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**Figurative Thinking and Mystical Experience in the
Baroque Age**

Itineraries in 16th- and 17th-century Spiritual Writing

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The Baroque age and the architectural metaphor

The use of architectural metaphors in religious texts is overwhelming. This is, to the least, a consequence of the Old and New Testament's numerous architectural references. The Baroque period offers a propitious climate for a rich interchange between architecture, devotion and texts. The (Counter-)Reformation was a welcome stimulant to rethink the role of the arts (including architecture) in devotional practice, while the Baroque crisis created a mindset that was profitable and applicable to the investigation of the human soul. Not only did both investigations resonate against a common background of a spiritual and psychological crisis, they also shared a common vocabulary to describe the origins and effects of this crisis. By means of introspection, the psychology of the human soul shared its hidden chambers with the apogee of the mystical experience. As Benedetta Papasogli has brilliantly demonstrated in "Le fond du cœur", spatial representations and architectural metaphors served the moral introspection and the rethinking of spiritual representations from the late humanists over the mystics to the Jansenists. Inner and outer space, clarity and obscurity, monumentality and confinement are the constituents of Baroque magnificence that encompasses the secret realm of that which cannot be expressed in words, the "non-dit". The aim of my presentation is to examine the role of architectural metaphors in 17th-century French spiritual texts. I will analyse the status and function of the architectural representations by exploring the structuring and incentive role of the architectural figure or itinerary in the devotee's spiritual journey.

Architecture in moral and spiritual texts

The analysis of the status of the architectural metaphor in Baroque mystical texts needs some broader introduction on the use

of the *figura* in these texts. Results of earlier research done by Agnès Guiderdoni and Ralph Dekoninck on *Figurabilité* have demonstrated that in the early modern period, *figura* (or figure) commonly acted as an interface between several dimensions of reality, including the material world and the conceptual, the concrete and the abstract. "Figure" refers to the dialectical movement between reality and representation which was at the core of the theological discussion since the (Counter-)Reformation. Hence, *figura* and especially the derived notion of "figurabilité" are to be understood as a process of making visible what initially belongs to the reality of the invisible or ineffable through the figurative. As a consequence, the concept of "figure" had a considerable importance in mystical theology based on the experience of the ultimate love and union with God. 17th-century spiritual texts discern three main types of images: material images (referring to the external world and seen by the eye), spiritual or imaginary images (images raised by the inner faculties and referring to the external world) and intellectual images (sometimes even living) images which are solely inspired by God and independent from any external stimulus. It is obvious that these categories are an early modern reading of Saint Augustine's theory on vision (discerning corporal, spiritual and intellectual vision), a theory that has been fundamental to the Christian discourse on vision and images¹. Important for our research is to see how new or alternative approaches of figurative thinking can be explored through to the mystical figurability of the indescribable. As Cousinié explains, the figure rather refers to a presence than to a visual element and consequently testifies to the possibility of an exceptional and immediate relation between men and the divine:

Il s'agirait moins de rapports autres que strictement "visual"... moins d'une image que d'une présence essentielle, l'image n'étant pas cette présence ni même lieu de son advenue mais le lieu à partir duquel elle (présence essentielle) peut, éventuellement, s'instaurer².

As I will show, it is precisely this transcendental or almost ontological use of the architectural metaphor that makes it favourable and consistent to the rendering of the spiritual experience.

¹ Frédéric COUSINIÉ, "Images et Contemplation dans le discours mystique du VII^e Siècle Français", *Dix-septième siècle*, 2006, 230, p. 33-34.

² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

“Construire sa propre demeure, c’est aussi apprendre à l’habiter”

Our journey to the Baroque understanding of the role of architecture in spiritual texts starts at the foundations of the building. In French, the etymology of “edifice” goes back to *aedificium*, which is the substantive of the verb *aedificare* > *édifier*. Both French and English commonly use “edification” when referring to the building of something and in particular to the construction of the moral man³. The verb “édifier” can be used respectively in its literal and figurative sense, referring to the construction of building and man: “*se dit figurément en Morale, et signifie, Porter à la piété par les bons discours, par les bons exemples. La lecture de l’Ecriture Sainte édifie beaucoup les Fideles*”⁴. Hence, the use of architectural metaphors in moral and religious texts is rather self-evident. The interchangeability of the disciplines was possible on the level of writing and thinking about the subject matter⁵. But what about the architectural experience itself? As Papasogli has pointed out, the experience of the inner self – often referred to as “demeure” – is dictated by two itineraries leading to at least two different concepts of the architecture of the soul. The first itinerary – the moral one – is leading to moral edification through introspection. The mystical journey equally leads the reader along the faculties and passions. But instead of edifying the reader in the knowledge and correct handling of them, the mystical journey proceeds to the creation of a potential of a maximal oblivion or deconstruction of the self, culminating in the “néant” (nothingness), where the union with God’s love takes place (i.e. a total surrender)⁶. Hence, the mystical journey transgresses the (moral) figurative sense of the architectural metaphor. Whether in image or verbal description, the architectural figure becomes part of the mystical experience as it delimits and makes visible the inner

³ S. PLOEG, *Staged experiences Architecture and Rhetoric in the Work of Sir Henry Wotton, Nicholas Hawksmoor and Sir John Vanbrugh*, Unpublished PhD, Universiteit Groningen, 2011, p. 130-131.

