

# The Metaphysics of Light in the Aesthetics of Suger of Saint-Denis<sup>1</sup>

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## *Introduction*

Light has always been an object of research for the human mind. And it is not difficult to imagine why. Without light, we would be deprived of vision, and without the latter, our knowledge would be decisively impaired. On the other hand, in the absence of light not even life itself could exist. However, even if this were possible, there would be nothing to contemplate. In this sense, as Rostand rightly affirmed: “The sun, without which things would merely be what they are.”<sup>2</sup> And we could add: without light man would be merely what he is.

Within philosophical thinking, light is almost always related with life or with the vital force that sustains things. From this perspective, the most diverse traditions relate light with divinity and, often, even identify it with the latter. Sometimes is also referred to being.

On the other hand, we see that light is constantly used in a metaphorical sense. Its meaning, due to its physical characteristics of being diaphanous, transparent and as it were invisible, can be applied to something that transcends matter.

In addition to this, light is also important objectively speaking as a physical condition for the sensible apprehension of an object, as well as subjectively as an effect of vision. It is interesting to note that in Medieval Latin these two aspects are differentiated with distinct words: the word “*lumen*” for the first and “*lux*” for the second. Moreover, from this perspective one could consider the famous problem of illumination from the gnosiological point of view, but also from the luminous manifestation of things, to which is normally assigned the word “splendour,”

Now, it would seem that this splendour or this light is related to aesthetics. Often we designate things that provoke aesthetic admiration with words such as “splendorous,” “luminous,” “resplendent,”

1. I am grateful to Walter Senner, OP, Giulia Lombardi and Wayne J. Hankey for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

2. Edmond Rostand, *Chantecler*, acte I, scène II, Ode au Soleil (Paris: E. Fasquelle, 1910), 28.

“illustrious,” “brilliant” or in French, “*féerique*,” “*éclatant*,” etc... So, could it be that “light” is an essential characteristic of beautiful things?

It is obvious that without light we can have no experience of visible beauty. However, do beautiful objects not have an intrinsic “luminous” characteristic or something associated with its manifestation, namely, splendour?

Let us take that which is known as “Gothic” within the history of art and architecture. If what Chateaubriand said is true: “You could not enter a Gothic church without feeling a kind of awe and a vague sentiment of the Divinity,”<sup>3</sup> whence does this power to enrapture and this feeling of transcendentality flow?

Suger of Saint-Denis is widely recognized as the main inspirer of what we know as Gothic.<sup>4</sup> Whence did he derive his inspiration? Were there principles and philosophical deductions behind this new art form? Was this not associated with light? Or with splendour?

From this perspective, let us explore the history of what was called the “metaphysics of light” and inquire into its relationship with the masterpiece of Suger, the Basilica of Saint-Denis.

### 1. *Short Historical Survey of the Dionysian Tradition until Suger*

The harmonization of Neoplatonism and Christianity in the Dionysian *corpus* offers key insights, especially in theological and cosmological matters. Light is an example of this. Moreover, according to Scazzoso, this theme is — together with apophatism, which, incidentally, is closely related to his theory of light — the most important in Dionysius’ thought,<sup>5</sup> which would inspire many Latin authors from the Middle Ages in a symbolic and aesthetic context,<sup>6</sup> among them Suger of St. Denis.

3. François-René Chateaubriand, *The Genius of Christianity*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. Charles I. White (Baltimore: Murphy-Lippincott, 1871), 385 = *Œuvres de Chateaubriand: Génie du Christianisme*, vol. 5 (Paris: Dufour et Mulat, 1859), 279.

4. Cf. e.g. Conrad Rudolph, “Inventing the Gothic Portal: Suger, Hugh of Saint Victor, and the Construction of a New Public Art at Saint-Denis,” *Art History* 33:4 (2010): 571: “The almost unprecedented art programme that Suger oversaw during his reconstruction of both the west and the east ends of the abbey church is credited with the first expression of what we know as Gothic; its architecture, sculpture, stained glass, and so-called minor arts all being of international significance.” See also David Stanley, “The Original Buttressing of Abbot Suger’s Chevet at the Abbey of Saint-Denis,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 65, (2006): 334-355.

5. Cf. Piero Scazzoso, *Ricerche sulla struttura del linguaggio dello Pseudo-Dionigi Areopagita* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1997), 189.

6. Cf. e.g. Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 77; Felipe de Azevedo Ramos, “Luz, esplendor e beleza em Pseudo-Dionísio Areopagita,” *Lumen*

Despite the mystery behind the identity of Dionysius, his works occupied an important place in Medieval thought. Also noteworthy is his great influence in both Western and Eastern theology and philosophy, in the original Greek, or in the translations into Latin, Arabic, Syrian, etc. Nevertheless, although this author was known throughout the entire Middle Ages, his successes followed in most cases the so-called “Medieval Renaissances.” The first important one took place in the Carolingian Age, with significant scholarly consequences. One of these was a result of the spreading of new translations of Dionysius’ influential books. One of the most important was the Latin translation of Dionysius by the Abbot Hilduin of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, around the year 838, who, along with many others believed that Dionysius, the patron saint of Paris, called Saint Denis (another form of Dionysius), was the same (Pseudo) Dionysius, the Areopagite. After some years, in 862, John Scotus Eriugena produced an improved translation — still with many incongruities, as Narvaja argued<sup>7</sup> —, and the latter is considered the first major Latin reception of the Areopagite,<sup>8</sup> drawing together once again the Greek and Latin Platonists.<sup>9</sup>

We owe a debt to Eriugena not only for his translation but also for his commentary on *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in which he interprets Dionysius in a highly aesthetical manner. From his point of view, the world itself was a metaphor and could also be understood as a theophany.<sup>10</sup> Rorem also explains that for him, “art, properly understood, was spiritually uplifting or anagogical. Eriugena’s aesthetics, while based on Dionysian principles, went beyond the Areopagite’s writings and even influenced the way Eriugena went about translating them.”<sup>11</sup>

After three centuries, history saw another Dionysian revival in the so-called “Renaissance of the Twelfth Century.” Several factors were influential in this revival, including the spiritual *Veritatis* 20 (2012): 30-46.

7. Cf. José Luis Narvaja, “Algunas notas acerca de la traducción latina de Juan Escoto Eriúgena de las obras del Pseudo-Dionisio Areopagita a partir de la noción de ‘luz’,” *Stromata* 61 (2005): 165-178.

8. Cf. Paul Rorem, “The Early Latin Dionysius: Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 601-602; Jean Leclercq, “Influence and Noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages,” in *The Complete Works*, by (Ps.) Dionysius, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 25-26.

9. Cf. Wayne J. Hankey, “Misrepresenting Neoplatonism in Contemporary Christian Dionysian Polemic: Eriugena and Nicholas of Cusa versus Vladimir Lossky and Jean-Luc Marion,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82:4 (2008): 684.

10. Cf. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 79.

11. *Ibid*, 80.

ascendancy of Bernard of Clairvaux, the birth of Scholasticism and institutionalization of the universities, the invigoration of the study of Latin authors and Greek philosophy, the juridical and economical development of cities, the culmination of Romanic Art and the birth of Gothic.<sup>12</sup> In the theological and philosophical domains, we must mention the birth of the monastic school of the Augustinian Abbey of Saint-Victor, whose members included great masters, such as Hugh of Saint-Victor and Richard of Saint-Victor. Considered one of the most important thinkers of his time, Hugh also made commentaries on *The Celestial Hierarchy* and reintroduced Pseudo-Dionysius in Western theology and philosophy, which would reach its apex in the following century, during the Scholastic period.

