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Space and Beholder in Nineteenth-Century Sacred Architecture¹

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I

In his sonnet *Cathedrals etc.*, published in the third series of *Ecclesiastical Sketches (From the Restoration to the Present Time)*, William Wordsworth wrote:

Open your gates, ye everlasting Piles!
Types of the spiritual Church which God hath reared;
Not loth we quit the newly-hallowed sward
And humble altar, 'mid your sumptuous aisles
To kneel, or thrid your intricate defiles,
Or down the nave to pace in motion slow;
Watching with upward eye, the tall tower grow
And mount, at every step, with living wiles
Instinct—to rouse the heart and lead the will
By a bright ladder to the world above.²

In the poem two interrelated modes of reception were presented of a Gothic—and by analogy, also a neo-Gothic—church: one of these modes may be called 'ecstatic', and the other, 'kinaesthetic'.

The former was related to the impression made on the beholder by the soaring building, especially its tower rising to the sky. First, this view sets off affects, this being the lowest, basic and instinctive reaction (*affectio*) aroused in the human body by external objects ('mount [...] with living wiles instinct').³ This bodily movement is quickly followed by a more conscious reaction developed in the form of feelings ('rouse the heart') which culminate in a desire ('lead the will') to detach oneself from the earth and rise into the sky.

¹ The article was written with the financial support of the De Brzezie Lanckoroński Foundation.

² William Wordsworth, 'Cathedrals etc.', in: *idem, The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Henry Reed, Philadelphia, 1848, p. 309.

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley, San Francisco, 1988, pp. 48–51.

Such a mode of reception of a Gothic church was, in fact, typical since the end of the eighteenth century.⁴ Chateaubriand wrote in general that ‘On ne pouvait entrer dans une église gothique sans éprouver une sorte de frissonnement et un sentiment vague de la divinité’.⁵ In the nineteenth century, most authors concentrated on the church interior, demonstrating that the vertical orientation of piers and pointed-arch vaulting (as in the tower) as well as the reduction of the materiality of the walls, replaced by slim supports and huge areas of glazing, should be understood as a desire, typical of Christianity, to leave the earth and reach the heavens.

In the experience of a Gothic building described above, its spatial disposition and division into individual elements, such as a nave, aisles, transept and chancel did not really matter. A building was therefore experienced as a whole, as a hollowed out solid, which by its upward orientation, both inside and outside, was the expression of the Christian soul and of the spirit of prayer. Thus, the real edifice was becoming a kind of allegory or metaphor: its physical substance was only a point of departure for the formation of a figurative meaning. George Aylisse Poole made it explicit when he wrote that: ‘A Gothic Cathedral does as it were, and scare *by metaphor*, praise God. It is not merely *a place wherein*, but *with which* the church worships the Almighty. Its vast and complex *unity*: its simple melody, so to speak, and its full and intricate harmony, is as a noble hymn of praise continually ascending to the Most High, and carrying up with it the chorus of accordant hearts’.⁶ One could find many more similar statements. Joris-Karl Huysmans called the Gothic cathedral ‘an allegory of the mystical life’⁷, while John Mason Neale and Benjamin Webb termed it ‘the petrification of our religion’.⁸ For Coventry Patmore, the source of the affective potential of this architecture lay generally in its walls, and not in the individual parts of the building: ‘The very walls of a Gothic church “teach” as no language can—not by appealing to thought, as words do, but by an actual effect upon the senses’.⁹

Such an understanding of the Gothic church suggested that there existed an appropriately formed, ideal recipient. It would be a person who, while standing, kneeling or walking, went into a kind of ecstasy. According to nineteenth-century

⁴ Wojciech Bałus, *Gotik ohne Gott? Die Symbolik des Kirchengebäudes im 19. Jahrhundert*, trans. Ewa Górbiel and Tomasz Szybisty, Frankfurt am Main, 2016, pp. 101–104.

⁵ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme—Nouvelle édition augmentée*, Arvensa Editions, 2014, p. 351.

⁶ George Aylisse Poole, *The Appropriate Character of Church Architecture*, London, 1842, p. 86 (original emphasis).

⁷ Joris Karl Huysmans, *The Cathedral*, trans. Clara Bell [1898], p. 332, https://www.goodreads.com/ebooks/download/478794.The_Cathedral (accessed on 20 October 2016).

⁸ John Mason Neale and Benjamin Webb, ‘Introductory Essay’, in: *The Symbolism of Churches and Church Ornaments. A Translation of the First Book of the Rationale Divinorum Officiorum Written by William Durandus*, New York, 1893, p. LX (first edition: Leeds 1843).

