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MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION  
OF THE EXILE AND RETURN TO PARADISE  
IN ERIUGENA'S *PERIPHYSEON*

In recent years a number of remarkable publications have appeared, which lay considerable emphasis on the importance of a broadly conceived allegorical interpretation in Ancient literature. This approach to literary texts, stressing their deeper and more elusive layer of meaning, is represented, among others, by Peter T. Struck's book *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts*. "Poetic texts" is more than just a linguistic utterance:

But a few bold souls, ancient as well as modern, have it in mind that poetry will do something more for us. They suspect that the poets' stories might say more than they appear to say, and that their language might be more than just words. [...] Some go further and take poetry as a vehicle into a region where more sober minds fear to tread, where the limitations and encumbrances of our regular lives do not exist, and where we might meet, finally face to face, the deathless gods themselves. This realm is familiar to most of us, as a superstition or a moment of insight. It lies just beyond the always receding horizon that circumscribes our day-to-day existence.<sup>1</sup>

Allegorical interpretation tries to penetrate beyond the superficial aspects of a literary text; the text itself is treated as a riddle, a revelation, whose role is to take the reader along to a deeper domain of meaning, to a very special kind of knowledge, a knowledge concealed from the profane eyes of the "uninitiated." The language of the text subjected to allegorical interpretation acquires

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<sup>1</sup> Peter T. STRUCK, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

another dimension and a twofold function: it both “reveals” and “conceals”; in a paradoxical unity of two mutually opposed functions, it “conceals by revealing.” This ambiguity of the signifying function of the language of a literary text is hardly acceptable to the orthodox semantic approach to language: ever since Aristotle and the rhetorical tradition originated by him, ambiguity has been regarded as disqualifying a text (Cf. *Poetics* 1458a).

The problem of the interpretation of literary text has recently been taken up in Polish literature by Mikołaj Domaradzki in a number of articles and above all in his book *Filozofia antyczna wobec problemu interpretacji. Rozwój alegorezy od przedsokratyków do Arystotelesa* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii UAM, 2013). The author discusses various devices of ancient rhetoric: allegory, *hyponoia* (conjecture, guess), *ainigma* (riddle), *symbolon* (symbol) and steers towards the conclusion that it is precisely figurative language that makes it possible to go beyond the realm of meaning that can be captured by our ordinary language in its literal application into the realm transcending the ordinary; and it is for that reason that the privileged areas of application of figurative language have been religion and philosophy, in particular religiously oriented philosophy.<sup>2</sup> „Allegorists,” Struck writes, “uniquely among classical readers, see in poetry the promise of conveying complete and fundamental truth. [...] allegorism reveals the literary-critical impact of one of the best-attested popular views of the poets, that the poet is a kind of prophet.”<sup>3</sup>

Given this perspective, it is hardly surprising that allegory and allegorical interpretation should acquire paramount importance in Platonism in general, and in Neoplatonism in particular, the current of thought seeking to attribute religious functions to philosophy, in fact, to represent philosophy as the true religion, that is as the means by which man can be reunited with the divine. It is enough to mention just a few characteristic themes, such as the ethical ideal of becoming like God and the idea of return to primal unity which is the true home of man. Nevertheless, as Deirdre Carabine stresses, “the return of all things to the One, conceived either in individual or in cosmic terms, does not have to leave a causal metaphysical scheme in place behind it, since there is no longer any need for this.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mikołaj DOMARADZKI, *Filozofia antyczna wobec problemu interpretacji. Rozwój alegorezy od przedsokratyków do Arystotelesa* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii UAM, 2013), 21 f.

<sup>3</sup> STRUCK, *Birth of the Symbol*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Deirdre CARABINE, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters, 1995), 104.

Neoplatonist philosophers, in developing their theory of allegory as grounded in the very structure of reality, had ample material to build upon, notably the earlier conceptions of Plato and the Stoics.<sup>5</sup> The salient characteristics of the Neoplatonist approach to allegory have been captured by Peter Struck in his article *Allegory and ascent in Neoplatonism*. In what immediately follows I will attempt to give a synthetic representation of the features of the Neoplatonist approach to allegory conceived as a form of ascent, laying stress on the points that will subsequently be of use in presenting the specific features of Eriugena's re-working of the classical theme of cosmic exile and return to paradise. Discussing Plotinus's treatment of mythical narrative, Struck states: "Myth gives Plotinus a means by which he can express synchronic realities in a diachronic narrative form."<sup>6</sup>

(1) Thus one characteristic of allegory that first comes to mind is that it makes possible a translation from timelessness to synchrony; owing to allegory reality, which by its essence lacks any sequence, can be expressed and grasped sequentially, in a discourse, description, or narrative.

