose, *Enarrationes in Ps.* I.2 (Migne *PL* XIV, 926).

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

church of Abbot Hugh there were columns with historiated capitals in the ambulatory, of which eight still exist. Two seem to offer the key to the symbolic ensemble. They represent the eight tones of Gregorian music. A man or woman carrying a musical instrument personifies each tone. These eight tones, twice the number four – the number of the elements, cardinal points, seasons, cardinal virtues, and subjects of the quadrivium – express the harmonies of the earth and of persons; but since they also give the number of the planets, they express the harmony of the universe. Emile Mâle contended that if we had a complete series of the Cluny capitals, we would also have an explanation of the cosmos through music. "It was not by chance that the serious-minded Cluniac monks had this philosophy of the world carved around the sanctuary; the virile harmony of their plain-song filling the immense church seemed to them the final explanation of all things."[22]

From Spectators to Dancers

Even if we share the faith taught by the Bible of Moissac we live in another world. For Andrew Louth it is our individualism that alienates us from the cosmology of Denys and that makes us spectators rather than dancers in the world of *The Celestial Hierarchy*. Our notions of a "social contract" mean that we regard hierarchy as something imposed on us, and something distinct from us, while for Denys the hierarchy consists of us. The theophany of the cosmos, and the hierarchies that transmit the divine light, are not over against us like a cosmic and ecclesial dance, a spectacle for the appraisal of the individual: we are part of it. We are all meant to join the dance.[23]

But a greater difficulty is that, in the phrase of Peter Casarella, we now "wait for the cosmic Christ in an uncreated world."[24] *For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now*; we can still see the longing for the cosmic Christ carved on the *trumeau* at Moissac. But now it seems we no longer live in a cosmos or even a creation. The premises of Denys' account of the world are becoming unintelligible. The world, and above all what was most cosmic in the world – the sky – provided persons in antiquity and the middle ages with brilliant evidence that good is not only a possibility but a triumphant reality. Cosmology had an ethical dimension. In turn the task of transmitting such good into the here below where we live, enriched ethics with a cosmological dimension. It is through the mediation of the world that a person becomes what

[22] Mâle, *op. cit.*, pp. 321–322.
[23] A. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), Chapter 8.
[24] P. Casarella, "Waiting for a Cosmic Christ in an Uncreated World", *Communio* XVIII/2 (Summer 2001), pp. 230–264.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

he or she must be, and consequently what they are. Human action is related to the structure of the cosmos, it moves to a celestial rhythm. Dance in the oldest Church was a means of proclaiming, by imitation, the harmony of the world.[25] The "dancing prophet" is emblematic. Wisdom is *la sagesse du monde*.[26] Creation texts define the ethos of the cosmos.[27]

As Oliver O'Donovan contends, the order of things that God has made is *there*. It is objective, and persons have a place within it. Christian ethics, therefore, has an objective reference because it is concerned with life in accordance with this order. In this assertion Christian ethics are in agreement with the classical ethics of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, who understand that the way the universe *is*, determines how persons *ought* to behave in it. Morality is our participation in a created order, an order that is vindicated in the resurrection of Christ.[28]

Ruskin, the "Victorian Solomon", still sought a wisdom that related nature, art and architecture to society and economics. He sought to apply the same laws to ordinary human life as applied to sapphires and snowflakes.[29] But the event of modernity has transformed perception of the relation between the cosmos, its transcendent source, and its human interpreter.[30] For modern persons there is no longer any connection between cosmology and ethics, no longer any relationship between what we know of the structure of the universe and the way we think about ourselves and feel what we are and ought to be. The progress of astrophysics or the earth sciences enable an increasingly exact cosmography; they allow more and more likely conjectures concerning cosmogony. But it becomes increasingly obvious that we no longer have a cosmology.

[25] L. Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung"*, (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1963), p. 28, citing Paulinus of Nola, *Ferte Deo, pueri, laudem; pia solvite vota/et pariter castis date festa choreis*.

[26] R. Brague, *The Wisdom of the World. The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, translated by T. Fagan, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[27] W. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos. The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999). Brown treats the creation texts of Scripture as the expression of a moral imagination that is directed to shaping Israel's character.

