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BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOWS:  
REFLECTING ON VARIED CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES  
ON THE PECULIAR LAMBENCY SUFFUSING GOTHIC CHURCHES  
AS EVIDENCED BY GERMAN LITERATURE  
FROM THE LATTER DECADES OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY  
AND THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY\*

What seems to emanate from the dominant tenor permeating the scholarship dedicated to exploring the early nineteenth century resurgence of stained-glass ornamentation is the significant function ascribed to the variegated 'mystical' twilight, which is thought to have played a pivotal role in the expansion of the renewed interest in this form of art.<sup>1</sup> However, within the compass of this artistic genre, no efforts have hitherto been taken to attempt comprehensive research into the reasons behind

the fascination at the time with that kind of ambient interior illumination, nor has there been any serious discussion of the conceptual associations triggered by that kind of twilight.

Therefore it behooves any thorough art-historical investigation to comprehensively address the full spectrum of aspects underpinning this phenomenon, chief among them being aesthetic, religious and social matters as well as issues bound up with specific cultural idiosyncrasies and regional character. This article undertakes to outline, albeit in a preliminary and incomplete way, a handful of conclusions regarding the diversified perception of the ambient light inside Gothic churches. In addition, the remit of this paper is confined to the years at the turn of the nineteenth century, as well as being focused exclusively on publications in the German language; little wonder that with these self-imposed limitations, the contribution made by the ideas presented below can be but humble.

Seen through the eyes of Suger, Abbot of the French Abbey of Saint-Denis and the spiritus movens behind the early Gothic reconstruction of that church, as well as for some medieval authors singing the praises of the magnificence of churches of the medieval era, such interiors were literally awash with ambient resplendence.<sup>2</sup> Of course, one will justifiably call into question the absolute veracity or relevance of such depictions. This is because even though

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\* A few passages from this article appeared in: T. SZYBISTY, 'Rola światła w percepcji gotyku pod koniec XVIII i na początku XIX wieku – na przykładzie wybranych utworów z literatury niemieckiej', in *Światło i ciemność w literaturze, kulturze i sztuce. Od antyku do współczesności*, ed. by D. Szymonik, E. Kozak, A. Pogoda-Kołodziejak, Siedlce, 2015, pp. 15–23.

<sup>1</sup> D. PARELLO, 'Anspruch und Wirklichkeit in der religiösen Kunstindustrie am Beispiel der rheinischen Glasmalereiwerkstätten Baudri und Oidtmann', in *Renaissance der Gotik. Widerstand gegen die Staatsgewalt? Kolloquium zur Kunst der Neugotik*, ed. by U. Schubert, S. Mann, Goch, 2003, p. 172. See, for example, also: D. HESS, 'Romantic Atmosphere and the Invocation of the Past. Motifs and Functions of Early Stained Glass Collections around 1800', *Revista de História da Arte*, 3: *Collecting through Connections. Glass and Stained-glass Collectors and Their Networks in the Nineteenth Century*, 2015, pp. 9–10; E. VAASSEN, *Bilder auf Glas. Glasgemälde zwischen 1780 und 1870*, Munich and Berlin, 1997, p. 28; D. PARELLO, 'Helmle – Merzweiler – Geiges. Die Glasmalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts in Freiburg', in *Aufleuchten des Mittelalters. Glasmalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts in Freiburg*, exh. cat., Augustinermuseum Freiburg, 26. Mai bis 3. September 2000, Freiburg im Breisgau, 2000, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Numerous medieval texts on this subject are compiled and commented on by G. BINDING, *Die Bedeutung von Licht und Farbe für den mittelalterlichen Kirchenbau*, Stuttgart, 2003 (Sitzungsberichte der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft an der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, 41, no. 3), pp. 129–171.



on the one hand the accounts may have reflected the actual first-hand impressionistic observations of the writers, on the other hand, such witnesses could very well have been swayed by contemporaneous prevailing rhetorical tropes and turns of phrase employed for the sake of verbalizing culturally recognizable associations. The provenance of such conceptual or cognitive mannerisms may have been bound up, for example, with the description of the Divine Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, or it may even have lain in the metaphysics of light propounded by St Augustine or Dionysios Areopagitis,<sup>3</sup> with such hypotheses acquiring much plausibility given that a couple of centuries later the very same interiors inspired different characterizations, dominated rather by references to paucity of light.

Admittedly, that later perception of Gothic architecture may have been conditioned by developments in Renaissance and Baroque architecture, with a simultaneous trend towards ever-brighter standards for the illumination of interiors. In the era of the Enlightenment, the deliberate, increasingly 'dark' portrayal of the Middle Ages was underpinned by factors relating to symbology – light, by dint of emblemizing the new epoch and symbolizing rational understanding,<sup>4</sup> was in a sense 'commandeered' by the believers of the new rational creed, and henceforth had to be prevented from being attributable to a period deemed to have been dominated by ignorance, oppression and religious superstition. A case in point here is the comment passed in 1790 by Karl Ludwig von Knebel, a poet and friend of Goethe: he was genuinely looking forward to the expansion of the revolutionary upheaval in France, as in a letter to his sister he made disparaging reference to 'the Gothic shadows' (*gothische Finsternisse*), which to his mind symbolized the restriction of the freedoms possessed by the individual.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, as aptly noted by Elgin Vaassen, the philosophy of Enlightenment was not only bent on blowing away the cobwebs of spiritual darkness, but also addressed itself to the brightening up of actual interiors.<sup>6</sup> This rationalist campaign led to the removal or destruction of many a stained-glass window panel in churches, either due to their poor state of repair or because it was a popular belief that the stained glass was

responsible for the obfuscation of the interior and stultification of the faithful. The latter opinion can be found, for example, in a statement delivered in 1790 by Rev. Joseph Felician Geissinger from Freiburg im Breisgau.<sup>7</sup>