⁹ Coventry Patmore, ‘Churches and Preaching-Halls’, in: *idem, Courage in Politics and Other Essays 1885–1896*, Oxford, 1921, p. 193.

theories, the reception of a work of art and architecture was a process unfolding in time: the beholder was moving and surveying an object with his eyes.¹⁰ The visual experiences could be further enhanced by other factors, e.g. sound, increasing with time. The Polish architect Jan Sas Zubrzycki wrote in his *Philosophy of Architecture* about the Gothic cathedral: ‘As soon as the music sounds in the choir of tones, uniting with the voice of the soul, then is the ecstasy already boundless’.¹¹

The ‘ecstatic’ character of reception originated also in the specific concept of the corporeality of the beholder: ‘It is all very well to say that prayer should be as easily and fervently offered in a whitewashed conventicle as in a Gothic cathedral. Theorists on prayer naturally say so; but do people who pray say so? It may or may not be humiliating to admit that “the body has so much to do with religion” that the sight of torrents of lines soaring from floor to roof-ridge helps the soul to soar in prayer, or that the surroundings of traceries and foliage expressly designed to symbolize life as moving freely in the strictest bonds of law conveys the peace of submission into the heart. It is a simple fact that it is so’.¹² The vertical orientation of a Gothic church was thus experienced bodily as dynamics and freedom (within the limits of natural laws) enclosed within the architectural substance, but this feeling was transposed into purely spiritual states. Affective sensations of ascending resulted in the prayerful upward flight of the *soul*, whereas the symbols of life imparted tranquillity to the *heart*. The body merely played the part of a medium, a transmitter of affects. This eventually led to the negation of the body—as much as earthly existence allowed. In Huysmans, and earlier in Wölfflin, the svelte, willowy figures, hardly touching the earth became the equivalents of a dematerialised Gothic church: ‘This church appeared as a supreme effort of matter striving for lightness, rejecting, as though it were a burden, the diminished weight of its walls and substituting a less ponderous and more lucent matter, replacing the opacity of stone by the diaphanous texture of glass. [...] It was as slender and colourless as Roger Van der Weyden’s Virgins, who are so fragile, so ethereal, that they might blow away were they not held down to earth by the weight of their brocades and trains. Here was the same mystical conception of a long-drawn body and an ardent soul, which, unable to free itself completely from that body, strove to purify it by reducing it, refining it, almost distilling it to a fluid’.¹³

¹⁰ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1996; Régine Bonnefoit, ‘Der “Spaziergang des Auges” im Bilde. Reflexionen zur Wahrnehmung von Kunstwerken bei William Hogarth, Adolf von Hildebrand und Paul Klee’, *Kritische Berichte* 2004, 32, no. 4, pp. 6–18.

¹¹ Jan Sas Zubrzycki, *Filozofia architektury. Jej teoria i estetyka* [Philosophy of Architecture. Its Theory and Aesthetics], Kraków, 1894, p. 124.

¹² Patmore, ‘Churches and Preaching-Halls...’, p. 193.

¹³ Huysmans, *The Cathedral*, pp. 110–111; Frederic J. Schwartz, ‘Cathedrals and Shoes: Concept of Style in Wölfflin and Adorno’, *New German Critique* 1999, 76, pp. 5–7.

The second of the modes of the reception of a Gothic church described by Wordsworth, the kinaesthetic one, envisaged a different concept of corporeality than the one illustrated above. The poet instructed the reader, 'down the nave to pace in motion slow'. So the beholder was supposed to use his body, but not in order to dispose of it while experiencing the cathedral and exchange it for the spiritual ascents, but to actually move around the building.

The kinaesthetic experience of a building was described by the German art historian August Schmarsow as late as the end of the nineteenth century. This was related to the then recent discovery of space as the basic factor determining building's interiors, which in turn was the consequence of adopting psychological foundations in the theory of reception of a work of art.¹⁴ According to Schmarsow, only a moving man can, through the faculty of proprioception and the bodily experience of the length (measured by his steps while marching around the building), breadth (reckoned by turning the head to the right and left and by outstretched arms) and height (thanks to the upright position of the body) perceive the disposition of the building's interior and determine it correctly.¹⁵ This does not mean, however, that people had not made use of the dynamic experience of space before the phenomenon was theoretically laid out. Already Johann Wolfgang Goethe wrote, 'One would think that architecture as a fine art works solely for eyes. Instead, it should work primarily for the sense of mechanical motion in human body'.¹⁶ In Wordsworth's sonnet quoted above, the discovery of 'intricate defiles' in the interior of the cathedral clearly points to experiencing the 'sumptuous aisles' through the body moving along them as if in a steep-sided, narrow gorge.