[28] O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and moral order*, (Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1986). O'Donovan's ethics oppose those of historicism.

[29] "Government and co-operation are in all things and eternally the laws of life. Anarchy and competition eternally and in all things, the laws of death." Kenneth Clark notes how this phrase first appears in the last volume of *Modern Painters* and then reappears in *Unto This Last*, Essay III. 54. K. Clark, *Ruskin Today*, (London, Penguin, 1991), p. 264. See also M. Wheeler, *Ruskin's God*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[30] L. Dupré, *Passage to Modernity. An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993).

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Atheism and an acosmic perception of the world are mutually reinforcing. Nietzsche's madman offered an acute diagnosis of the eclipse of the ancient cosmos. Not once in his proclamation of the death of God does he decry the absence of personal belief in a Creator God. Rather, he recognizes that believers prepare for nihilism in their confident blindness to the disappearance of the divine from the cosmos. The earth has been unchained from its sun and we stray through infinite nothing. It grows colder. With the death of God comes in turn the loss of the idea of nature as a reality imbued with ultimate meaning. For Heidegger the pronouncement 'God is dead' means that the suprasensory world is without effective power. It bestows no life.[31]

As Casarella observes, there is no science or privileged knowledge that would bring our waiting for the cosmic Christ to an end. Standing with Nietzsche's madman at the end of modernity's confident blindness and before the beginning of any new synthesis it is more a question of reformulating spiritual exercises for the mind and the heart. Seeking a future wholeness we can attend to the fragments of meaning we possess which may belong to a future synthesis. In relation to the "dancing prophets" of Moissac and Souillac one such spiritual exercise might be to discover if it is still possible to deny nihilism with the evidence of our ears so that we may re-perceive a cosmos and how our action may move to a celestial rhythm. This is the promise of treatments of the ancient theme of the moral and cosmic significance of music in the work of Rowan Williams and Catherine Pickstock.

The moral life may be conceived of as the choice to give sense to passing time.[32] This choice discovers significance and direction in passing time. For Thomas Aquinas moral action is directed and focused on a single end: the vision of God and participation in his life. It is this end that gives action meaning and sense, in such a way that action may become anticipation and preparation for beatitude. Nihilism is the denial that there is any such dynamism to the life of persons. We do not live in a cosmos; we live after "the untuning of the sky."[33] Reality is unintelligible, without meaning in and for itself. For Thomas it is *acedia* that frustrates our orientation to our end, but nihilism denies the very possibility of such an end. This melancholia

[31] M. Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead", *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*, translated by W. Lovitt, (New York, Harper and Row, 1977), p. 61.

[32] X. Thévenot, *Avance en eau profonde! Carnet spirituel*, (Paris, Cerf, 1997), p. 45, cited in J-C Nault, "Acedia: Enemy of Spiritual Joy", *Communio* XXXI, 2, (Summer 2004), p. 248.

[33] J. Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500–1700*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961). Spitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 138, equates secularization with "demusicalization".

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

finally removes its mask and reveals its true identity as nihilism; the loss of the taste for being as it offers itself under the fragile "species" of "sensed" – that is, directed and meaningful, temporality.[34] The past is dead and the future moves towards death. The present is an impersonal flux. The sense of time is lost in boredom and satiety. In contemporary and especially urban life we are "pressured by time." Our lives are strictly timed in a form characterized by the conjunction of industrialization with the development of calendars and clocks.[35] Transport and communication have increased their speed and animate an "accelerated culture." But speed is different from movement. Movement goes somewhere, speed nowhere.[36]