By the same token, however, the metaphoric investment of the Gothic style with darkness turned out to be an exceptionally efficacious strategy for the evocation of that frisson of emotion which underpinned the eighteenth century aesthetics of sublimity.<sup>8</sup> That fashion was transplanted from British literature, and the trend is exemplified by the local emulation of British 'graveyard poetry', where Gothic buildings or ruins were pressed into service with the express brief of affording that eerily atmospheric backdrop. A work that perfectly illustrates this lyrical backwagon in Germany is the elegy *Wo bin ich? – in Einsiedeleien* written by the young Herder, probably after his father died in 1763.<sup>9</sup>

The medieval architecture in Herder's elegy, enhancingly enveloped by sombre, dim shadows, is one of the numerous staple elements of the scenery which mediate the emergence of this uncanny sense of otherworldliness. What is more, in fact, it was the Gothic buildings themselves that singlehandedly succeeded in providing the *pièce de résistance* of any evocative setup. The consummate crystallization of such sufficiency comes courtesy of the genre of gothic novels which Norman Holland and Leona Sherman christened with a term that hits the nail on the head, and with a flourish, too: 'woman plus habitation',<sup>10</sup> with the designation being mandated by the authors' contention that medieval buildings featured in these literary works tend to lend themselves as a framework for the rise of turbulent emotions, commission of crimes and appearance of ghosts. Securely ensconced in this same lineage is Christian Heinrich Spieß's *Das Petermännchen*, a 1791 novel which was very popular with Goethe's contemporaries. The plot of the novel is set in the thirteenth century. The main character, Rudolph, the

<sup>3</sup> The perception of light in the Gothic era has been succinctly presented and richly referenced by E. KOZINA in "Lauteres Gold wie durchsichtiges Glas" (Offb 21,21). Einige Überlegungen zum Lichtbegriff in der Zeit der großen Kathedralen', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst und Denkmalpflege*, 65, 2011, no. 1/2, pp. 28–34.

<sup>4</sup> K.E. BECKER, *Licht – [L]umière[s] – Siècle des Lumières. Von der Lichtmetapher zum Epochenbegriff der Aufklärung in Frankreich*, Cologne, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Ludwig von Knebel's letter to his sister Henrietta, Jan. 11<sup>th</sup> 1790, in *Aus Karl Ludwig von Knebels Briefwechsel mit seiner Schwester Henriette, Erzieherin der Prinzessin Karoline von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach (1774–1813). Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Hof- und Literaturgeschichte*, ed. by H. Düntzer, Jena, 1858, p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> E. VAASSEN, *Bilder auf Glas*, p. 27 (as in note 1).

<sup>7</sup> Universitätsbibliothek Freiburg im Breisgau, ms. 498: Joseph Felician GEISSINGER, *Abschriften von Epitaphien oder Grabschriften, welche in Unser lieben Frauen Münster, der pfarrkirche zu Freiburg in dem Breysgau befindlich seynd...*, p. 74 (manuscript scan: <http://dl.ub.uni-freiburg.de/diglit/geissinger1787>, retrieved 21 January, 2019). I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Daniel Parello from Corpus Vitrearum Deutschland for bringing the passage to my attention.

<sup>8</sup> See among others: H. VON TROTHA, *Angenehme Empfindungen. Medien einer populären Wirkungsästhetik im 18. Jahrhundert vom Landschaftsgarten bis zum Schauerroman*, Munich, 1999, passim.

<sup>9</sup> J.G. HERDER, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by B. Suphan, vol. 29: *Eigene Gedichte*, ed. by K. Redlich, Berlin, 1889, p. 230; cf. P. FRANKL, *The Gothic. Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries*, Princeton, 1960, pp. 419–420; W. DOBBEK, *Johann Gottfried Herders Jugendzeit in Mohrungen und Königsberg 1744–1764*, Würzburg, 1961, pp. 62–64.

<sup>10</sup> N.N. HOLLAND, L.F. SHERMAN, 'Gothic Possibilities', *New Literary History*, 8, 1977, no. 2, p. 279.

last surviving scion of the Westerburger house, falls in love with Regina, the daughter of a knight named Otte- weil, who will by no means assent to the lovers' marriage. Rudolph decides to abduct his beloved and together they journey to Westerburg Castle, where the priest who is to solemnize their union has suddenly been laid low with an infirmity depriving him of any speech faculty. The lovers have to wait until a monk summoned from the near- by cloister can perform the nuptial rites, albeit not until the following day. They treat themselves to a sumptuous feast, whereupon Rudolph wants to usher his companion to an improvised chamber. During the passage, Regina's attention is arrested by the spellbinding moon, peering in through the lancet windows.<sup>11</sup> She registers a sudden desire to step outside the castle to appreciate the beauty of the scene, so the pair makes for a summerhouse in the nearby forest. The dim, shaded ambience of their shelter releases both of them from the shackles of propriety. Half an hour later the distraught and horrified girl rushes out of the forest. Tormented by a sense of guilt, she commits suicide before the night has passed. Here, the elements of Gothic architecture, silhouetted only by virtue of the glinting reflections of the moonlight, forebode the viola- tion of the norms of morality, which triggers the tragic twist of the plot and leads to the death of Rudolph's beloved.