¹⁴ Stefan Muthesius, 'Przestrzeń architektoniczna około 1900. Czy odkrycie przez historyków sztuki "Raumstile" wpłynęło na formę pruskich neorokokowych klatek schodowych? ['Architectural Space around 1900. Did the Discovery of the 'Raumstile' Influence the Form of Prussian Neo-Rococo Staircases?], *Kwartalnik Architektury i Urbanistyki* 1991, 36, pp. 27–33; Mitchell W. Schwarzer, 'The Emergence of Architectural Space: August Schmarsow's Theory of "Raumgestaltung"', *Assemblage* 1991, 15, pp. 54–55; Harry Francis Malgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, 'Introduction', in: *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics 1873–1893*, ed. Harry Francis Malgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, Santa Monica, 1994, pp. 58–64; Ákos Moravánszky, 'Die Wahrnehmung des Raumes', in: *Architekturtheorie im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine kritische Anthologie*, ed. Ákos Moravánszky, Wien and New York, 2003, pp. 123–129; Cornelia Jöchner, "'Wie kommt Bewegung" in die Architekturtheorie? Zum Raum-Debatte am Beginn der Moderne', *Wolkenkuckucksheim* 2004, 9, no. 1, <http://www.cloud-cuckoo.net/openarchive/wolke/deu/Themen/041/Joechner/joechner.htm> (accessed on 30 November 2016).

¹⁵ August Schmarsow, 'The Essence of Architectural Creation', trans. Harry Francis Malgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, in: *Empathy, Form...*, pp. 288–290.

¹⁶ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Baukunst 1795', in: *Goethe Werke – Hamburger Ausgabe*, Bd. 12, München, 1994, p. 36. English translation after: Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1977, p. 152.

The nineteenth-century theoretical texts on sacred architecture demonstrate that this mode of perception was known at that time. The kinaesthetic experience was associated with the interpretation of the church building as an allegory of spiritual life. Karl Schnaase wrote: 'The higher form of the interior is not the centre, but the middle line, a *perspective* that, being able to infinitely lengthen and divide, more closely corresponds to the movement of spiritual life'.¹⁷ Józef Łepkowski, a professor of archaeology (including medieval) at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, declared that the interior of the church illustrates the 'Christian's way of life': 'in the church, each of its parts explains the Christian's way of life and the mystery of eternity. You enter through baptism next to the baptismal font, then you proceed along the nave, which is [your] life and history, so that you can reach the sanctified part, the high altar, where you are supposed to obtain: grace, unction, Sacraments and blessing'.¹⁸

A similar way of thinking can also be found in the texts from the circles related to The Ecclesiological Society. Neale and Webb, in their introduction to the English translation of the treatise of Durandus, stated broadly that the entrance to the church was located in the west, 'for it is only by way of the Church Militant that we can hope to enter the Church Triumphant'¹⁹, whereas Poole explained why the baptismal font was placed next to the main entrance: 'As the Porch is the entrance to the material Temple, so is the Holy Baptism, which is represented by The Font, the entrance into the spiritual Temple, the Church of Christ'.²⁰ He also drew attention to the fact that the church pavement should be properly designed: 'The arrangement of the floor may be made equally to promote or to destroy breadth and effect. The eye is necessarily turned eastward at the entrance of a church, and that direction ought to be encouraged and satisfied'.²¹ As a commentary to this last statement, he quoted a fragment of a poem by Frederick William Faber that connects man's path of life with the orientation towards the east and paradise, but that also includes allusions to the church's interior (the baptismal font and altar) in the image of a pilgrimage through the world:

Our life lies eastward: every day
Some little of that mystic way
By trembling feet is trod:

¹⁷ Karl Schnaase, *Niederländische Briefe*, Stuttgart, 1834, p. 212 (original emphasis). See also: Hans Aurenhammer, *Raumprobleme. Alois Riegl und die Interpretation der altchristlichen Basilica um 1900*, in: *Angekommen auf Ithaka. Festgabe für Jürgen Borchhardt zum 80. Geburtstag*, eds. Fritz Blakolmer, Martin Seyer and Hubert D. Szemethy, Wien, 2016, p. 288.