In this context Rowan Williams observes that the inescapable fact about music is that it takes time.[37] It takes time to receive what is only given as we are caught up in a series of relations and transformations and are changed and enlarged. Music may be the most contemplative of the arts not because it takes us into the timelessness of mathematical relations but because it obliges us to rethink time: it is no longer time for action, achievement, dominion and power, not even time for acquiring ideas. It is simply time for feeding upon reality; quite precisely like the patient openness to God of the contemplative. All music is a kind of narrative: it does what it does by extending itself over a period, transforming positions or relations, indicating possibilities that may or may not be realized, then doing this rather than that, choosing, closing, but then setting up new possibilities of change. This art may be celebrated because this is how we learn the wisdom of creatures. Our wisdom is not God's; or rather it reflects God's in a wholly different mode. The joy and harmony that is God's eternally we can know only as growing and changing souls; by being patient with uncertainty, the need to choose, patient with the slow labor of change. When we forget this and make a bid for the timeless wisdom of God, we become desperately impatient with the work of choice, the cost of living in a world where things and persons resist our will. We have no time to waste in attention to realities we don't choose and control. Thus a musical event is – whether we know it or not – a moral event, a recovery of the morality of time. "What we learn, in music as in the contemplative faith of which music is a part and also a symbol is what it is to work with the grain of things, to work in the stream of God's wisdom." In music we can rediscover the flux of time as a dynamic

[34] M. Lena, "Eloge du temps ordinaire", *Christus* 157 (1993), pp. 18–28.

[35] J. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 71–75.

[36] J. Baudrillard, cited in S. Redhead, *Paul Virilio. Theorist for an Accelerated Culture*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 49.

[37] R. Williams, "Keeping Time. For the Three Choirs Festival", *Open To Judgment. Sermons and Addresses*, (London, DLT, 1994), pp 247–250.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

order in which we can participate by moral action. Williams' chastened re-conception of a cosmic music allows us to begin to re-imagine participation in a divine harmony.

Catherine Pickstock commends Augustine's *De Musica* as a source for re-imagining this participation.[38] The vision of a cosmos informed by *Logos* understands flow as only expressive of, and constituted by, measure. Thus music was once conceived of as a structured flow, which denies priority to either spatial harmony or temporal melody. Polyphony is the eventual expression of this balance, but it also required the role of a structuring silence to become possible as a mode of musical practice. Pickstock argues that Augustine anticipated this role. He sees the alternation of sound and silence in music as a manifestation of the coming into being and non-being, which must characterize a universe created out of nothing. He relays and develops the Pythagorean vision of a cosmic music by understanding the interplay between harmony and melody, space and time, as possible only within the scope of creation out of nothing. No immanent spatial fixity guarantees order, and yet we are not left with disorder. Her account is in concordance with John Milbank's attempt to present peace as coterminous with Being using a "musical" ontology inspired by Augustine. Ontological priority is given to harmony and peace by conceiving of creation *ex nihilo* as a consistently beautiful, continuously differential and open series in which the Church is a *concentus musicus*.[39] In *De Musica* Augustine relates that some are

[38] C. Pickstock, "Soul, city and cosmos after Augustine", *Radical Orthodoxy*, Edited by J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward, (London, Routledge, 1999), pp 243–247. For Begbie, *op. cit.*, p. 85, n. 61, her confidence in Augustine and in medieval polyphony seems excessive and the text more ambivalent and ambiguous about the mutable multiplicity of the temporal world. Spitzer contrasts Augustine with Ambrose as two ways open to Christianity: the one inherited from Plato, turning away from the *saeculum*, aspiring towards monotheistic monody; the other transforming pantheistic fullness into Catholic polyphony. His work suggests that Pickstock's argument might be strengthened by reference to Ambrose as well as to Augustine. Spitzer, *op. cit*.pp. 28–33. See also, J. James, *The Music of the Spheres. Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe*, (London, Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

[39] J. Milbank, "'Postmodern Critical Augustinianism': A Short *Summa* in Forty Two responses to Unasked Questions", *Modern Theology*, 7, No. 3 (April 1991), p. 228; *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990), pp. 422–434, "Counter-Ontology". In his response to Milbank Williams protests that our salvation cannot simply be a pure return to a primordial harmonics, to a peace of the Church that is not historically aware of how it is constructed in events that involve conflict and exclusion. Milbank offers little account of how the peace he speaks of is "learned, negotiated, 'achieved', inched forward, discerned and risked" rather than already achieved. However Williams' questions are not designed to challenge the project but ask for clarification of how much place is given for the patience that contingency enjoins. R. Williams, "Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision", *New Blackfriars* 73. 861, (June 1992), pp. 319–326. See also W. Hankey, "Re-Christianizing Augustine Post-Modern Style", http://www.animus.mun.ca//animus/1997vol2/hankey1.htm