The arranged marriage, brokered by eighteenth centu- ry 'matchmaking' writers, between all things Gothic and shade or darkness has exhibited enormous longevity to date, and is still highly regarded as part of the staple in- ventory of key tropes and motifs employed by the liter- ary genre of horror. In the latter decades of the eighteenth century darkness or subdued light was deemed an almost requisite circumstance for the full appreciation of Gothic architecture. The encapsulation of this sentiment can be discerned in one of Goethe's juvenile works, entitled *Von deutscher Baukunst* (1772), where the elucidation of the principles underlying the architectural concepts intrin- sic to the design of Strasburg cathedral takes place by the subdued light of evening, rather than by daylight. This is the necessary facilitation empowering the observer to 'to enjoy and to understand'<sup>12</sup> the quiddity of the building. And the twilight prevailing in the interior came to the no- tice of Heinse, who visited the cathedral in 1780, en route to Italy. He later phrased his impressions in a laconic way: 'the area in close proximity to the choir becomes [...] more sacrosanct [...] and darker, too.'<sup>13</sup> Even though Heinse does not transcend the confines circumscribing the eighteenth century aesthetic concepts and perceives the cathedral's interior as a sublime environ, it can be suggested that he

stole a march on tradition, as the association between shade and sanctity espoused by him had hitherto been lost on German scholarship and lore at large. Therefore, it seems plausible that Heinse's pronouncement spurred the development of Romanticism's perception of shad- ows. A similar feeling of lofty sublimity evoked by dark- ness can be spotted in Georg Forster's comments in the wake of his visit to Cologne cathedral in 1790.<sup>14</sup>

Subdued light is also a feature elevated to the status of key significance for the perception of the Gothic in Goethe's novel published in 1809 and entitled *Elective Af- finities*. It strikes readers as an occasionally ironic polemic with biological, philosophical and cultural conventional wisdom and discourse of the day.<sup>15</sup> The plot of the nov- el is set in the microcosm of a park, where Goethe cho- reographs the arrangement of stylistically and function- ally diverse free-standing architectural structures. One of them is 'an old-German' church with a cemetery situated nearby. Charlotte, one of the four main characters of the novel, decides to have the gravestones from the cemetery embedded in the walls of the building. Thus the Gothic church metamorphoses into a lapidarium of sorts almost substantively entwined with death, thereby foreshadow- ing the subsequent development of the plot. In the course of a detailed inspection of the condition of the church, the main characters chance upon a chapel, which is lat- er subjected to thorough refurbishment. The placement of the stained-glass window as the crowning glory of the renovation works is the moment when Otilie experiences a 'mystical' vision in this newly restored interior:

A solemn, beautiful light streamed in through the one tall window. It was filled with stained glass, grace- fully put together. The entire chapel had thus received a strange tone, and a peculiar genius was thrown over it. [...] The parts which she knew so well now meeting her as an unfamiliar whole delighted Otilie. She stood still, walked up and down, looked and looked again; at last she seated herself in one of the chairs, and it seemed, as she gazed up and down, as if she was, and yet was not – as if she felt and did not feel – as if all this would van- ish from before her, and she would vanish from herself; and it was only when the sun left the window, on which

<sup>11</sup> Ch.H. SPIES, *Das Petermännchen. Geistergeschichte aus dem drei- zehnten Jahrhundert*, part 1, Prague, 1791, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> J.W. GOETHE, 'Von deutscher Baukunst', in *Von deutscher Art und Kunst. Einige fliegende Blätter*, Hamburg, 1773, p. 129.

<sup>13</sup> W. HEINSE, *Die Aufzeichnungen. Frankfurter Nachlass*, ed. by M. Bernauer et al., vol. 1: *Aufzeichnungen 1768–1783*, Munich and Vienna, 2003, p. 450.

<sup>14</sup> G. FORSTER, *Ansichten vom Niederrhein, von Brabant, Flandern, Holland, England und Frankreich, im April, Mai und Junius 1790*, part 1, Berlin, 1791, pp. 70–75. For more on the sublimity experi- enced by Forster in Cologne cathedral see among others J. BISKY, *Poesie der Baukunst. Architekturästhetik von Wicklemann bis Boisserée*, Weimar, 2000, pp. 181–190.