¹⁸ [Józef] Łepkowski, 'Kościół katolicki zewnątrz i wewnątrz oraz nieco o krzyżach' [Catholic Church Outside and Inside, and Some Remarks on Crosses], in *Juliusza Wildta Kalendarz powszechny na rok 1861*, Kraków, 1860, pp. 20–21.

¹⁹ Neale and Webb, 'Introductory Essay...', p. CI.

²⁰ Poole, *The Appropriate Character...*, p. 61.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

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In thoughtful fast, and quiet feast,
Our thoughts go traveling to the East
To our incarnate GOD.
Fresh from the Font, our childhood's prime
To life's most oriental time, –
.....
Still doth it eastward turn in prayer,
And rear its saving altar there.
Still doth it eastward turn in creed,
While faith in awe each gracious deed
Of her dear Saviour's love doth plead,
Still doth it turn at every line
To faith fair East—in sweet mute sign
That through our weary strife and pain,
We crave our Eden back again.²²

Łepkowski, Neale and Webb associated the kinaesthetic experience of the church with religious meaning (Schnaase's 'spiritual life') attributed to particular parts of the sacred building. For only by considering the nave as the image of the earthly Church (*Ecclesia militans*) and the chancel as the image of the heavenly Church (*Ecclesia triumphans*) was it possible to give the journey from the western side to the sanctuary in the eastern part of the edifice the sense of the spiritual pilgrimage to heaven.

What strikes us when reading the nineteenth-century treatises on architectural symbolism is a desire to assign each and every element of the church building a fixed meaning. According to many contemporary authors, sacred architecture was a kind of language.²³ Poole wrote: 'I proceed to show [...] that Ecclesiastical Architecture is a language: that it has always, so long it has deserved its name, aimed in expression'.²⁴ The conviction that architectural symbolism had a linguistic character derived from the fact that meanings assigned to churches resulted from historical (or 'archaeological', as it was then put) investigation. In the nineteenth century, both the Anglican and the Catholic Churches established that the character and essence of Christian art had been lost in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and that it was time to depart from the errors committed then. A solution to the problem was sought for in the Middle Ages, when the allegedly true church art was believed to have flourished. The re-establishment of the rules and principles governing that art was supposed to bring about the revival of sacred architecture and related arts. Numerous

²² Poole, *The Appropriate Character...*, note on p. 95; Frederick William Faber, 'The Mourner's Dream, part 2: The Voyage', in: *idem, The Cherwell Water-Lily and Other Poem*, London, 1840, pp. 227 and 229.

²³ Chris Brooks, *Signs for the Times: Symbolic Realism in the Mid-Victorian World*, London, 1984, pp. 59 and 62.

²⁴ Poole, *The Appropriate Character...*, p. 18.

scholars studied old writings and treatises, producing models and instructions intended for contemporary artists.²⁵ According to those scholars, the principles governing the symbolism and iconography in the Gothic period were strictly defined, and hence they were a kind of ‘hieroglyphic script’, that is, precisely, a language.²⁶ As a result, in sacred architecture, efforts were made to emphasize spatial boundaries between individual parts of the building. Regarding architectural signs as a language, it was necessary to define with clarity all parts of the church, because only by constructing—in Schmarsow’s words²⁷—a ‘crystalline’, and not ‘organic’, spatial structure, that is, by avoiding fluid transitions and blurred borders, was it possible to clearly articulate the nave, chancel, or sanctuary. Simultaneously, the ‘crystalline’ separation was necessary in order to specify the symbolic basis for the next stages of a ‘Christian’s way of life’ (from *Ecclesia militans* to *Ecclesia triumphans*). Thus, a kinaesthetic perception of such a building was not exclusively the result of the beholder’s natural propensity to move inside the building (as Schmarsow described it²⁸), but it derived from the symbolic structure of the church.

III

Thus, a full–perfect–experience of a Gothic and a neo-Gothic church in the nineteenth century consisted of two different elements. On the one hand, it required physical movement within the church’s interior, and on the other hand, an almost total disposal of the body in order to be able to spiritually soar to the heavens. The physical movement and sensory experience served above all for deciphering the symbolism recorded in the spatial structure of the church, in its architecture, decoration and furnishings, as the Christian way of life (font: beginning of life – nave: earth, *Ecclesia militans* – chancel: heaven, *Ecclesia triumphans*). The ‘flights’, in turn, although they started with kinaesthesia and affects located in the body, were supposed to sublimate into purely spiritual experiences, verging on completely freeing oneself from the body, because they were caused by the vertical orientation of the almost ethereal interiors permeated with light, whose actual spatial arrangement was in that case irrelevant. Thus, the first of these elements associated the experience with the actual architectural space, while the second, by depriving buildings of their materiality and clearly delineated space, changed them into metaphors of the ascent to heaven.