Another Abbey, now Benedictine, played a fundamental role in bringing “new lights” to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, by coordinating, in an extraordinary manner, material with immaterial light. We are speaking of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, whose Basilica, of the same name, is considered the birthplace of Gothic in a unifying system, the luminous architecture par excellence, as we shall see.

## 2. Suger and Saint-Denis

The Basilica of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, whose origins can be traced back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, was the burial place of the first Parisian bishop, Saint Denys, who was for a long time the object of confusion with (Pseudo) Dionysius, the Areopagite. There we find one of the most prominent Benedictine centres in the Europe of the Middle Ages and an important devotional sanctuary. Since the time of King Dagobert (†639), this Basilica had become the official necropolis of the French sovereigns. Meanwhile, little by little, Saint-Denis allied its spiritual vocation with that of the French monarchy, providing it great prestige and influence, partly due to another great figure who united in himself qualities such as the regent of France, distinguished writer, abbot and thinker. His name was Suger of Saint-Denis.

The name of this great man was associated with the Basilica and Abbey of Saint-Denis due to his extraordinary work there. However, we must recall that this Abbey, at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was undergoing a serious dilemma of secularization.<sup>13</sup> The immediate predecessor of Suger was an abbot named Adam,

12. Cf. e.g. Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

13. Cf. Rolf Große, *Saint-Denis zwischen Adel und König: die Zeit vor Suger (1053-1122)* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2002), 131-230.

whom the most famous and pre-eminent philosopher of that time, Peter Abelard long criticized, together with the abbey itself, when he was there as a refugee monk after his affair with Heloise. His complaints are summarized in his *Historia calamitatum*: “*Erat autem abbatia illa nostra, ad quam me contuleram, saecularis admodum vitae atque turpissimae, cuius abbas ipse quo ceteris praelatione maior, tanto vita deterior atque infamia notior erat.*”<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that Abelard also stated that his persecution was fomented by the monks of Saint-Denis due to his critiques of the identification of St. Denys with (Pseudo) Dionysius. Consequently, according to him, he was considered an “enemy of the monastery.” Abelard, in turn, described the Abbot as “being much more corrupt than the others (monks)” and as one looking for any chance to destroy him.<sup>15</sup> After some time he fled the monastery, because in his words: “I was horrified to think what they would stoop to, and, with everything else that had happened, I lost all hope, convinced that the whole world had conspired against me.”<sup>16</sup>

A short while later, the Abbot Adam died and Suger succeeded him in the abbotship. This important transition is summarized by Suger’s biographer, William of Saint-Denis: “*Videtur itaque vir iste ad hoc divinitus directus, ut unum tantum cui preerat locum, sed totum Francorum illustraret (illuminate) imperium.*”<sup>17</sup> In fact, this play on words is appropriate, for this new abbot brought not only new material lights for Saint-Denis but also immaterial ones, first for the Abbey and the adjacent Basilica, and then for the whole of Gaul.

Suger was born in 1081 and when he was only 10 years old he entered the Abbey of Saint-Denis as an oblate. He studied in the Saint-Denis-de-l’Estrée priory, where he received intellectual and monastic formation.<sup>18</sup> Suger also gained expertise in classic Latin authors, discoursed “with every subtlety” on the dialectical and rhetorical books, and garnered renown as *peritus*

14. Petrus Abaelardus, *Historia calamitatum*, ed. Jacques Monfrin (Paris: Vrin, 1962), 81, l. 654-657.

15. Cf. *Ibid.*, 89, l. 928-940.

16. *Ibid.*, 91, l. 982-985 (trans. William Levitan, 2007, 30): “*Tunc ego nequitiam eorum vehementer exhorrens, utpote qui iam diu tam adversam habuissem fortunam, penitus desperatus, quasi adversum me universus coniurasset mundus.*”

17. Guilelmus Mediolanensis (monachus Sancti Dionysii), *Vita Sugerii*, I, in *Ceuvres*, vol. 2, by Suger, ed. Françoise Gasparri (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008), 297.

18. Cf. John F. Benton, “Suger’s Life and Personality,” in *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis: A Symposium*, ed. Paula Lieber Gerson (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 3-15.

*dicendi* both in Latin and vernacular.<sup>19</sup> He was so proficient in the art of eloquence that people would assume that he was reading a script rather than speaking spontaneously.<sup>20</sup> He was also dedicated to archival research in his adolescence,<sup>21</sup> and since that time had dreamt of reforming the Basilica. William concludes his *Vita* with a poem which sums up his glorious career:

*Arrisere tibi nascenti sidera septem,  
Prospectusque fuit visque salubris eis.  
Thesauros tibi larga suos natura paravit,  
Expanditque tibi philosophia sinus.  
Nec tibi successus laetos fortuna negavit;  
Fata dedere boni quicquid habere solent.*<sup>22</sup>

It is possible that during the studies of his youth he had come across Dionysius' *The Celestial Hierarchy*, both in a Latin manuscript conserved in the Abbey and/or through contacts with Hugh of Saint-Victor and his writings.<sup>23</sup> Nowadays, the question of the influence of Dionysius (even through mediation) in Suger's writings and works of art is still debated, as we shall see.

### 3. *New Lights for Saint-Denis*

"*Nemo summo fit repenter,*" says the Latin proverb, and so it was with the reform of the Basilica. In the first place, after he took charge of the Abbey, Suger re-established the monastic discipline in light of the previous situation with the Abbot Adam. In fact, Bernard of Clairvaux laments the previous administration and praises the monastic reform in a letter addressed to Suger (in 1127 or 1128).<sup>24</sup> Bernard expressly explains the reason for his disapproval, saying

19. Cf. Guilelmus Mediolanensis, *Vita Sugerii*, I, in *op. cit.*, 305.

20. Cf. *ibid.* See also Giles Constable, "The Language of Preaching in the Twelfth Century," *Viator* 25 (1994): 146.

21. Cf. Sugerius, *De administratione*, III, in *Œuvres*, vol. 1, ed. Françoise Gasparri (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008), 64: "Cum etate docibili adolescentie meae antiquas armarii possessionum revolverem cartas." NB: The division of Suger's texts follows the Gasparri edition (*De administratione* [*Gesta Sugerii Abbatis*] = *De adm.*; *De consecratione* [*Scriptum consecrationis*] = *De cons.*): *Œuvres* by Suger, ed. Françoise Gasparri, 2 vol. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008).

22. Guilelmus Mediolanensis, *Vita Sugerii*, I, in *op. cit.*, 373.

23. Cf. Dominique Poirel, "Symbolice et anagogice: l'école de Saint-Victor et la naissance du style gothique," in *L'abbé Suger, le manifeste gothique de Saint-Denis et la pensée victorine*, ed. Dominique Poirel (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 169.