<sup>15</sup> More on the significance of light in Goethe's novel: T. CRITZMANN, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften als Jahresmärchen. Ein Dialog zwi- schen Aufklärung und Romantik*, Cologne, 2006, pp. 239–258; T. SZYBISTY, "Durch das einzige bunte Fenster fiel ein ernstes bun- tes Lichte herein". Zu einem Motiv in Goethes Roman "Die Wahl- verwandtschaften", *Estudios Filológicos Alemanes. Revista de in- vestigación en Lingüística, Literatura y Cultura alemanas*, 26, 2013, pp. 93–103.

before it had been shining full, that she awoke to possession of herself, and hastened back to the castle.<sup>16</sup>

In the wake of that inspiring moment, one of the entries in Otilie's diary takes the following form: "The coloured window panes convert the day into a solemn twilight; and some one should set up for us an ever-burning lamp, that the night might not be utter darkness."<sup>17</sup> Thanks to the dimmed colourful light pervading the chapel, the eye can consummate a synthesis of the disparate elements of Gothic architecture, and this is the only perceptual environment capable of imparting unified 'integrity' to otherwise discrete components. (An account of the same revelation can be found in Goethe's juvenile text about Strasbourg cathedral.) The unique luminosity induces in the beneficiary of that mystical experience a sense of spiritual darkness, which, however, subsides when physical darkness sets in and the rays of the sun stop glittering through the panels of the stained glass. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that this darkness descending on the recipient of the experience portends and prefigures death, for one year after her vision Otilie succumbs to anorexic self-annihilation and dies. Her mortal remains are deposited in the chapel, which represents the fulfilment of the premonition at the beginning of the novel: the chapel turns into a sarcophagus edifice. Therefore, in Goethe's world, a Gothic interior constitutes a buffering halfway station between temporality and the eternity of afterlife, and the key element responsible for its simultaneous heterotopic nature is none other than subdued, coloured light.

If we cross-reference *Elective Affinities* and the other previously cited eighteenth century works, two important, symptomatic changes can be isolated. The first change highlighted the part played by the subdued illumination as being conducive to a supra-rational insight into reality, whereas the second concerned the quality of that light *per se*. The latter development seems to have been grounded in the fact that the sheer atmospheric of the Gothic penumbra had first trumped any chromatic aspects, which is borne out by ample evidence, deriving from Goethe's juvenile text, from Herder's and Spieß's fixation on the uncanny atmospheric and their marginalization of colour, and last but not least, from Heinse's and Forster's accounts.

Although the colourful light pervading the chapel described by Goethe could be interpreted in direct conjunction with his theory of colour, whose studious elaboration coincided with the writing of *Elective Affinities*,<sup>18</sup> the viv-

idly mystical component of Otilie's vision seems to suggest that the author included here an ironic allusion to the Romantic understanding of darkness and colours, which went a long way towards a new interpretation of Gothic architecture.

Indeed, by calling into question the presumption of the omnipotence of rational knowledge, symbolized by light, Romanticism jumpstarted profound paradigm shifts in the realm of symbology. Thus, shade, 'a different incarnation of light' signifying knowledge that is supra-rational, intuitive and revealed, was elevated to the status of being positively contrapuntal to light. Nothing could have better crystallized this new kind of mentality than Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht* (1800), where it was darkness that was portrayed as the source of gnostic illumination. Less than two decades had passed when Eberhard von Grote couched this sentiment even more explicitly, coining the notion of the 'tranquil nightliness'<sup>19</sup> of mystical, Gothic cathedrals. Yet, almost in the same breath, he acknowledged that it would be a real challenge for his contemporaries, brought up in and conditioned by the Enlightenment's fetish-like reverence for the light of reason, to accommodate their senses to such cathedrals' dark interiors and understand medieval architecture as such. The twilight premises of Gothic churches also commanded the interest of Hegel, who believed that they were a perfect externalization of the Christian spirit, seeking internal peace, and detachment from materiality, thereby facilitating sublimation of temporality.<sup>20</sup>

However, the romantic pivot to darkness, taking place at the turn of the nineteenth century, was not so much bent on subverting the metaphoric significance of light as championed by Enlightenment; instead, it strove to creatively 'juxtapose opposites in order to attain all the more profound understanding'.<sup>21</sup> To once again invoke the example of Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht*, the night, eponymously used in the title, is not construed as ultimate darkness and an affirmation of death, but as a conjunction of darkness and light, approximating a moment of liberation obliterating the 'dichotomy of night and day, being me and not-me at once'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> J.W. GOETHE, *Elective Affinities*, Boston, 1872, p. 170.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 172.

<sup>18</sup> T. CRITZMANN, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften als Jahresmärchen*, pp. 239–244 (as in note 15); see also C. BRODSKY, 'The Coloring of Relations: *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* as *Farbenlehre*', *Modern Language Notes*, 97, 1982, no. 5, pp. 1147–1179; M. FANCELLI, "'Die Farbenlehre" und "Die Wahlverwandtschaften"', in *Goethe und die Natur. Referate des Triestiner Kongresses*, ed. by H.A. Glaser, Frankfurt am Main, Bern and New York, 1986, pp. 177–186.

<sup>19</sup> E. VON GROTE, 'Vorwort. Bilder der Zeiten', in *Taschenbuch für Freunde altdeutscher Zeit und Kunst auf das Jahr 1816*, Cologne, 1816, p. XI.

<sup>20</sup> G.W.F. HEGEL, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, ed. by D.H.G. Hotho, vol. 2, Berlin, 1837, p. 335; cf. W. BAELUS, "'La cathédrale" of Joris-Karl Huysmans and the Symbolical Interpretation of the Gothic Cathedral in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century', *Artibus et Historiae*, 57, 2008, p. 168.

<sup>21</sup> A.K. HAAS, 'Światłości pełne światła. Niemiecka literatura i malarstwo przełomu osiemnastego i dziewiętnastego wieku wobec problemu (samo)poznania', *Ethos*, 30, 2017, no. 3 (119), p. 191.