²⁵ Balus, *Gotik ohne Gott...*, pp. 73–86.

²⁶ Peter and Dorothea Diemer, ‘Christliche Hieroglyphen. Vorgotische Bauplastik als Bilder-rätsel’, *Zeitschrift für Schweizerische Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte* 1997, 54, pp. 235–242.

²⁷ August Schmarsow, *Barock und Rokoko. Das Malerische in der Architektur*, Berlin, 2001, pp. 8–9.

²⁸ Schwarzer, ‘The Emergence of Architectural Space...’, p. 55; Jöchner, ‘Wie kommt Bewegung...’.

Both ways of beholding the church were based on the belief in the existence of ‘Christian reality’. According to Neale and Webb, in Christianity, ‘by the outward and visible form is signified something inward and spiritual,’²⁹ while for pagans, reality is purely material. Therefore, it was not enough to build a church out of bricks or stone. It was only the saturation of the edifice with religious meanings, that is, giving it a ‘sacramental’ character, that made the material structure a fully ‘real’ creation.³⁰ As noted by Neale and Webb, ‘*Sacramentality* ran through all the arrangements and details of Christian architecture, emblematical of Christian discipline, and suggested by Christian devotion; then must the discipline have been practiced, and the devotion *felt*, before a Christian temple can be reared’.³¹ Hence, the Christian reality required not only knowledge of the principles of symbolism, but also of metaphors that resulted from the discovery in architecture of references to a supernatural, heavenly reality. Thanks to the symbolism the church could be perceived as a ‘Christian way of life’, and thanks to the inclusion of an emotional element rooted in piety, to be experienced as ‘the allegory of the mystical life’ or ‘the petrification of our religion’ – a ‘type of spiritual Church’ as Wordsworth wrote in his sonnet.

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²⁹ Neale and Webb, ‘Introductory Essay...’, p. XXVII.

³⁰ James F. White, *The Cambridge Movement. The Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival*, Cambridge, 1962, pp. 70–71.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. XXVI (emphasis mine).

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Na idealne doświadczanie gotyckiej i neogotyckiej świątyni w XIX w. składają się dwa różne elementy. Z jednej strony wymagało ono fizycznego ruchu po wnętrzu kościoła (doświadczenie kinestetyczne), a z drugiej – niemal całkowitego pozbycia się ciała, aby człowiek wchodzący do świątyni mógł się duchowo wznieść do niebios (doświadczenie „ekstazy”). Ruch fizyczny oraz zmysłowe doświadczanie służyły przede wszystkim rozszyfrowaniu symbolizmu tkwiącego w przestrzennej strukturze kościoła, jego architekturze, dekoracji i wyposażeniu jako chrześcijańskiej drogi życia (chrzcielnica – początek życia, nawa główna – ziemia, *Ecclesia militans*, chór – niebo, *Ecclesia triumphans*). „Wzloty”, choć rozpoczynały się od kinestezji i efektów odbieranych w ciele, miały się sublimować w czysto duchowe doświadczanie – na granicy wręcz całkowitego wyswobodzenia się z ciała, ponieważ rodziły się na skutek pionowego ukierunkowania wręcz eterycznych wnętrz przenikniętych światłem, w których faktyczny układ przestrzenny w tym momencie nie miał znaczenia. Pierwszy zatem z tych elementów łączył doświadczanie z konkretną przestrzenią architektoniczną, podczas gdy drugi – pozbawiając budowle ich materialności oraz wyraźnie wydzielonych przestrzeni, przekształcał je w metaforyczne wstępowanie na niebios. Obie formy odbioru świątyni opierały się na wierze w „chrześcijańską rzeczywistość”. Ten szczególny typ rzeczywistości wymagał nie tylko wiedzy na temat zasad symbolizmu, lecz także metafor, które wynikały z odkrywania w architekturze odniesień do tego, co stanowi nadprzyrodzoną niebiańską rzeczywistość. Właśnie dzięki symbolice świątynia mogła być postrzegana jako „chrześcijańska droga życia”, a dzięki włączeniu pierwiastka zakorzenionego w religijności – być doświadczana jako „alegoria życia mistycznego” czy „petryfikacja naszej religii” – „rodzaj kościoła duchowego”, jak to nazwał w swoim sonecie Wordsworth.