(2) Essential to the Neoplatonist's conception of allegory is the fundamental insight that the physical world has another, hidden aspect; in fact, visible appearances are but superficial manifestations of a more substantial reality.<sup>7</sup>

(3) However, there is an invisible ontological connection between beings that appear to our experience and their profound ontological source; this connection provides the foundation for semantic structures and relations. Following Plotinus, this underlying unity of the essential and the apparent was viewed as grounded in the conception of creative outflow (*proodos*)<sup>8</sup>.

(4) Inseparable from the Neoplatonist's discussion of allegory is the pervading presence of paradox: "...the One as an entirely transcendent entity that also still (somehow) manifests itself in visible, tangible, concrete rea-

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Peter T. STRUCK, "Allegory and ascent in Neoplatonism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland and Peter T. Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57-58: „Plato's understanding of appearances had always insisted on some higher, un-fallen level of reality, in which the forms dwell, and to which we have no access through our senses [...]. The Neoplatonists of late antiquity carry forward the Stoic ideas that myth might be a repository of profound truth, and that the dense language of poetry has the capacity to convey truths that exceeded the grasp of plain speech."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 59. The structure of this description of Neoplatonic exegesis is mine.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.* Struck uses the term "emanation." About the Neoplatonic roots of the term and its meaning in Eriugena, cf. Stephen GERSH, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: BRILL, 1978), 17-18.

lity, sets out a paradox that is a natural incubator of allegorical thinking. It will give impetus and provide an authoritative parallel to an allegorical habit of claiming that allegorical literary constructions render the transcendent in the concrete, and use language to express what is beyond language.”<sup>9</sup>

(5) Since the ultimate objective of human life is return to and perfect union with the Source, allegory is integrated in the process of coming back as a means to that eschatological end: “allegorical reading itself might offer a kind of pathway for this ascent, and that hermeneutic activity might lift one up through ontological layers, anagogically, toward the One. Plotinus produces a new and powerful possibility for understanding figuration according to a logic of synecdoche, as opposed to imitation.”<sup>10</sup>

(6) This metaphysically and epistemologically grounded conception of allegory underwent further development in Porphyry, who elaborated specific methods of interpreting literary texts and applied these to reading the Homeric poems. Some elements of his method were: (a) looking for parallels to one part of the interpreted text in other parts of the author’s work, (b) ample use of etymology, and (c) invoking associations with cultural and philosophical themes informing the cultural consciousness of his time, which meant referring both to classical authorities and natural knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

(7) The philosophy of Proclus brought to culmination the mystical and magical elements found in the *Chaldean Oracles* and in Iamblichus and thus it combines allegory with theurgy. According to Struck „Both theurgist and poet reverse the process of emanation, and open up an avenue by which we might retrace the ontological movement that produced the universe back up from material to divine. An anagogical reading is now emphatically possible, an interpretation itself takes on a role in the soteriological aspirations of souls.”<sup>12</sup>

It is this Proclean re-structuring of the legacy of philosophical and religious thought of Neoplatonism that was passed on, via Pseudo-Dionysius, to the early Middle Ages and John Scotus Eriugena, to form the foundation of Eriugena’s own elaboration of the theme of allegory.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> STRUCK, “Allegory and ascent in Neoplatonism,” 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Rorem remarks: “Using the explicit language of proceeding from and returning to the same source and goal, Eriugena here isolates the entire purpose (*intentio*) of the Dionysian corpus. His thorough appropriation of this dynamic of procession and return, *exitus* and *reditus*, descending pluralization and ascending unification, is evident in the structure of his own ‘summa’

By following Eriugena's reading of the Biblical narrative of the expulsion from Paradise, I would like to show the way his treatment of the Biblical text realizes the essential points of the Neoplatonic conception of allegory. One could say (slightly modifying the title of Peter Struck's article *Allegory and Ascent*) that for Eriugena allegory is ascent, ascent which is the return to the Origin/Source. This conception, Neoplatonic in its essence, comes in combination with the Patristic idea of the four levels of meaning in Holy Scripture.<sup>14</sup>