<sup>22</sup> G. VON MOLNÁR, 'Novalis' "blaue Blume" im Blickfeld von Goethes Optik', in *Novalis. Beiträge zu Werk und Persönlichkeit Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. by G. Schulz, Darmstadt, 1986 (Wege der Forschung, 248), p. 443.



Géza von Molnár, who believes that it is generally in Novalis's character to perceive reality in terms of 'polarization and fundamental unity',<sup>23</sup> notes that the peculiar dialectic of day and night that is present in his writings is largely beholden to Goethe's theory of colours, an early version of which was published between 1791 and 1792 in the form of the treatise entitled *Beiträge zur Optik*; later, soon after the release of *Elective Affinities*, the content of the former work was incorporated in *Farbenlehre*, a compendious publication released in 1810 and comprising the results of his many years of research. In opposition to Newton, Goethe claimed that colours were a product of the interpenetration of light and darkness. That conception inevitably led to the designation of any chromatic manifestations (along with other phenomena, such as penumbra, indwelling the borderline between light and darkness) as a symbolic representation of the union between varied dimensions of being as well as knowledge.

In the chromatic system elaborated by Philipp Otto Runge, who was well versed in Goethe's beliefs, which can also be borne out by the fact of an encounter and exchange of letters between these two individuals,<sup>24</sup> colour was by no means reducible to a physical phenomenon only, as it also intermediated between the realms of matter and spirit. This conception, it was widely held after a 1909 publication by Siegfried Krebs,<sup>25</sup> in part was a legacy of Jakob Böhme's mystical writings, which evidently were read by Runge as early as 1802.<sup>26</sup> And it would be a serious understatement to claim that the reception of Böhme's output was limited only to Runge; instead, it would be fully justified to speak of the explosion of a fully-fledged romantic 'renaissance of Böhme'.<sup>27</sup>

For Runge, colours interspersed in the liminal area between light (good) and darkness (evil) represent a path to the Absolute. They have been given to man, as otherwise he would not be capable of comprehending pure,

supernatural light.<sup>28</sup> Similar assertions were made by Johann Wilhelm Ritter, the most illustrious representative of Romanticism's natural scientists; he maintained that colours were the product of the refraction of the rays emanated by the soul of the universe.<sup>29</sup> This short study must also make a mention of Ludwig Tieck, for whom colours encapsulated the language of 'the spirit of the world', and this spirit was both revealed and hidden by them.<sup>30</sup>

Studies investigating phenomena associated with light, gathering momentum at the turn of the nineteenth century and spawning the elaboration of mystical and religious interpretations of colour, were undoubtedly a significant backdrop for the perception of gothic interiors. As stained-glass window panels emanated colourful beams, the ambient light of the interiors prompted the reflection that such premises constituted anterooms ushering observers in to a spiritual reality, and both metaphysical and eternal, too.

Such ideas were perfectly in sync with the plan, albeit abortive, for a construction undertaking designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel in 1810. It would have been a mausoleum of Queen Louise of Prussia. Its blueprint displayed some affinities with the chapel envisioned a year before by Goethe in his *Elective Affinities*.<sup>31</sup> In the outline of the vision for the structure, the architect did not associate the Gothic with darkness but with subdued colourful light. He himself affirmed that his chief desire was to highlight the 'cheerful face of death' (*heitere Ansicht des Todes*), embraced as a passage to a more beautiful, eternal life.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it stands to reason that in his design the mausoleum was to be an invocation of the image of such a transition, where the shaded anteroom was to lead to an interior steeped in 'the bright red light of the morning'.

Likewise, in many literary works dating from the early decades of the nineteenth century, the colourful lighting and twilight prevailing in Gothic churches were perceived as an intermediary between the material and spiritual realms. In the first of his cycle of sonnets (released in 1824, two years after their author's religious ordination<sup>33</sup>) dedi-

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 426.

<sup>24</sup> H. MATILE, *Die Farbenlehre Philipp Otto Runges. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Künstlerfarbenlehre*, Munich and Mittenwald, 1979 (Kunstwissenschaftliche Studientexte, 5), pp. 139–141.

<sup>25</sup> S. KREBS, *Philipp Otto Runges Entwicklung unter dem Einflusse Ludwig Tiecks*, Heidelberg, 1909, passim; cf. K. MÖSENER, *Philipp Otto Runge und Jakob Böhme. Über Runges "Quelle und Dichter" und den "Kleinen Morgen". Mit einem Exkurs über ein Palmenemblem*, Marburg/Lahn 1981 (Marburger Ostforschungen, 38), passim.

<sup>26</sup> H. MATILE, *Die Farbenlehre Philipp Otto Runges*, p. 130 (as in note 24).

<sup>27</sup> J. SÁNCHEZ DE MURILLO, *Der Geist der deutschen Romantik. Der Übergang vom logischen zum dichterischen Denken und der Hervorgang der Tiefenphänomenologie*, Munich, 1986, p. 191. We should not overlook the fact that the Romantic understanding of light and colour was influenced by other mystics, for example Swedenborg and Oettinger; see among others L. MIODOŃSKI, *Całosc jako paradygmat rozumienia świata w myśli niemieckiej przełomu romantycznego*, Wrocław, 2001, pp. 210–234.