24. Cf. Bernardus Claraevallensis, *Epistula* 78, 4, ed. J. Leclercq, H. M. Rochais, C. H. Talbot, vol. 7 (Romae: Cistercienses, 1957-1977), 203, l. 18-26.

that it was not to create confusion or to offend anyone, but to show the contrast so that “the beauty of the new appear more sharply and strikingly” and “making the present good shine forth more clearly.”<sup>25</sup> This is the way in which Suger, introduced “light,” little by little, into the Abbey, so that in 1129, Bishop Stephen of Paris praises him, because “inter alia gallorum monasteria per Dei misericordiam precipue in omni religioni elucet.”<sup>26</sup>

In the first place, the reform made by Suger was dedicated to enforcing the Benedictine Rule and discipline. Afterward, Suger provided a new impulse which led to ornamental improvements of the Basilica, such as the development of liturgical splendour, and the acquisition of goods and possessions, always doing so with moderation while renouncing superfluous or excessive luxury. At the same time he exercises parsimony with regard to food, and always shows concern for the poor.<sup>27</sup>

However, it was the architectural restoration and artistic renewal of the Carolingian basilica, especially the façade and the chevet, that would render Suger famous and inspire many to give him the title “founder of the Gothic style.” This Gothic dream — while likely not entirely realized — progressively matured in Suger’s soul until the fulfillment of his most extraordinary deed, which would transfigure religious art entirely in France and beyond. To provide an idea, between the years 1180 and 1270, more than 80 Gothic cathedrals were built in France alone, in addition to abbatial or monastic churches and other religious buildings.<sup>28</sup> Thus Eco summarizes Suger’s character with the following words: “He was the prototype for the man of good taste and the devotee of art of the twelfth century, the leader of the largest symbolic and architectural undertaking on the Île de France, a political man and a refined humanist.”<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. *The Application of the Metaphysics of Light*

If it is true that “the metaphysics of light greatly influenced the style

25. *Ibid*, 204, l. 15-21.

26. *Cart. blanc*, vol. 2, 278 (De Argentolio) apud Giles Constable, “Suger’s Monastic Administration,” in *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis: A Symposium*, *op. cit.*, 28 (emphasis added).

27. Cf. Françoise Gasparri, “Suger et Saint-Denis,” in *Œuvres*, vol. 1 by Suger, ed. Françoise Gasparri (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008), xxxiv; Guilelmus Mediolanensis, *Vita Sugerii*, I, in *op. cit.*, 321.

28. Cf. Rolf Toman, ed., *Gothic: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting* (Köln: Könemann, 2004), 9.

29. Umberto Eco, *Arte e bellezza nell’estetica medievale* (Milano: Bompiani, 2009), 40.

and artistic techniques of the medieval epoch,"<sup>30</sup> it is also true that light is important in the Middle Ages for the development of ideas.<sup>31</sup>

Concerning Suger, the application of the metaphysics of light is reflected in his writings about the reform of the Basilica: one on its consecration (*De consecratione*<sup>32</sup>) and another on its administration (*De administratione*) — perhaps written to justify this new design<sup>33</sup> and demonstrate his totally new approach in giving a detailed account of the originality of the architecture.

The basilica to be reconstructed had towers that were neither very sturdy nor very elevated and was "threatening ruin."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the basilica had housed much aesthetical symbolism since the time of King Dagobert, as Suger describes:

When he had constructed this [basilica] with a marvelous variety of marble columns he enriched it incalculably with treasures of purest gold and silver and hung on its walls, columns and arches tapestries woven of gold and richly adorned with a variety of pearls, so that it might seem to excel the ornaments of all other churches and, *blooming with incomparable luster and adorned with every terrestrial beauty, might shine with inestimable splendor.*<sup>35</sup>

The Abbot of Saint-Denis praised this in order to demonstrate even more clearly his love for the aesthetical features of the basilica, but he wanted much more splendour. Thus, he applied the eminent characteristic of beautiful things passed on by Dionysian Aesthetics, i.e. *claritas*, evidently without dismissing proportion.

In any construction, obviously, firstly one must think about the foundations. As he would narrate in his own testimony, these should not be material but spiritual (in Christian terms this

30. Luis Diego Cascante Fallas, "La metafísica de la luz, una categoría de la ontología bonaventuriana," *Revista Filosofía de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 36, 88/89 (1998): 342.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Called *Scriptum consecrationis* by Suger in his posterior work on the administration (cf. *De adm.*, II, 5, 118).

33. Cf. Mary E. Wilson, "Gothic Cathedral as Theology and Literature" (PhD diss., University of South Florida, 2009), 58.

34. *De cons.*, III, 12.

35. *De cons.*, II, 8 (trans. in Suger, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, eds. Erwin Panofsky and Gerda Panofsky-Soergel, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 87.) This is taken almost verbatim from the *Gesta Dagoberti* (cf. ed. Panofsky, 224-225).



means the strongest of all, Jesus Christ).<sup>36</sup> In order to enhance the beauty of that monument and apply his philosophical background to the matter and bestow on it a spiritual sense, he chose the finest materials in quality and quantity — “*materie autem validissime nova quadraria qualis et quanta nunquam in partibus istis inventa fuerat, Deo donante, occurrit*”<sup>37</sup> — and the best artists to adorn that *opus novum*, which would maintain coherence with the ancient work.<sup>38</sup> Here, in fact, we can find — now applied in the fine arts in an extraordinary way — the convergence of quality (represented by *claritas*) and quantity (*proportio*).

These are the structural elements of the work of art. However, for many historians of philosophy there is also a spiritual aspect, in the Neo-Platonic perspective, behind Gothic architecture. However, it is present in an original way, that is to say, to manifest the Primal Light through material light. This was proportioned by the new combination of structural elements: the pointed arches of Burgundian architecture and the ribbed vaults from Normandy were allied with the most innovative part of Suger’s inspirational project, namely, the flying buttresses to support the hemicycle vault, which provided the essential elements for the Gothic style. In fact, with this usage — at the same time ingenious, useful and aesthetical — he conferred security and grandiose beauty to the chevet and the whole church.<sup>39</sup> However, we should not dismiss his sagacity in building “from pre-existent sources in order to meet the newly recognized needs of the present.”<sup>40</sup>

The material reason of this reform was to permit the entrance of more light into the church through an increase in windows and a diminution of walls or partitions using fewer and thinner columns.<sup>41</sup> But the philosophical reason was a real translation, so to speak, of the metaphysics of light to matter and, ultimately, an augmentation of its comprehensive beauty. In order to further embellish that ancient edifice, proportion was also considered an important element. Therefore, it was important “to ennoble the new addition [...] with the beauty of length and width.”<sup>42</sup> To do so, Abbot Suger

36. Cf. *De cons.*, III, 12.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Cf. *ibid.*

39. Cf. Stanley, “The Original Buttrussing of Abbot Suger’s Chevet,” 334-355.

40. Conrad Rudolph, “Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window: Suger, Hugh, and a New Elite Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 93 (2011): 418.

41. Cf. Charles M. Radding and William W. Clark, *Architettura e sapere nel medio-evo: costruttori e maestri tra Romanico e Gotico* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1997), 70-83.

42. *De cons.*, VII, 26 (trans. Panofsky, 101): “...longitudinis et latitudinis pulchri-

used the traditional concepts of proportionality “by means of geometrical and arithmetical instruments”<sup>43</sup> in order to adapt the dimensions of the older structure to the new reformed basilica.

This concept of proportion, which imbues the basilica with symbolism, was considered in conjunction with its illumination. In the chevet, the most important achievement of this reform, he explicitly says that he added “the *elegant* and *praiseworthy extension* [...] by virtue of which the whole [church] would *shine* with the *wonderful* and *uninterrupted light* of the most *luminous* windows, pervading the interior *beauty*.”<sup>44</sup> Here we find his aesthetic sense in *proportio* and *claritas* united. This demonstrates an interesting aspect of Suger’s concept for the basilica: by using the verb “*enitere*” in the imperfect tense, he implies that the same proportionality of the edifice was to provide more light for the Basilica. Truly, the light was added to this new *opus* in a very special way, as never seen before, mainly by the enlargement of its dimensions in an *elegant* and *praiseworthy extension* and by the introduction of larger windows, rendered possible thanks to the new flying buttresses together with the other mentioned elements. The result is that “it allowed that whole magnificent *opus* [to be completed] in three years and three months, from the crypt below to the summit of the vaults above, elaborated with the variety of so many arches and columns, including even the consummation of the roof.”<sup>45</sup>

And for inauguration of the new chevet, a very splendid ceremony of dedication was convoked on June 11, 1144, in which the hierarchical and ternary patterns, typical of the Dionysian system are present.<sup>46</sup> Once the consecration was complete, Suger wrote the following verses, which synthesises his love for *claritas*:

*Pars nova posterior dum jungitur anteriori,  
Aula micat medio clarificata suo.  
Claret enim claris quod clare concopulatur,*

*tudine inmitteremur nobilitare.”*

43. *Ibid.*: “...geometricis et arithmetis instrumentis medium...”