⁴ Antoine FURETIÈRE, *Dictionnaire Universel*, 1690 (www.lexilogos.com).

⁵ Henry Wotton – a 17th-century English author, diplomat and politician – wrote both on architecture as an operative art and on education or the moral building of man. In the Epilogue of *The Elements of Architecture* Wotton referred to a new work by his hand, namely *A Philosophical Survey Education*, which he also termed a “Kinde of Morall Architecture”.

⁶ Benedetta PAPASOGLI, *Le Fond du Cœur, Figures de l’espace intérieur au VII^e siècle*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2000, p. 233.

place or space of the mystical experience. As we shall see, this "action" (<> mystic theology = theology of passiveness) encompasses the three levels of spiritual vision/imaginative representation. Thereby, various uses of the architectural figure are adopted: from external referent to mental image, or spiritual referent. The use of the figure is thus as variegated as the figure itself, the aim however remaining the (expression of the) achievement of the spiritual journey.

The structuring role of architecture in texts

If the outward expression of mystical exaltation became a successful topic for Baroque artists, no direct evidence or representation of the spiritual journey in the human soul could be given. Hence the importance to provide the devotee with figurative testimonies, guidelines on how to reach the rapture of the soul following the total surrender to God. First, the architectural journey is often used as the guide or itinerary towards the spiritual experience. Secondly, the architectural setting conceptualises the mystical experience by creating both its mental and physical space.

Desmarests de Saint-Sorlin (French author and mystic) gives us a brilliant example of the use of architecture as a visual and mental image on different levels of the mystical journey. Saint-Sorlin guides the devotee in "*la ville de la vraie volupté*" (the city of true pleasure). This city consists of fictive buildings illustrated in engravings. Each building represents a specific step in the spiritual exercise. On a first level, architecture structures the text and the actions undertaken in the spiritual journey. The access to this heavily secured city leads from the fictive room of Eusèbe (fictive but represented as a real room belonging to the conceptual world) to the mental city of the mystical experience. The journey proceeds from buildings with a real external referent such as a tavern, an academy or a museum towards mental constructions like the house of fortune. Moreover, on a second level the architecture organises the journey along the cognitive and spiritual level of the mystical experience. The taverns, galleries, academies, etc. represent the carnal and intellectual pleasures and faculties of life which are gradually abandoned⁷. The

⁷ "*O Philédon tu es demeuré comme embourbé dans les plaisirs charnels qui sont ceux de la jeunesse de l'esprit, dont tu n'as pas pu te retirer par manque de force et de courage. Et ainsi, bien que tu te sois avancé dans l'âge, tu ne t'es point avancé dans le goust des plaisirs et tu es demeuré toujours jeune d'esprit, c'est à dire toujours insensé. De sorte*

discovery of the “*ville the la vraye volupté*” is dictated by humility, obedience, prayer and mortification. Thus, the journey in the city is simultaneously dictated by architectural splendour and poverty of the sensory impressions. There could be no greater opposition between the exuberant description of richly decorated and gilded marble rooms and the humble mindset that is to be adopted by the devotee. The splendour of the architectural settings acts as a contrastive figure for the mystical experience. Such a contradiction between the figure and the referent are typical for mystical texts and is recognized as such by Saint-Sorlin:

Scache que dans les choses de l'intérieur on fait tout le contraire de ce qui se fait dans les choses de l'extérieur [...] car le plus grand plaisir et le plus grand courage est a s'abaisser a se retrancher, a se dépouiller, a se destacher d'affection et de haine, a se faire moindre de plus en plus et a se remettre au néant⁸...

Laurent de Paris, a French Capucin, published his *Palais de l'Amour Divin* in 1602⁹. In order to describe this mystical union with God (l'amour Divin), Laurent de Paris refers to the Song of Songs, the ultimate reference to the mystical union with God. Laurent de Paris defines three necessary components or mindsets of this true love, namely the memory of God's presence, the surrender to the divine will and the quest for Divine glory. Only a fulfilment of the three will lead to the union with God, which takes place in *the sacré-saint cabinet du tres pur amour Divin*. Contrary to Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, Laurent de Paris does not use the structural and pedagogical qualities of the architectural figure. The figure is used to reveal the capacity of the soul to achieve the mystic union. The *palais de l'amour divin* points to the ultimate transformation of the soul as a place for introspection, memory and prayer into the soul as a temple (*sacré des sacrés*) of God's love.