<sup>28</sup> See among others Philipp Otto Runge's letter to his brother Daniel, Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> 1802, in *Hinterlassene Schriften von Philipp Otto Runge*, Mahler, ed. by dessen ältestem Bruder, part 1, Hamburg, 1840, p. 17; cf. H. MATILE, *Die Farbenlehre Philipp Otto Runges*, p. 130 (as in note 24).

<sup>29</sup> J.W. RITTER, *Fragmente aus dem Nachlaße eines junges Physikers. Ein Taschenbuch für Freunde der Natur*, Heidelberg, 1810, p. 166.

<sup>30</sup> L. TIECK, *Phantasien über die Kunst, für Freunde der Kunst*, Hamburg, 1799, pp. 122–123.

<sup>31</sup> T. CRITZMANN, *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften als Jahresmärchen*, pp. 161–168 (as in note 15).

<sup>32</sup> K.F. SCHINKEL, 'Entwurf zu einer Begräbniskapelle für Ihre Majestät die Hochselige Königin Luise von Preußen', in *Aus Schinkel's Nachlaß. Reisetagebücher, Briefe und Aphorismen*, mitgeteilt und mit einem Verzeichniß sämtlicher Werke Schinkel's versehen von A. Freiherrn von Wolzogen, vol. 3, Berlin, 1863, p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> A. PORTMANN-TINGUELY: 'Smets, Wilhelm', in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 10, Hamm, 1995, cols 655–666.

cated to extolling the virtues of Cologne cathedral, Wilhelm Smets dwells on the colourful radiance pervading its interior. The poet compares it to 'the blue of the purest ether', which may represent an allusion to the romantic interpretation of this colour. In addition, in the same sonnet, we read about 'the wonderful light' and an image which is reminiscent of 'a pink-and-golden wave of a veil', woven by the morning dew.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, it is by virtue of such gleaming, shiny colours that the interior is perceived by Smets as a space that is religious *per se*. Still, the sonnet that follows focuses on the shadows enveloping the inside of the cathedral. And yet the juxtaposition of that darkness of the interior of the cathedral with the complete impenetrability of the night and the brightness of the day, together alternating outside and incessantly splitting the lyrical subject, warrants the hypothesis that for Smets the interior of the cathedral is filled with twilight rather than complete darkness. The shaded premises of the church are a space to which the external world is given no access, completely exempt from the mutability of the times of day, nor is there any room for quotidian afflictions besetting the soul. Such distractions have to yield to pious contemplation, which guides believers to 'the column of eternal light' and transmutes the interior of the cathedral into the garden of paradise.<sup>35</sup>

Even though the space of a Gothic church, steeped in a multi-coloured glow, was habitually perceived as the anteroom leading to a metaphysical reality, it was also plausible to put other constructions on that reality. For example, in Goethe's poem entitled *Gedichte sind gemalte Fensterscheiben*, published in 1827, the church, saturated with radiance pouring through the colourful glass, becomes an environment lending itself to aesthetic illumination, a shrine impenetrable to philistines' eyes because from the outsider vantage point nothing but darkness can be spotted inside.

Poems are stained-glass windows which, when seen  
By looking in from the great square outside,  
Through gloom and dark reveal of light no sign.  
That is the vision of the philistine  
Who may in lifelong sullenness abide  
Because of it, morose of mind and mien.

But come inside, and from within survey  
The sacred house with reverent, joyful cheer.  
The colours now at once shine bright and clear,  
And history and ornament appear,  
Significant and noble their display.  
Children of God, that is a goodly sight;  
Be edified, and give your eyes delight!<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> W. SMETS, *Eintritt*, in idem, *Gedichte*, Aachen, 1824, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> W. SMETS, *Weihe*, in idem, *Gedichte*, p. 19 (as in note 34).

<sup>36</sup> Translation sourced from E.G. STANLEY, 'The Early Middle Ages = The Dark Ages = The Heroic Age of England in English', in *The*

Of course, when it came to the factors underlying the shift in the perception of the significance of the unique quality of light filling Gothic churches, in addition to such contributing factors as the new understanding of darkness and the novel metaphysical interpretation of colours, we ought to acknowledge also a transformative process whereby the Middle Ages came to be credited with a peculiar brand of devout religiosity, lofty feelings, and social harmony, and were also perceived as a period in which the German national character was in its heyday. This is the accolade given to the Middle Ages by Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck in their seminal, groundbreaking publication entitled *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, released in 1797. The thrust of their arguments boils down to the statement that the development of German art in that period reached its peak in Dürer's time.

The intermeshing of the national and religious spheres, so conspicuous in Wackenroder and Tieck's text, gained reinforced traction especially during the period of the Napoleonic wars. Tailored to the propaganda demands of the day, the necessarily disparaging and oversimplified stereotype of the French (who were associated with Latinized culture and perceived as beholden to the Romano-Hellenic heritage) led to the consolidation of the German people and rallied them around nationalist and Germanic battle cries. As claimed by Jost Hermand, the inventory of patriotic propaganda symbols drew upon the imagery of the Middle Ages and the Gothic, notions of Germanic identity, the culture of the North and the legend of Ossian.<sup>37</sup> All of this provided nutritious fodder for nurturing a shared identity. The subdued ambient light of Gothic shrines, which was, incidentally, highly emblematic of the atmosphere of Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (which captured the imagination and favourably re-fashioned people's vision of the non-classical, northern counterpart of the dim and distant 'ancient past'), was obviously harnessed as part of the politicized imagery. That symbol appropriation was all the easier because the metaphoric significance of such dim light could be easily linked to the allegedly Germanic roots of the Gothic style, typified by lancet-like curves.