44. *Ibid.* (emphasis added): “... illo urbano et approbato in circuitu oratoriorum incremento, quo tota clarissimarum vitrearum luce mirabili et continua interiorem perlustrante pulchritudinem eniteret.”

45. *De adm.*, II, 5, 118 (trans. Panofsky, 49.51): “... certum est etiam argumentum, quod in tribus annis et tribus mensibus totum illud magnificum opus, et in inferiore crypta, et in superiore voltarum sublimitate, tot arcuum et columnarum distinctione variatum, etiam aperturae integrum supplementum admiserit.”

46. Cf. *De adm.*, II, 4, 115; *De cons.*, VI, 20.22.24 (even the time for the reform was apparently planned on purpose: three years and three months).

*Et quod perfundit lux nova, claret opus  
Nobile quod constat auctum sub tempore nostro;  
Qui Sugerus eram, me duce dum fieret.<sup>47</sup>*

This brightness in the Basilica was pervaded by the new light and the proportional measure that united the rear part with the front part. This innovation allowed for the entrance of more light — together with the theory behind it — in the edifices. In fact, in the case of Romanesque art, Gothic's predecessor, due to its architectural structure, the rounded arches and thick walls, the insertion of large windows was not as possible as in the case of Gothic. The obvious consequence was the reduction of the entrance of sunlight for the whole complex.

Thus, we find in Saint-Denis one of the most innovative systems in the history of architecture. In order to permit the entrance of more luminosity, pointed (ogival) arches are introduced, allowing for the redirection of the stress lines of the upper weight down to the floor. At the same time, the lateral pressure is absorbed by the flying buttresses permitting "finer walls, slender columns and higher ceilings."<sup>48</sup> So light becomes the main "construction material" for this "transparent architecture,"<sup>49</sup> in which the spiritual was incorporated in light, and God, the immaterial light, became visible in matter. And then there was light in architecture as never seen before.

##### 5. *Light in Suger's aesthetics*

But how did these "lights" enter into the Basilica? Even though stained glass windows existed prior to the advent of Gothic architecture, we find in it a sublimation of this art form as never seen before. However, what was the source of this idea to transfigure art with this new instrument?

Analysing Suger's reasons in his writings, we find liturgical and theological motives for the reform, but these were not the only ones.<sup>50</sup> Moreover one should not analyse the texts alone; we must also consider

47. *De adm.*, II, 5, 120 (emphasis added).

48. Felipe de Azevedo Ramos, "And Then There Was Light!" *Heralds of the Gospel*, September 59, 2012, 22.

49. Helmut Knoblauch, "Es werde Licht! Das Licht in den gotischen Kathedralen," *Abenteuer Philosophie* 115 (2008): 39 (emphasis added).

50. Regarding this, see numerous references in Werner Beierwaltes, "'Negati affirmatio': A Foundation for Medieval Aesthetics from the writings of John Scotus Eriugena," *Dionysius* 1 (1977): 127-159 republished as "'Negati affirmatio': il mondo come metafora. Sulla fondazione di un'estetica medievale," in *Eriugena: I fondamenti del suo pensiero*, ed. Werner Beierwaltes (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1998), 131-180.

the iconographical point of view as well as historical background.

Studies regarding the possible reasons for Suger's inspiration for Saint-Denis' reform began in the last century, especially through the research of Erwin Panofsky, one of the most eminent scholars in recent times to associate art and philosophy in the Middle Ages. For him there was a "mental habit" behind the formation of Early and High Gothic.<sup>51</sup> Despite the fact that this theory was heavily criticized by recent authors as being contaminated by Hegelianism, it is worthwhile to distinguish some aspects.

As is easily noted, there was an analogous *modus operandi* in the various kinds of "arts" in the Middle Ages, but this interrelation is not to be understood as absolute. This problem is not found, at least by the author of this present work, in the project of Panofsky. However, even if we were to admit some exaggeration in the latter's theories, we can still analyse the same texts of Suger to see how they can be of use to us. In an enlightening passage, the Abbot of Saint-Denis explains that "the identity of the author and the works provides what is needed for the worker."<sup>52</sup> In other words, the inspiration and what motivates the author plays a crucial role in the way the work will be done. As Reeve suggests: "Complete readings of Gothic buildings must embrace a variety of approaches and, where possible, acknowledge multiple Medieval and modern subject positions, however seemingly incongruous they may appear to contemporary scholars."<sup>53</sup>

Either way, it seems obvious that we should not view interdisciplinary studies in the light of a simple and strict interrelation between subjects. What happens in art is not *exactly* what happens in philosophy and vice versa. But, on the other hand, it is evident that some correlation can be found, as the History of Ideas can prove. In the Renaissance, for instance, there are many themes in iconography related either to a philosophical or to a political origin, just to give one example.

In the case of Gothic architecture, many authors admit its interrelation with the metaphysics of light, as we have previously shown.<sup>54</sup> In Saint-Denis, the manifestation of light is clearly related to stained glass windows. These mosaics of translucent

51. Cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic architecture and scholasticism* (New York: Meridian books, 1959), 27.

52. Cf. *De cons.*, III, 12.

53. Matthew M. Reeve, *Reading Gothic Architecture* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 7.

54. See also Günther Binding and Uwe Dettmar, *Was ist Gotik?: eine Analyse der gotischen Kirchen in Frankreich, England und Deutschland 1140-1350* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges, 2000), 52.

glass clearly had a higher function than allowing the entrance of more light into the basilica (due to its proportion compared with the dimensions of the basilica, as it is evident that coloured glass diffuses less light than transparent glass). Nevertheless, the secret was in the icons, which had a highly symbolic purpose, offering its viewers a veiled and transcendent meaning.

There is an array of themes found in stained glass windows. However, let us consider the most famous, the so-called “anagogical windows.” From the artistic viewpoint, it is possible to distinguish in them a clear use of allegorical images to represent subjacent content.<sup>55</sup> However, with regard to the word “anagogical” itself, we must note that Suger explicitly suggests that this type of window is capable of elevating observers from material to immaterial realities.<sup>56</sup> Those icons, in fact, had the ultimate function, of captivating the viewer’s senses, and transporting him to transcendent realities.

In those representations, the type of art that imitates nature was not sufficient, there had to be something that gave the observer the possibility of transcending from material lights to the Prime Light, by the force of *pulchrum* and the representative content.

Accordingly, to represent those lights, Suger employs different materials related to illumination, such as gold, silver and precious stones.<sup>57</sup>

The Abbot of Saint-Denis uses the expression “*vitri vestiti*” together with “*saphirorum materia*” — i.e. blue glass — to refer to the stained glass windows, “probably to refer to the glass’s dual aspect, its veiled imagery and jewel-like radiance.”<sup>58</sup> This iconographical function was then “vested” with the most varied symbols on a large scale. The chevet alone, while not large in comparison with later Gothic cathedrals, contained 109 square metres of glass.<sup>59</sup>

In another passage the Abbot of Saint-Denis expresses gratitude for having been able to adorn the basilica with luxurious materials such as “gold, silver, most precious gems and excellent textiles.”<sup>60</sup>

55. Cf. Conrad Rudolph, ed., *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 180; Andrzej Piotrowski, *Architecture of Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 30.