Eriugena's Irish upbringing inculcated in him appreciation of the importance of the literal meaning of the Biblical text as the indispensable point of departure of all subsequent interpretations. In his commentary on St. John's Gospel Eriugena calls this level of interpretation the "letter" (*littera*) or "sacred history."<sup>15</sup>

Indispensable as it is, the letter has to be exceeded in an effort to win the spiritual understanding of the Scriptures. This point is made in Eriugena's comments on Christ's words uttered in the Nicodemus scene: "The letter kills, the spirit gives life." Eriugena develops the idea, adding that the letter kills when we read it and fail to comprehend its meaning; it gives life when read and understood.<sup>16</sup>

An element of Eriugena's biblical exegesis that is distinctive of his method is the use he makes of the distinction between *mystery* (*sacramentum*) and *symbol* (*symbolum*).<sup>17</sup> In his *Commentary on the St. John Gospel* he explains that by "mystery" we should understand "allegory of actions and words": in other words, mystery concerns the historical order of events and

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of philosophical theology, the *Periphyseon*, as often noted." Paul ROREM, "The Early Latin Dionysius: Eriugena and Hugh of St. Victor," in *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 73.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Denys TURNER, "Allegory in Christian late antiquity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, 71 f. Cf. Henri DE LUBAC, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Montaigne, 1959), 178 f.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. ERIUGENA, *Homilia et Commentarius in Euangelium Iohannis* [further: *Hom. and Com.*], III, 5, 320 B, ed. Edouard A. Jeauneau, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, 166 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 87: "Littera est factum quod sancta narrat historia". Cf. ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon. Liber quintus* [further: PP V], 935D, ed. Edouard A. Jeauneau, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, 165 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 106.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Com.* III, 4, 318 B p. 83: "Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat". Lex enim lecta et non intellecta occidit, lecta vero et intellecta vivificat."

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jean PÉPIN, "Mysteria et Symbola dans le Commentaire de Jean Scot sur l'évangile de saint Jean," in *The Mind of Eriugena*, ed. John J. O'Meara and Ludwig Bieler (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1973), 16-30; Agnieszka KIJEWSKA, "Eriugena's Idealist Interpretation of Paradise," in *Eriugena, Berkeley, and the Idealist Tradition*, ed. Stephen Gersh and Dermot Moran (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 169.

the order of the narrative reporting these and its detailed description is included in the biblical text. Baptism and other sacraments performed by Jesus are past events related by the New Testament which are constantly repeated in the Church's practice.<sup>18</sup>

Whereas a *sacramentum* is a sensibly ascertainable event with mystical significance and effect, the essence of a *symbolum* is purely spiritual teaching.<sup>19</sup> Eriugena remarks in the Scriptures, and in particular in the New Testament passages are frequent which purportedly relate a story or an event, yet their whole significance does not reside in the sequel of events but in the meaning and doctrine they convey. As an example of this sort of passages he quotes the Gospel parables.<sup>20</sup> Of the two the *symbolum* appears to be more essential, as the true meaning of a sacrament can only be grasped in the light of the doctrine, that is in the light of the symbol.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship obtaining between the *sacramentum* and the *symbolum* is illustrative of that holding between physical and transcendent reality and, correspondingly, between the "literal" sense of a text and its "spiritual" or "allegorical" meaning. Far from denying the importance of the letter, Eriugena attaches higher value to the spiritual interpretation of an inspired text, that is to interpreting mysteries.

Eriugena's biblical exegesis is constantly confronted with the problem of interpreting transcendent reality, which is simple and simultaneous (whose unity is that of a single moment), in terms of a sequential narrative which develops in a certain passage of time (ad 1). This problem can be stated in terms of Eriugena's own philosophy by saying that the spatial-temporal notions which we use in our description and narratives are the categories proper to the level of Eriugena's third nature, that is, the nature which is

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Com.* VI, v, 344 D-345 A, p. 132: "Ubi primo quaerendum quid inter **mysteria** distat utriusque legis, litterae videlicet et gratiae, et symbola. **Mysteria** itaque proprie sunt quae iuxta allegoriam et facti et dicti traduntur, hoc est et secundum res gestas facta sunt, et dicta quia narrantur. Verbi gratia: Mosaicum tabernaculum et secundum rem gestam erat constructum, et textu sanctae scripturae dictum atque narratum [...] In novo quoque testamento mysteria baptismatis, dominici quoque corporis ac sanguinis, necnon et sancti charismatis, iuxta res gestas conficiuntur, et litteris traduntur et dicuntur."