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

misguided into thinking that they could best reflect eternity by freezing the flow of time, by having an artefact whose stasis seems to reflect eternity the better. But Augustine demurs; time and space must be fused to reflect eternity, because the flow of time, the perpetual supplementation of moments in time evokes the unencompassibility of the eternal. The cosmos is more like a *carmen*, a song or poem, than it is like a single note. The spatial articulations stabilize the perpetual supplementation in time. Thus, music, although initiated by the flow, is not primarily a matter of flow over against articulations. On the contrary, it is only constituted as flow by the series of articulations mediated by a silence, which allows them also to sound together. On the basis of this conception that Augustine can assert that the salvation of every creature consists in being in its own proper place as well as its time.[40] Both aspects are equally necessary if the cosmos is to be a poem or song. This is a musical model of redemption. Our uniquely right position is harmonious with the cosmos as a whole. Redemption is at once ethical and aesthetic.

Thus, for Pickstock's Augustine, loving one's neighbour is part of "keeping musical order."[41] His *ordo amoris* transposes the Pythagorean identification of cosmic order with music into the key of love.[42] *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.* Only through charity can a person reach true music. Such a change of emphasis seems natural: for Christian dogma all beauty and order belong eminently to the order of the Trinitarian relations, and so have no basis profounder than love. This is where David Hart finds the chief appeal of this tradition: the image of cosmic music is an especially happy way of describing the analogy of creation to Trinitarian life. Creation is not, that is, a music that explicates some prior and undifferentiated content within the divine, nor the composite order that is, of necessity, imposed upon some intractable substrate so as to bring it into imperfect conformity with an ideal harmony; it is simply another expression or inflection of the music that eternally belongs to God, to the dance and difference, address and response of the Trinity.[43] This music is perhaps *der*

[40] *De musica* VI xvii 56; Every created thing which strives for ultimate unity atque ordinem proprium vel locis vel temporibus, vel in corpore quodam liberamento salutem suam teneat.

[41] *De musica* VI xiv 46, (Migne PL XXXII).

[42] L. Spitzer, op. cit., pp. 19–20; *De ciuitate Dei* XV. 22 (Migne PL XLI). Augustine defines virtue as rightly ordered love in accordance with the song of the City of God in the Song of Songs, *ordinate in me caritatem.*

[43] D. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite. The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003), p276.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Seelenheimatlaut, the music of our nostalgia yearning homeward and heavenward.[44]

We can dare to imagine a liturgical society animated by such a cosmic music, like the city of the Magnesians described in *The Laws* of Plato. Here doxology as a mode of life constitutes the supreme ethic. Every single day of the year there is a liturgical festival. The divine gift of the liturgical cycle with all the concomitant sustenance, which the deities bring to these festivals, is what distinguishes persons from the wild animals that receive no such gifts of order, rhythm and harmony. *Choreia* is *paideia*:

> . . . the gods, pitying the toils which our race is born to undergo, have appointed holy festivals, wherein men alternate rest with labour; and have given them the Muses and Apollo, the leader of the Muses, and Dionysius, to be companions in their revels, that they may improve their education by taking part in the festivals of the gods, and with their help . . . (W)hereas the animals have no perception of order or disorder in their movements, that is, of rhythm or harmony, as they are called to us, the gods . . . have given the pleasurable sense of harmony and rhythm; and so they stir us into life, and we follow them, joining hands together in dances and songs; and these they call choruses, which is a term naturally expressive of cheerfulness. Shall we begin then with the acknowledgment that education is first given through Apollo and the Muses?[45]

The whole populace of the city is bound together by communal acts of celebration and self-offering. All the citizens have a harmony, a harmonious task in the greater whole. A citizen of such a city does not regard himself as autonomous or self-enclosed but constituted by belonging to this greater liturgical community. For Plato the city reflected the order of the cosmos, the whole that perpetually revolved around an axis. This revolving was itself a kind of worship, the music of the spheres, and a kind of cosmological liturgy. And it was thought that the liturgy that Plato saw in the city was one that read its patterns in the cosmos. Accounts of medieval Christendom suggest a real and supremely liturgical society not so very unlike the Magnesian city of *The Laws*. In unexpected places a liturgical structure articulated the protocols of the everyday. Even the economic realm was partially ordered by a kind of grammar of Eucharistic offering. It was often organized into guilds and companies, which were dedicated to particular saints and would have a liturgical calendar ordered by different festivals. The profits of these companies were shared with the community in public works and charity. Even economic surplus was offered up in a kind of liturgy. The judicial realm, the family, and all the different orders of the community were

[44] L. Spitzer, op. cit., p. 4.