56. Cf. *De adm.*, II, 18, 146: “*Una quarum de materialibus ad immaterialia excitans.*”

57. Cf. *De adm.*, II, 18, 150.

58. Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 193.

59. Cf. Sumner Crosby and Pamela Z. Blum, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis: From Its Beginnings to the Death of Suger, 475-1151* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 371.

60. *De adm.*, I, prol., 54: “... *auri, argenti, et pretiosissimarum gemmarum, necnon*

And here we can find one of the most interesting connections with Dionysius, i.e., Suger in his *De administratione* enumerates the stones used in the ornamentation as such: “the sardius, the topaz, and the jasper, the chrysolite, and the onyx, and the beryl, the sapphire, and the carbuncle and the emerald.”<sup>61</sup> And here, he is not faithful to the Book of Revelation (Rev 21:19-20), which enumerates twelve kinds of stones, but to Dionysius, who distinctly uses the rare symbolism of the number “nine.”<sup>62</sup> To complete his profusion of light in this new type of art, Suger also had the walls painted in gold and with precious colours.<sup>63</sup> Splendour had to be ubiquitous.

Suger explains the background of this innovative enterprise. It sprang from love for the “*beauty* of the house of God.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, it is clearly seen that he carried out this reform in an evident aesthetical sense — or “marvelous” one, as Eco says.<sup>65</sup> And, while one may assume that he was not the only patron of this reform and that the merit for this enterprise should also go to the architects or the masons, the Abbot emphasizes in his writings that it was he himself who *made* — in the sense of guided — each thing, mentioning on different instances his own name.<sup>66</sup>

Once it has been clarified that there was an aesthetical background to this *novum opus*,<sup>67</sup> we can also distinguish another philosophical objective, according to Suger himself. As we have seen, the Abbot uses the noblest materials to render the building as beautiful as possible. Note that *nobile* and *pulchrum* were equivalent concepts in the High Middle Ages.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, those “noble” materials were used in order to embellish and *illuminate* the basilica and ultimately give it greater value. As the eminent medieval philosopher Edgar de Bruyne explains, proportion gives

*et optimorum palliorum.”*

61. *De adm.*, II, 13, 134 (trans. Panofsky, 63): “... sardius, topazius, jaspis, crisolitus, onix et berillus, saphirus, carbunculus et smaragdus.”

62. This is also used for the number of chapels in the ambulatory. Cf. Otto Georg von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 140.

63. *De adm.*, II, 1, 110. See also Sugerius, *Chartes* n. 8, in *Œuvres*, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 203.205.

64. *De adm.*, II, 13, 134: “*Cum ex dilectione decoris domus Dei.*”

65. Cf. Eco, *Arte e bellezza*, 41.

66. Cf. e.g. *De adm.*, II, 12, 132: “*Has arae tabulas posuit Sugerius abbas;*” *De adm.*, II, 4, 116: “*Ad decus ecclesiae, quae fovit et extulit illum, Sugerius studuit ad decus ecclesiae;*” *De adm.*, II, 5, 120: “*Qui Sugerus eram, me duce dum fieret.*”

67. *De adm.*, II, 3, 114.

68. Cf. e.g. Thomas de Aquino, *Super Gal.*, cap. 2, l. 2.

harmony and order to things but light gives the “nobility.”<sup>69</sup> This especially pertains to those instruments related to light or *claritas* — in the sense employed by Bonaventure: “*lux est pulcherrimum et delectabilissimum et optimum inter corporalia*”<sup>70</sup> — such as stained glass windows, gold and precious stones, as we have already commented.

Light was related to the sacred, as in most medieval motifs, and it was used to represent the divine in the optical and metaphorical sense, above all through the use of the magnificent blue glass, compared to the Sapphire, recently discovered. However, that new complex, shining like a kaleidoscopic monument, was not rooted in the concrete objective to serve itself (*ars gratia artis*) as some theorists of art would argue. It was necessary to transport beauty to its transcendental source and use the imagery in favour of aesthetics and metaphysics.<sup>71</sup> In the case of this reformed basilica, the result should be, as Suger himself argued, inspired by the words of Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, II, 5), that “*materiam superabat opus*.”<sup>72</sup> In fact, Suger did not remain only in the diversity of the material but offers a description “which shines with the radiance of delightful allegories.”<sup>73</sup> In this sense, his enterprise does not intend to offer just a sensitive experience but there is also a very idealistic proposal.

In a similar vein, Suger extends his thought to include ethical matters. For instance, he explains that the various colours and splendour of gems (“*multicolor gemmarum speciositas*”<sup>74</sup>) are capable of detaching a person from exterior things and providing an impetus for reflection on the holy virtues. Thus, one can be transferred from the material to the immaterial.<sup>75</sup> This can also be related to the stoic conception of purification and cosmology

69. Edgar de Bruyne, *L'esthétique du Moyen Âge* (Louvain: Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1947), 70-71.

70. Bonaventura, *Commentarius in librum Sapientiae*, VII, 10; VI, 153b (ed. Quaracchi, 1893), 153.

71. Cf. Gasparri, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, xxxv.

72. *De adm.*, II, 12, 132.

73. *De adm.*, II, 12, 132.134 (trans. Panofsky, 63): “*Et quoniam [ta]cita visus cognitione materie diversitas, auri, gemmarum, unionum, absque descriptione facile non cognoscitur, opus quod solis patet litteratis, quod allegoriarum jocundarum jubare resplendet, apicibus litterarum mandari fecimus.*”

74. This word has deep relationship with “*pulchrum*” and the theory of light. One of the sources of this meaning and the link with aesthetics we can find in Hugo a Sancto Victore, *Commentariorum in Hierarchiam Caelestem* (PL 175), 997B: “*Speciositatis, id est pulchritudinis.*”

75. Cf. *De adm.*, II, 13, 134: “*... aliquando multicolor gemmarum speciositas ab extrinsecis me curis devocaret, sanctorum etiam diversitatem virtutum de materialibus ad immaterialia transferendo.*”

also applied here through this ascension from the material to the immaterial, from the corporeal to the spiritual, from the human to the divine.<sup>76</sup> Once again art is not understood here as serving itself or simply giving pleasure to men, but as having the highest metaphysical role, of elevating the observer to immaterial realities.

However, could this not be accomplished through merely proportional objects? As our author explains, splendidous things — such as gold and precious stones — provide more precision (*acutius*) and more pleasure (*delectabilius*) for the observer of the church than the mere augmentation of dimension.<sup>77</sup> And this specificity applies once again to the details and to the hand of the artist. For Suger, the construction of sepulchres becomes elegant (*elegans*) by “the *exquisite industry* of the goldsmiths’ art and by the wealth of gold and precious stones.”<sup>78</sup> It was Suger’s opinion that the work was a reflection of the worker, the fruit of his interiority.

Furthermore, as Panofsky put it, “Suger was lucky, to discover in the words of the three times blessed Saint Dionysius, a philosophy that allowed him to greet the beauty of the physical as being the mediation to spiritual happiness.”<sup>79</sup> In this way there is a particular kind of aesthetical pleasure linked with *claritas*, different from that linked with proportion. The latter is more closely related to mathematics and is more discursive, while *splendour* has something of immediateness and is primal in character — due to the simplicity of light — and its particular relationship with sensibility.<sup>80</sup>

#### 6. “Anagogicus mos” and the question of Dionysian tradition

Now we will discuss in detail an important Sugerian insight, namely, his treatment of anagogy.