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 345 B p. 132: "Symbola vero, quae solummodo non facta, sed quasi facta sola doctrina dicuntur."

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 345 B p. 133: "In novo testamento multa narrantur, quae secundum fidem historiae non sunt facta, sed solummodo dicta ac veluti facta. Quorum exempla maxime in allegoria parabolarum dominicarum reperiuntur."

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Bernard MCGINN, "The Originality of Eriugena's Spiritual Exegesis," in *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena. The Bible and Hermeneutics*, ed. Carlos Steel, Gerd Van Riel, and James McEvoy (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 67.

created and does not create itself. God, the supreme Cause and Source of created reality (identical with the First Nature), originally posits in the act of his Free Will the created reality as an idea<sup>22</sup> that is most like Himself and therefore free of the “dispersion” which is the result of spatial-temporal existence. This form of reality is the second nature, the one that is created, yet, nevertheless, is itself creative and which comprises primordial causes – the absolutely original patterns of all things. The perfect, ideal form of being that is characteristic of the second nature mirrors the absolutely perfect being that is the Creator’s. This pattern of mirroring or copying is, characteristically, repeated at each level of created reality, for it is of the essence of created reality to be a manifestation, a sign, a revelation of the Source; in other words, every created reality is a theophany, that is, Divine apparition (ad 2).<sup>23</sup>

Perfect human nature in its primordial condition, that is, as included within the second nature, was identified by Eriugena with Paradise. In Book IV of the *Periphyseon* Eriugena argued at length that Paradise cannot possibly be any determinate spot in space and time; rather, this name should be understood as referring to spiritual reality, namely to the original, purely spiritual condition of human nature.<sup>24</sup> Expulsion from Paradise means simply loss of this perfect condition, the loss that befell man as a result of sin. Following man’s primeval transgression, the created world fell to an inferior way of being, namely to existence that is circumscribed by space and time (the third nature). Since any narrative is concerned with a sequence of events, that is, with temporal progression, it is naturally suited to the third nature and its condition and by no means can it adequately describe the second nature. Thus the narrative of the expulsion from Paradise cannot be understood literally; rather, it calls for a more special interpretation, one better suited to reveal the true and correct meaning of the scene.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Gersh remarks: „The essence of Eriugena’s idealism might be captured in the statement: ‘production is thinking’.” Stephen GERSH, “Eriugena’s Fourfold Contemplation,” in *Eriugena, Berkeley, and Idealist Tradition*, 155.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Com.* I, xxv, 302 B, p. 55: „Theophaniae autem sunt omnes creaturae visibiles et invisibiles, per quas deus – et in quibus – saepe apparuit et apparet et appariturus est”. Cf. Hilary A. MOONEY, *Theophany. The Appearing of God According to the Writings of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 146 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 2009), 199–206.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon. Liber quartus* [further: PP IV], 822 A, ed. Edouard A. Jeuneau, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, 164 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 114: „Quisquis diligenter praefati theologi verba perspexerit, nil aliud, ut opinor, in eis reperiet suaderi quam humanam naturam ad imaginem dei factam paradisi vocabulo, figuratae locutionis modo, a divina scriptura significari”. Cf. 825 C, p. 119–120; cf. KIJEWKA, “Eriugena’s Idealist Interpretation of Paradise,” 171 f.

It is at the beginning of Book V that Eriugena advances his proofs to the effect that Paradise cannot be conceived as a determinate place and the expulsion as a certain “historical” fact, at least not without contradiction. Having expelled man from Paradise, God posted a Cherub at its gate to prevent man from eating from the Tree of Life and thus possessing everlasting life:

Furthermore, if that Paradise from which man was expelled was local and terrestrial, and if the Tree of Life which was planted in the midst of it was an earthly and sensible tree, and brought forth fruit that was suitable for bodily consumption, why would God not have driven man forth only from that tree, and fenced him off in another part of Paradise from which he could not gain access to it? If the eating of the Tree of Life, which was permitted only to rational creatures, were the sole cause of man’s living in eternal bliss, why could not man after sinning have passed his wretched and mortal life of temporality in some other part of Paradise?<sup>25</sup>