In 1816, when the fervour of the resurgent patriotic campaign directed against Napoleon was still far from being over, Friedrich Wilhelm Carové characterized Gothic cathedrals as 'idealized, art-enhanced forest shrines of old-time Germanic peoples'.<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere in his study on medieval art, he observes that Germanic peoples, intu-

*Middle Ages after the Middle Ages in the English-speaking World*, ed. by M.-F. Alamichel, D. Brewer, Cambridge, 1997, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> J. HERMAND, 'Die gescheiterte Hoffnung. Zur Malerei der Befreiungskriege', in idem, *Avantgarde und Regression. 200 Jahre Deutsche Kunst*, Leipzig, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> F.W. CAROVÉ, 'Ansichten der Kunst des deutschen Mittelalters', in *Taschenbuch für Freunde altdeutscher Zeit und Kunst auf das Jahr 1816*, p. 73 (as in note 19).

iting the infinity and inconceivability of the numinous realm, had worshipped it in its awe-inspiring, mysterious darkness of the tall, thickly foliated forest.<sup>39</sup> Hence, in light of the above, the multicolour penumbra of a Gothic interior could plausibly be viewed as an aggrandized, artistically recaptured replica of the darkness shadowing the Germanic sanctuary. Indeed, allusions to this peculiar perception of light in a Gothic church are to be found even in the previously discussed poems by Smets. Even though there is no gainsaying that the pride of place in these poems is granted to religious and metaphysical matters, we cannot help but acknowledge that Cologne cathedral is compared there to a wood, enshrouded by shade; it obviously stands to reason that this analogy in that day and age would have evoked associations with the hypothetically 'sylvan' and Germanic origins of the Gothic style.

The varicoloured ambient illumination lingering in Gothic churches would have been associated with the German or Germanic spirit, but it could very well have resonated on a different, broader anthropological plane. Carové believed that what distinguished the German psyche was an appetite for mystery, metaphysics, and matters of the spirit, whereas the populations inhabiting southern Europe were allegedly steeped in, and therefore embraced, temporality, and their art never broke from the shackles of the mundane.<sup>40</sup> And he was not alone in believing so. A couple of years later, when a Swiss writer named Charles Victor de Bonstetten, following in the footsteps of Montesquieu, Rousseau and Herder, embarked on the unravelling of the mystery of the relationship between various European nations' mindsets and sensibilities and the climates they were exposed to, he arrived at the conclusion that the lush and luxuriant nature of the south of Europe seemed to predispose people there to interaction with the outer world, privileging sensuous exploration of the surrounding reality. Conversely, the austere circumstances of life in the north of Europe, which forced people into isolation and to seek shelter from the hazardous and cold natural environment, shed some light on 'the somewhat dreamy penchant for metaphysics, mystical sects and speculative endeavours'.<sup>41</sup> In addition, this bipolar anthropological system gave rise to Carové's determination of aesthetic questions. For example, he asserted that it was through sculpture that artists could reveal 'corporeal beauty, earthliness and pagan gods', but when it came to the conveyance of truth, he prioritized colour, as it was possessed of the potential to 'to render a human visage', especially the eye expression, as that feature vividly expresses

the spirit and love, the essence of our faith'.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, from this vantage point, colour would also have been the medium conveying spirituality, which, *per se*, was to emblemize German art in particular.

To get a better conception of the ramifications of the posited anthropological and cultural polarity of the North and the South, and how instrumental it could have been in searching for the very genesis of the parti-coloured twilight inside a Gothic cathedral, we may turn to Theodor Schwarz's *Erwin von Steinbach*, which was published in 1834. Its eponymous main character ventures up to Scandinavia to search for an inspiration for a cathedral he is going to erect in Strasburg, his home town. While up in the north, he decides to make a foray to the North Pole, which sojourn turns out to be a watershed, where he attains maturity both as an architect and a Christian believer.

Already in one of the opening chapters of the book classical architecture is contrastively juxtaposed with that of Gothic. As it stands bathed in the sunshine, the former's mission is to proclaim the affirmation of earthly life; on the contrary, the function of Gothic, deriving from the North, encompasses the dramatization of death, defined here as the eternity-bound destination of our terrestrial pilgrimage.<sup>43</sup> Obviously, the presence of the stained glass is instrumental in achieving that goal. Thanks to the colourful hues, the Gothic church transfigures into 'a holy place of isolation from the world'.<sup>44</sup> Other than that, in the novel there is another category of location that is invested with the same merit of seclusion, and this applies to the distant arctic regions. Likewise, in the case of these places, their peculiarity is underpinned by the unique light illuminating them.

The northern lights, emanating from the dark bosom of the sky, were sparkling and beaming before their eyes. The mysterious flashes and flares were shooting up, apparently reaching the very keystone of the vault of the sky, so much so that the lights of the stars seemed to be flickering but wanly and dimly, being surrounded by streaks of reddish light igniting and flaring up from

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>41</sup> K.W. VON BONSTETTEN, *Der Mensch im Süden und im Norden oder über den Einfluß des Clima's*, transl. by F. Gleich, Leipzig, 1825, p. 53.