He has explained his perception of the aesthetical experience. Through it, and by following the “lights,” one can — as Suger

76. Cf. *De cons.*, XV, 52: “[Deus in] susceptione materialia immaterialibus, corporalia spiritualibus, humana divinis uniformiter concopulas, sacramentaliter reformas ad suum puriores principium.” See also Martin Senz, “Die Rezeption stoischer Kosmologie bei Suger von Saint-Denis. Über ein Zitat aus Lukans ‘Pharsalia’ in Sugers ‘De consecratione,’” in “Das Haus Gottes, das seid ihr selbst”: mittelalterliches und barockes Kirchenverstaendnis im Spiegel der Kirchweihe, eds. Ralf M. W. Stammberger, Claudia Sticher and Annkatrin Warnke (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006), 225-226.

77. Cf. *De cons.*, II, 8.

78. *De cons.*, X, 32 (trans. Panofsky, 105) (emphasis added).

79. Erwin Panofsky, “Zur Philosophie des Abtes Suger von Saint Denis,” in *Platonismus in der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, ed. Werner Beierwaltes (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 120.

80. Cf. Pascale Duhamel, *Polyphonie parisienne et architecture au temps de l’art gothique (1140-1240)* (Bern: Lang, 2010), 35.



suggests — be transferred from this inferior world to the superior one in an *anagogical manner* ([in] *anagogico more*).<sup>81</sup> This expression is fundamental in understanding the philosophical context of the works of the Abbot of Saint-Denis, as we will explain.

The word “*anagogicus*” comes from the Greek ἀναγωγή (ἀνάγω), whose original meaning was related to “conduction” or “transportation” (mostly by sea),<sup>82</sup> but also, in Antiquity, this vocable was, in some texts, associated with spiritual elevation, such as is found in Plato (ἐπαναγωγή)<sup>83</sup> and Iamblichus.<sup>84</sup> In Medieval Latin, this term is used especially in the interpretation of the four senses of the Scripture: literal, typological, tropological and anagogical.<sup>85</sup> In this context, the latter was related with future events or it was understood in a mystical sense. But lately, the word “*anagoge*” used in Latin has acquired another meaning, also coming from Greek, that is, “elevation of the spirit,” or “contemplation.”<sup>86</sup> “*Anagogice*” would also come to have the same connotation as allegorical,<sup>87</sup> which was probably appropriated by Suger together with the previous sense.

Anagogy employed with those meanings has a much greater connection with Dionysian tradition according to Panofsky: “This ascent from the material to the immaterial world is what the Pseudo-Areopagite and John the Scot describe — in contrast to the customary use of the term — as the ‘anagogical approach’ (*anagogicus mos*, literally translated: ‘the upward-leading method’).”<sup>88</sup> Thus, while the quoted passage in Suger, does not explicitly mention any author, it is found in the Dionysian context.<sup>89</sup>

However, objections to this hypothesis have been recently raised. According to Linscheid-Burdich, for instance, the sense of *anagogicus* in Dionysius<sup>90</sup> simply refers to Revelation and it is

81. *De adm.*, II, 13, 134: “*Ab hac etiam inferiori ad illam superiorem anagogico more Deo donante posse transferri.*”

82. Cf. Franco Montanari, *Vocabolario della lingua greca*, 2nd ed. (Torino: Loescher, 2009), 174, s.v. “ἀνάγω.”

83. Plato, *Respublica*, VII, 532c.

84. Cf. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 3.7, l. 8 (ed. Édouard des Places), 114.

85. Cf. Beda Venerabilis, *De tabernaculo*, I (CCL, 119A), 25, l. 781-784.

86. Cf. Jan Frederik Niermeyer, *Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 42.

87. Cf. *ibid.*

88. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, 20.

89. Cf. e.g. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, 21; Gasparri, *Cœuvres*, vol. 1, 225; Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 120; Grover A. Zinn, Jr., “Suger, Theology, and the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition,” in *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis: A Symposium*, ed. Paula Lieber Gerson (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 34.

90. Cf. *De caelesti hierarchia*, I.2 (121A).

interpreted in the allegorical, tropological and anagogical sense.<sup>91</sup> Even if this were true, it would be unjustifiable considering the use of the two other possible Latin sources of Dionysius available to the Abbot of Saint-Denis, Eriugena and Hugh of Saint Victor: both of these authors also use this term in an uplifting sense,<sup>92</sup> “*per ordinem ad Deum reductio et conversio*,”<sup>93</sup> from the sensible to the intellectual, from the visible to the invisible.<sup>94</sup> In the translation of *De caelesti hierarchia* by Eriugena, we find in the brief first chapter alone — which supposedly is the most widely read for its accessibility — this word repeated three times.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the main aspect of this movement of elevation can be found in the translation of this first chapter.<sup>96</sup>

As we have seen above, it is clear that Dionysius was a topic of conversation at Saint-Denis, due to Abelard’s debates. But it is interesting to note that in the neighbouring monastery of Saint Victor, Hugh was commenting on *The Celestial Hierarchy* at that same time. Is this pure coincidence?

Michel Bur and other authors tend to postulate that the Dionysian influence on Suger’s inspiration was through the mediation of Hugh of Saint Victor, or at least together with him.<sup>97</sup> Whatever the case may be, it is possible to trace the prominence of Saint-Denis and Saint-Victor at that time. Even though there is no (surviving) letter between Suger and Hugh, there is some evidence that they worked

91. Cf. Susanne Linscheid-Burdich, *Suger von Saint-Denis: Untersuchungen zu seinen Schriften Ordinatio, De consecratione, De administratione* (München: Saur, 2004), 34.

92. Cf. e.g. Iohannes Scotus Eriugena, *Expositiones in Hierarchiam Caelestem* (CCCM 31), 8, l. 262-263: “*per anagogen, hoc est per ascensionem mentis in diuina mysteria, contemplabimur*,” Hugo a Sancto Victore, *Commentariorum in Hierarchiam Caelestem S. Dionysii Areopagitae*, II.1, expos. (PL 175), 941BC: “*Anagoge autem [941C] ascensio, sive elevatio mentis est ad superna contemplanda*,” *ibid.* (PL 175), 946A: “*Anagoge enim, sicut dictum est, ascensio mentis, sive elevatio vocatur in contemplationem supernorum*” (emphasis added).

93. Iohannes Scotus Eriugena, *Expositiones in Hierarchiam Caelestem* (CCCM 31), 141, l. 280-281.

94. Cf. Hugo a Sancto Victore, *Commentariorum in Hierarchiam Caelestem S. Dionysii Areopagitae*, II.1, expos. (PL 175), 956C. See also Paul Rorem, “Dionysian Uplifting (Anagogy) in Bonaventure’s *Reductio*,” *Franciscan Studies* 70 (2012): 183-188.

95. Cf. Iohannes Scotus Eriugena, *Expositiones in Hierarchiam Caelestem* (CCCM 31), 1-20, l. 1-664.

96. Cf. *ibid.* (CCCM 31), 14, l. 494-498: “*Quoniam impossibile est nostro animo ad immaterialem illam ascendere caelestium ierarchiarum et imitationem et contemplationem nisi ea que secundum ipsum est, materiali manuductione utatur. Visibiles quidem formas invisibilis pulchritudinis imaginationes arbitrans*,” Panofsky, *Zur Philosophie des Abtes Suger*, 113.