[45] Plato, *Laws*, translated by B. Jowett, (Amhurst, Prometheus Books, 2000), 653d-654a. See also 672e.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

subordinate to liturgical offering. Plato's vision of a sacred polis can be seen refracted in the subordination of this society to the Eucharist, which lay at the heart of the community and its liturgical calendars.[46]

But if it is still possible to sense how our action may move to a celestial rhythm why do we so seldom experience the world as music? Perhaps the reason is our fallen condition. Only the cross allows us access to an eternal, cosmic music.[47] By enduring its travail we learn that every apparent discord can in the course of musical time be resolved into harmony. The Spirit has the power to restore each line's scope of harmonic openness to every other line. Dissonance may be placed in suspense in openness to musical grace. At every turn of a phrase, new, unexpected harmony may still arrive, and this can sustain our hope. In a discussion of the death of children in a letter to Jerome, Augustine contends that the births and deaths of living creatures keep time in a predetermined harmony. He cites a phrase from Isaiah's vision of the creation of the stars *Qui profert numerose saeculum. He bringeth forth in measured harmonies the course of time*.[48] Music is given to those destined to die by the mercy of God to remind them of this great truth.[49] All the vicissitudes of this world can ultimately be known to belong to an astonishing song. Augustine himself had lost his son Adeodatus. A letter of Mahler relates how at a rehearsal one of the trumpets asked the conductor Bodanzky in despair: "I'd just like to know what's beautiful about blowing away at a trumpet stopped in a high C!" This gave Mahler an insight at once into the condition of persons who likewise cannot understand why they must endure being stopped to the piercing agony of their own existence, cannot see what it is for, and how their screech is to be attuned to the great harmony of the universal symphony of all creation. Bodanzky answered the unhappy man very logically: "Wait a bit! You can't expect to understand it yet . . . When all the rest come in, you'll soon see what you're there for!"[50] Medieval woodcuts depict Job comforted by musicians.[51] As Augustine saw,

[46] C. Pickstock, radio interview, "J.S. Bach and Joy", http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s226359.htm; *After Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1998). Her account of medieval society depends upon J. Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700*, (Oxford, Opus, 1985).

[47] C. Pickstock, "A Sermon for St. Cecilia", *Theology*, Vol. C No. 798 (November/December 1997), pp. 411–418.

[48] Isaiah 40.26 in the translation of Philip Schaff.

[49] Augustine *Epistolae* 166.5.13 (Migne *PL* XXXIII), *Unde musica, id est scientia sensuave bene modulandi, ad admonitem magnae rei, etiam mortalibus rationales habentibus animas Dei largitate concessa est*. This text is cited in H. Marrou's treatment of musical time in *Théologie de l'histoire*, (Paris, Editions de Seuil, 1968), Chapter 19.

[50] Letter of Mahler, cited Spitzer, *op. cit*., p. 108. His favorite symphony was his second, "Resurrection."

[51] These images of the medieval patron saint of music inspired James MacMillan's 2003 piece for violin and ensemble or chamber orchestra *A Deep but Dazzling Darkness*.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

one cannot imagine, and there could not be, any entirely discrete past event unaffected by what came later; for every note of music situated and defined by its place in a sequence, that which remains to be heard will change the nature of what has already been heard.[52] And this is the promise of the music for the end of time that the "dancing prophets" of Moissac and Souillac rejoice to hear.

The Revd Dr James Lawson
Corpus Christi College
Cambridge CB2 1RH
Email: Jbl24@cam.ac.uk

[52] Pickstock, *op. cit.* 1999, p. 265.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00154.x Published online by Cambridge University Press