<sup>42</sup> F.W. CAROVÉ, 'Ansichten der Kunst des deutschen Mittelalters', p. 80 (as in note 38).

<sup>43</sup> T. SCHWARZ, *Erwin von Steinbach*, Hamburg, 1834, vol. 1, pp. 131–132; cf. N. HINRICHS, *Caspar David Friedrich – ein deutscher Künstler des Nordens. Analyse der Friedrich-Rezeption im 19. Jahrhundert und im Nationalsozialismus*, Kiel, 2011, pp. 148–163; T. SZYBISTY, 'Północ jako przestrzeń inspiracji. Literacka wizja genezy katedry strasburskiej w powieści Theodora Schwarza "Erwin von Steinbach"', in *Obrazy świata, przestrzenie dzieła. Literatura – sztuki plastyczne*, ed. by S. Jasionowicz, Cracow, 2016 (Imaginarium, 1), pp. 103–115; T. SZYBISTY, 'Katedra jak kryształ. Przyczynek do badań nad romantyczną topiką świątyni gotyckiej', in *Literatura a architektura*, ed. by J. Godlewicz-Adamiec, T. Szybisty, Cracow and Warsaw, 2017 (Literatura-Konteksty, 1), pp. 227–230.

<sup>44</sup> T. SCHWARZ, *Erwin von Steinbach*, vol. 1, pp. 131–132 (as in note 43).

a sphere of milky luminescence. Our companion felt as if he were gazing at the mystical sun of the pole, an oneiric counterpart of the real celestial body, and for the time being, the duties of the latter being fulfilled by the former'.<sup>45</sup>

The image itself of 'reaching the very keystone of the vault of the sky' in the quotation above puts us in mind of a Gothic cathedral, while the light of the aurora borealis is associated with the colourful glow of stained glass. It looks as if Goethe's juvenile text's contrast between the South, with its emanation in the shape of classical architecture, and the North, manifesting itself in the Gothic sensibility, found its most extreme embodiment in the ideas presented in Schwarz's book. And the new scale of contrast was so monumental that it necessitated the improvisation of 'the mystical sun' as a counterpoint to 'the temporal sun'. Within this framework of reference, stained-glass is once again presented as a mimetic genre of art; nevertheless, this time the colourful panes do not pretend to imitate the luminous effects of beams of light shooting through the vaulted canopies of forest trees, but aspire to symbolize the mystical light of the North.

As outlined in this paper, there were several factors leading to the landmark developments recorded in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century German literature and relating to the novel perspective on the meaning of the ambient light inside Gothic churches. Such transformations mirrored a society-wide process of the re-evaluation of the significance of the Middle Ages, especially Gothic architecture, which came to be viewed as the distillation of the German or Germanic soul. Additionally, we should also single out the fresh reinterpretation of shade, which was prompted by the desire to improvise a symbolic counterpoint to light, which had previously come to symbolize Enlightenment. Not a whit less transformative was the romantic reimagining of light as a conduit for supra-rational understanding. The new ideas modified the perception of the interiors of Gothic churches flooded with subdued, multicolour light, which predestined such premises for the role of intermediary buffers between the world of matter and the realm of spirit. Moreover, they jump-started a surge of interest in stained glass, which encouraged efforts to revive the stained-glass tradition, occasionally spawning fantastical interpretations of this genre of art.

Translated by Mariusz Szerocki

## SUMMARY

Tomasz Szybisty  
BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOWS; REFLECTING ON VARIED CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE PECULIAR LAMBENCY SUFFUSING GOTHIC CHURCHES AS EVIDENCED BY GERMAN LITERATURE FROM THE LATTER DECADES OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Keywords: Gothic architecture, light, shadow, German literature, 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century, stained glass

What seems to emanate from the dominant tenor permeating the scholarship dedicated to exploring the early nineteenth century resurgence of stained-glass ornamentation is the significant function ascribed to the variegated 'mystical' twilight, which played a pivotal role in the expansion of the renewed interest in this form of art. Nevertheless, no comprehensive studies have been attempted to investigate this subject matter. Drawing on selected German-language texts from the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, this article undertakes to examine the transformative developments regarding perception of ambient light prevailing in Gothic churches. There is enough evidence to ascertain that before 1800 such buildings had been habitually associated with significantly bedimmed interiors; however, in the decades that followed, this perception underwent some modification and the light was not only just subdued, but it was suffused with colourful lambency. For one, the change was the result of the re-evaluation of the image of the Middle Ages, and of the Gothic style, in particular, as it was regarded as the manifestation of the German or Germanic character; for another, the transformation was effected, to a large extent by Romanticism's pronouncements on the meaning of colour and shade. In addition, research into this phenomenon should not neglect to acknowledge the part played by studies on light phenomena, which were conducted extensively at that time, among others by Goethe. All those issues conditioned the perception of the interiors of Gothic churches flooded with subdued, multicolour light, which predestined such premises for the role of intermediary buffers between the world of matter and the realm of spirit. Moreover, the aforementioned developments jump-started a surge of interest in stained glass, and encouraged increasingly enthusiastic efforts to revive the stained-glass tradition, occasionally spawning fantastical interpretations pertaining this genre of art.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, vol. 2, p. 401.