97. Cf. Michel Bur, *L’abate Suger: statista e architetto della luce* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1995), 194; Poirel, “Symbolice et anagogice,” 158; Gasparri, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, xxxiii.

together. For instance, paleographical studies demonstrate the collaboration of the Abbey of Saint-Denis and Saint-Victor in the writing of royal charts.<sup>98</sup> And as Poirel summarizes: “Neighbours by location, related in the king’s service, linked by personal contacts, the two abbeys are moreover united by a common spiritual ideal.”<sup>99</sup>

In any case, the hypothesis made by Rudolph is very plausible: “It is inconceivable that Suger and Hugh did not know each other in a city of 2,500 to 3,000 inhabitants.”<sup>100</sup> Rudolph also remarks how the imagery of the portals of Saint Denis have much in common with *The Mystic Ark* of Hugh of Saint Victor.<sup>101</sup> Moreover, Hugh would have helped Suger to promote “new public art,” through the portals.<sup>102</sup>

And here we find one of the most relevant characteristics of Suger’s project of *clarification*. Those portals — the first to be considered authentically Gothic and which “reached a new level of expressiveness”<sup>103</sup> — had much to do with the metaphysics of light behind Suger’s project. In fact, there one can find the first impulse to go from the material to the immaterial.

And Suger composed some verses to express that idea of light: from the material, one can be conducted to the immaterial, to Light in essence. That is why he left in the *tituli* of those portals (transmitted in *De adm.*) the abundant usage of the concept of *claritas* and its derivatives:

*Nobile claret opus, sed opus quod nobile claret  
Clarificet mentes ut eant per lumina vera  
Ad verum lumen, ubi Christus janua vera.  
Quale sit intus in his determinat aurea porta.  
Mens hebes ad verum per materialia surgit,  
Et demersa prius hac visa luce resurgit.*<sup>104</sup>

These *versiculi* clearly show the elevation from the material brightness to the Prime Light through a kind of illumination. According to Gasparri, those poems were a paraphrase of the first chapter of Pseudo-Dionysius’ *De caelesti hierarchia*<sup>105</sup> in reference to Neo-Platonic light metaphysics.<sup>106</sup> And, as Gasparri puts it,

98. Cf. Poirel, “Symbolice et anagogice,” 155.

99. *Ibid.*, 156.

100. Rudolph, “Inventing the Gothic Portal,” 569.

101. *Ibid.*, 589.

102. *Ibid.*, 593.

103. *Ibid.*, 569.

104. *De adm.*, II, 4, 116 (emphasis added).

105. Cf. Gasparri, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, 209.

106. Cf. Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, 164-165.

concerning his philosophical ideas, the influence that Hugh would have had on Suger should be considered, personally or through his commentary on *De caelesti hierarchia* and *De arca Noe*.<sup>107</sup> The very same tractates of Dionysius represent the encounter of those two worlds, of God and creature. And as there is in the edifice a hierarchy of lights coming from the highest parts, this similarity is also present in the Areopagite.<sup>108</sup> The whole *Corpus Dionysiacum*, by the way, “is widely expressive of the concept of the Church-edifice (Basilical, Byzantine, Gothic); of the Church as sacred art and of the sacred icon, intended in a Dionysian manner as an incitement to go from the visible toward the invisible.”<sup>109</sup> According to Speer, the interpretation of the Church as allegory is the main aspect of Suger’s intention in the basilica’s reform rather than being inspired on the *Corpus Dionysiacum* itself.<sup>110</sup> But as I have tried to demonstrate, those features do not overlap, but they rather complement one another.

From this perspective, Suger, in the opening of *De consecratione*, writes:

The admirable power of one unique and supreme reason equalizes by proper composition the disparity between things human and divine; and what seems mutually to conflict by inferiority of origin and contrariety of nature is conjoined by the single, delightful concordance of one superior, well-tempered harmony.<sup>111</sup>

According to Gasparri, “this sole phrase summarizes the whole Neoplatonic thought, probable synthesis of the philosophy of Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor (*Mystagogia*), John Scotus and Hugh of Saint-Victor, and at the same time the motivation of his [Suger’s] whole work.”<sup>112</sup> And, thus we may conclude that “surely Suger’s writings stand in a Dionysian tradition.”<sup>113</sup>

107. Cf. Gasparri, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, 209.

108. Cf. Scazzoso, *Ricerche sulla struttura del linguaggio*, 134.

109. *Ibid.*, 185.

110. Cf. Andreas Speer, “Abt Sugers Schriften zur fränkischen Königsabtei Saint-Denis,” in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, by Sugerius [de Sancto Dionysio], trans./ed. Andreas Speer et al. (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 32-33.

111. *De cons.*, I, 2 (trans. Panofsky, 83): “*Divinorum humanorumque disparitatem, unius et singularis, summeque rationis vis admirabilis contemperando coequat: et que originis inferioritate, et naturae contrarietate invicem repugnare videntur, ipsa sola unius superioris moderate harmonie conveniencia grata concopulat.*”

112. Cf. Gasparri, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, 179.

113. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 82.

Based on the studies of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Suger's "platonizing tendencies" were undoubtedly shared by his contemporaries.<sup>114</sup> However his writings do not include deeper insights of Dionysian thought than those contained in Hugh of Saint Victor, for example. Moreover, we cannot discern *strong* congruencies of Suger with so many *possible* authors, as Lindscheid-Burdich attempts to demonstrate through a lexicographical method.<sup>115</sup> As an example of this analysis, let us take the verse "Aula micat medio clarificata suo." This could have been originally, according to her, from Prosperus Aquitanus ("claret opus Domini totam qui construit aulam"); Venantius Fortunatus ("emicat aula potens, solido perfecta metallo, [...] invitat locus ipse deum sub luce perenni"); Notkerus Sangallensis ("Haec domus aulae caelestis / probatur particeps / in laude regis caelorum / et cerimoniais / et lumine continuo aemulans / civitatem sine tenebris").<sup>116</sup> Although not probable, these may have been influences at play. But associating only a few commonly used words in this way in lexicographical research, yields many other possible relationships.<sup>117</sup> Or, to use a modern example, if you google the words "art," "medieval" and "philosophy" the return is no fewer than 3,170,000 results.<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore, a problem arises with those who do not consider the Dionysian tradition in Suger's thought, or even that "aesthetics" in itself exist for him. Those are, in general, the same authors who altogether dismiss the existence of aesthetics throughout the Middle Ages, such as Speer<sup>119</sup> recently proposes. In fact, in this case, there

114. Cf. Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 131.

115. Susanne Lindscheid-Burdich, "Beobachtungen zu Sugers Versinschriften in *De administratione*," in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, by Sugerius, eds. Andreas Speer et al. (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 112-113.

116. *Ibid.*, 114-115.

117. Cf. e.g. *Liber sacramentorum Augustodunensis*, 1491 (CCL 159B): "prop[r] itio splendore clarifica cunctam que familiam tuam ad aule huius suffragia concurrentem benignus exaudi eiusdem que conditorum omnia desideria cordis conplacita tibi pius adimple;" *Liber sacramentorum Engolismensis*, 2133 (CCL 159C): "propitio splendore clarifica, cunctam que familiam tuam ad aulae huius suffragia concurrentem benignus exaudi eiusdem que conditorum omnia desideria cordis conplacita tibi pius adimple uotis que responde, augmenta eis annos uitae et temporum felicitatem, ut per spatia longeva uiuentes, melioribus ornamentis studio eorum locus iste refulgeat;" Bernardus Claraevallensis, *Sermones super Cantica Canticatorum*, XXVII, 13, ed. cit., vol. 1, 191: "Et domus lutea, et aula regia; et corpus mortis, et templum lucis;" Bernardus Morlanensis, *De contemptu mundi*, I, v. 641-642 (ed. H. C. Hoskier), 22: "Non ibi visio, non ibi mansio luce repleta, Non locus ordinis, aulaque luminis, arva que laeta."