The structuring role of the text in architecture

In the examples given so far, a mental image of architecture is created in order to structure the text, to guide the devotee and to

que tu es encore bien éloigné de la ville de la vraye volupté, dont tous ces grands plaisirs humains sont que les faubourgs et dans laquelle on gouste les divins plaisirs. — Jules DESMARETS DE SAINT-SORLIN, *Les Délices de l'esprit*, 1675, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, tableau 11, 42.

⁹ This work was an important inspiration for François de Sales.

create the possibility of the mystical experience. It is now time to question the transcendental or figurative potential of built architecture. Some examples of built architecture used to stimulate the mystical experience are well-known.

Richeome's book *Les Peintures Spirituelles* is a guided tour of the old *noviciate* of the Jesuits on the Roman hill of the Quirinal¹⁰. The aim of the book is to make the built environment part of the mystic experience. As Agnès Guiderdoni pointed out in a conference paper, the *Peintures Spirituelles* revisits and reconfigures the *noviciate* as place of memory and meditation touching at the spiritual experience – which she calls a fourth dimension – through the interaction of material and sacred figures¹¹. As Bailey has demonstrated, this is best understood when looking at the infirmary. The combination of the physical presence in the building, the biblical inscriptions and the images acts as a three-dimensional emblem, meant to dispose the onlooker towards God's will.

Les Tableaux que iusques icy vous avez veus, servent en santé, pour vous inviter à l'amour et pratique de plusieurs belles vertus ; ceux que vous verrez en ces infirmeries, sont dressez pour [...] vous monstrent les vrais remedes de vos maux, il vous apprendrons a vous disposer à la mort, si telle est la volonté de Dieu...

Through the text of Richeome, the architecture of the *noviciate* becomes an image-language, strictly coded in order to lead the associative powers of the image in desired, controlled directions while, at the same time, blocking unwanted peripheral associations of the mystical experience¹².

The Carmelite Deserts and the mystical texts produced in their seclusion – e.g. Albert de Saint Jacques's guide to the mystical

¹⁰ Richeome derives the very act of seeing and perceiving from the will of the Creator. The "species" by which we see an object can only exist by the will of the creator. Furthermore, according to Richeome, the mind of the viewer is altered by such a contact with an exterior form.

¹¹ Agnès GUIDERDONI, « Hors Texte et Hors Image. L'Univers Figural du P. Richeome SJ. »

¹² Louis RICHEOME, *La peinture spirituelle ou L'art d'admirer aimer et louer Dieu en toutes ses œuvres, et tirer de toutes profit salutere*, 1611, p. 309 (293). – K. VAN ASSCHE, "Louis Richeome, Ignatius and Philostrates in the Novice's Garden", in J. MANNING, M. VAN VAECK (eds), *The Jesuits and The Emblem Tradition*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1996, p. 4. – A "dédoublément" of the meaning of the architecture takes place: the built environment creates a place where the mystical experience can be initiated but it is the accompanying text that shares the actual spiritual journey through the figure of the architectural environment.

experience of the Desert of Marlagne – equally combine all the aspects and strengths of the Baroque image-language. The establishment of the deserts is to be understood as a “‘spatial reform’ analogous to the reform of the bodies, institutions and consciences undertaken by the mystics in Counter-Reformation, Baroque era¹³”. The Carmel Deserts housed, reified and made dramatically visible the radical apophysis which was so central to the order’s distinctive spirituality. Being a physical recreation of Mount Carmel, the deserts also created a sacred topography. Architecture itself became the figure of the mystical ideal expressed both in text and stone. Again, the visual and sacred image fuse into a fourth dimension aiming at the spiritual experience. The fusion of the holy person and the sacred space was indeed the ideal to which these Baroque Eden projects aspired.

Conclusion

The study of architectural metaphors in 17th-century spiritual writings proposes a unique possibility to see the “figurabilité” at work. As the examples cited here show, architecture is used as a figure which transcends the function of the metaphor in contemporary moral texts. While for the latter, the architectural metaphor is only used as a figurative expression, it becomes structural and ontological in spiritual writings. 17th-century mystical texts all use the figurative powers of the architectural metaphor in order to share the authentic and direct experience of God. Both the use of the image and of the architectural metaphor are based on a longstanding tradition since Augustine and 12th-century mysticism. 17th-century mystical writers inscribe themselves into this tradition by means of exploring all the possibilities of the image in the Baroque, especially the interplay between concealment and revelation (both in their literal and figurative meaning).

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¹³ T. JOHNSON, “Gardening for God: Carmelite deserts and the sacralisation of natural space in Counter-Reformation Spain”, in W. COSTER, A. SPICER (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 193.