118. Search made on 12 Nov. 2014.

119. Cf. Andreas Speer, "Is There a Theology of the Gothic Cathedral? A Re-reading of Abbot Suger's Writings on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis," in *The mind's eye: art and theological argument in the Middle Ages*, eds. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and

would have been no influence at all from one to the other, because there is no object to be influenced. Taking Speer and Lindscheid-Burdich into consideration, Haug argues that it is difficult to imagine that the highly educated Suger would not have had access to the Dionysian Corpus; most likely it was available to him due to his privileged position in his Abbey.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, if one considers Hugh's thought in itself, one can find the connection of the theory of "spiritual construction" with the building in three dimensions. Therefore, it is perfectly plausible the existence of the relationship between the Victorine *forma mentis* and the gothic style.<sup>121</sup>

Nevertheless, for our purpose, we should consider an aspect that is very important for the philosophy of art: this perspective cannot be restricted to the writings, but rather it must be considered, evidently, the very same works of art and the general background. Thus, Suger's paraphrase of Pseudo-Dionysius is not to be found only in words or in his singular way of writing,<sup>122</sup> but in the *novum opus* itself. "Suger's use of Dionysian aesthetics is not the creative inspiration for the new style but rather a *perceptive* commentary on it."<sup>123</sup> It was through architecture that he represented the most important features of Dionysius's *De caelesti hierarchia*:<sup>124</sup> first of all,

Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 66; Andreas Speer, "L'abbé Suger et le trésor de Saint-Denis: une approche de l'expérience artistique au Moyen Âge," in Poirel, ed., *L'abbé Suger*, 78. He also denies Dionysian influence due to absence of the characteristic *via negationis* in Suger. But the based tractate used by the Dionysian tradition is *De caelesti hierarchia*, the less complex of all and in which there is not as much as the nowadays famous Dionysian language (such as mystics and those oppositions such as "brilliant darkness" (*De mystica theologia*, I, 1 997B) and the *via negationis* itself. In any the attribute of Divine Light is a *positive* one, or as Dionysius itself states that the "superabundant light, [is] that perfection preceding all perfection" (*De caelesti hierarchia*, X, 3, 273C).

120. Cf. Walter Haug, "Gab es eine mittelalterliche Ästhetik aus platonischer Tradition?," in *Neuplatonismus und Ästhetik: zur Transformationsgeschichte des Schönen*, eds. Verena Olejniczak Lobsien and Claudia Olk (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), 29.

121. Cf. Dominique Poirel, "Métaphysique de la lumière dans la tradition dionysienne latine," in *Lumière et vision dans les sciences et dans les arts: De l'antiquité au XVIIe siècle*, eds. Michel Hochmann and Danielle Jacquart, Genève: Droz, 2010, 101.

122. Cf. Françoise Gasparri, "Le latin de Suger, abbé de Saint-Denis (1081-1151)," in *Les historiens et le latin médiéval*, eds. Monique Goulet and Michel Parisse (Paris: Publ. de la Sorbonne, 2001).

123. *Roem, Pseudo-Dionysius*, 82 (emphasis added).

124. Cf. *De caelesti hierarchia*, I.1 (120AB): "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights. But there is something more. Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in."

the luminous character,<sup>125</sup> but also the hierarchy and the processive character of light, the aesthetical and anagogical manner — the *reditus* of man through beautiful things — or, using Dionysian terminology, a theophany,<sup>126</sup> which is symbolized by Suger's own epitaph: "*Cui rapuit lucem lux septima Theophaniae, / Veram vera Deo Theophania dedit.*"<sup>127</sup> In any case, Suger puts himself under the patronage of Dionysius, the *Areopagite* in a formal way: "*Sugerius, Sancti Dionisii ariopagite abbas.*"<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, the Abbot of Saint-Denis wrote an original tractate constructed of stone, and this was his most innovative enterprise. Undoubtedly, after him, art was decisively transfigured in the Middle Ages. The Gothic was thus the focal point of many important cities in Europe. And henceforth, Suger was the one who influenced medieval thought, directly or indirectly, for centuries to come.

### Conclusion

It is known that Dionysius and his true identity were even debated within the very Abbey of Saint-Denis by Abelard, immediately preceding Suger's ascension to the office of Abbot. The "anonymous author" of the fifth-sixth century was undoubtedly "known," but it remains a mystery up to what point he *studied* in the Abbey. Likewise, the precise role of Hugh of St. Victor in the aesthetical conception of Suger is unknown. What is certain is that the Abbot of Saint-Denis follows the Dionysian tradition, as Rorem attests:

The Dionysian corpus certainly had a major impact on the way beauty was understood theologically in the Latin Middle Ages, not least in the towering, [83] luminous beauty of Gothic architecture. Among the most visible, concrete and well-known legacies of the Middle Ages, this architecture is linked, ironically, to one of the most evasive, elusive, and least-known figures of earlier Christianity, the yet-anonymous author of *The Celestial Hierarchy*.<sup>129</sup>

125. Koch calls it the "Hand- oder Grundbuch der Lichtsymbolik" (cf. Josef Koch, "Über die Lichtsymbolik im Bereich der Philosophie und der Mystik des Mittelalters," *Studium Generale* 13 [1960], 656).

126. Cf. *De caelesti hierarchia*, IV.3 (180B); Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 2001), 67; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Ästhetik: Klerikale Stile*, vol. 2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961), 183.

127. Simon Chèvre-d'Or, "Épitaphe de Suger," in Gasparri, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 377.

128. Sugerius, "Chartes n. 16" in Gasparri, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, 265.

129. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 82-83.

We see how strongly the passion for splendour manifested under every possible form is revealed in the writings of Suger. Even though it was not customary at that time, he left two writings on the new dedication of Saint-Denis with impressive details regarding his Gothic aesthetics. Additionally, without ignoring proportionality, but making use of it to obtain *claritas*, he created an architectural style that unites seemingly disparate elements such as elegance and strength, simplicity and refinement, and he successfully recalled to the human spirit — like bats incapable of seeing the light of the sun<sup>130</sup> — the various *lumina* which lead to the true *Lux*, when the theory of participation is applied.

Through that architectural masterpiece, of a verticality that elevates the mind, of a filtered polychrome that shuns the superfluous, and of a splendour never before seen in the construction of an edifice, he sought new lights for human life, even from the ethical perspective. From Saint-Denis the anagogical sense of art was perfected, and going beyond material limits, prompted the senses to reflect with respect on immaterial realities.

Through the Gothic transmitted by those monuments, the metaphysics of light became “visible” in matter and by means of this reinforced the splendours of pulchritude. Regarding the idealization of Suger, it is sufficient to recall the words of his biographer: “*Quis enim ejus vitam digno possit effere preconio?*”<sup>131</sup> And further on he explains the details of the Sugerian undertaking: “*Cui praecipua semper fuit intentio vel studium ut nobile beati Dionysii monasterium omni gloria et honore attolleret, religiose ordinaret, et ecclesiam redditibus opulentam, aedificiis ampliolem, ornamentis decoratam redderet.*”<sup>132</sup>

Undoubtedly aesthetics was forever changed with the emergence of the Gothic style. And with Suger, splendour had never been so visible, nor the invisible so splendid.

130. Cf. Aristoteles, *Metaphysica*, II.1 (993b9-11); Thomas de Aquino, *Q. d. De malo*, q. 16, a. 8, ad 2.

131. Guillelmus Mediolanensis, *Vita Sugerii*, I, in *op. cit.*, 361

132. *Ibid.*