Neither is Paradise a place rather than a certain condition of human nature, nor is expulsion a temporal event; the narrative of Genesis calls for adequate interpretation:

...the Paradise from which man was driven forth was nothing else but his own human nature which was formed in the Image of God. It was from the dignity of that Image that the same human nature, contemning God’s order fell. Whence it follows that the sending or driving forth of man is nothing else but the loss of that natural felicity for the possession of which he was created.<sup>26</sup>

The words of Genesis „Nunc ergo ne forte mittat manum suam, et sumat etiam de ligno vitae, et comedat, et vivat in aeternum?” (Gen 3:22) ought not to be read as implying prohibition, but instead as a prediction of return (ad 5). Such a reading is only won at the cost of some linguistic maneu-

<sup>25</sup> ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon*, 861 B–C, trans. John J. O’Meara (Montreal: Bellarmin, Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987), 524; PP V (Jeauneau), p. 4: “Si paradus ille, de quo homo expulsus est, localis erat terrenusque, et si lignum vitae, quod in medio ipsius plantatum est, terrenum fuit atque sensibile fructumque corporeis usibus aptum protulerit, cur non ab ipso solo vitae lingo deus hominem expulerit et in aliqua parte paradisi eum sepserit, ne lignum illud posset attingere? Si enim nulla alia causa feliciter et aeternaliter vivendi in paradiso fuerit praeter esum ligni vitae, qui solis rationalibus creaturis concessus est, cur homo post peccatum in aliqua paradisi parte miser atque mortalis degere temporaliter non potuerit?”

<sup>26</sup> ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon*, 863 A–B, p. 526; PP V (Jeauneau), p. 6: “...deduximus non aliud esse paradusum de quo homo expulsus est praeter ipsam humanam naturam ad imaginem dei creatam. Ex cuius (imaginis videlicet) dignitate eadem ipsa natura, divinum praeceptum contempens, corrui. Ac per hoc conficitur nihil aliud esse hominis emissionem vel eiectionem, nisi naturalis felicitatis, ad quam possidendam factus est, perditionem.”

vering (ad 6): the quoted sentence is interpreted as a question rather than prohibition and Eriugena's understanding of the words "nunc ergo" is very non-standard: "Do you see the largeness of the divine compassion which is compressed within the single temporal adverb Now, and a single causal conjunction Therefore? This same divine compassion converting the lamentation for man to a consolation both of man himself and of the Heavenly Powers, promises under an ambiguous and interrogative form of speech of the Return of man into Paradise. For He says: 'May he not perchance put forth his hand and take of the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever?' The meaning is: We must not mourn unduly the death of man, nor weep so profusely for his fall from Paradise; for hope of the Return is not entirely taken away from him."<sup>27</sup>

There follow more analyses in support of this reading: this time the springboard for the argument is etymology. The biblical text has it that God placed a Cherub at the entrance to Paradise, Eriugena observes. Yet Cherubim, according to Pseudo-Dionysius's topography of the angelic world, form part of the supreme triad of angelic creatures, second only to Seraphim, the triad engulfed in the immediate contemplation of God. Thus Cherubim, who are directly related to God, cannot be directly related to man, who may only come into immediate contact with inferior spiritual creatures, namely with angels (in the special sense of the word) who are the lowest order of the spiritual world. Consequently, if Paradise was a place somewhere in our spatial realm, the sentry posted to guard it would not be a Cherub.<sup>28</sup> Eriugena then proceeds to explore etymology of the name 'Cherub,' meaning "the variety of knowledge" or "the outpouring of wisdom"<sup>29</sup>: „But if we accept in this context only the significance of the name without relating it to the celestial essence (to which that name belongs), we can say that God placed Cherubim, that is, the variety of knowledge, or the pouring forth of wisdom, before the Paradise of pleasure, that is to say, before the sight of rational

<sup>27</sup> ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon*, 862 C–D, p. 523; PP V (Jeauneau), p. 5-6: "Videsne quanta divinum pathos contineat, dum sit brevissimum ex uno temporali adverbio, quod est 'nunc', et una causali coniunctione, quae est 'ergo', comparatum. Sed, veluti post hominis planctum eadem divina clementia ad se ipsam caelestesque virtutes consolandas conversa, reditum hominis in paradysum sub quadam dubitativa locutionis forma interrogativaque promittit. Ait enim: 'Ne forte manum suam mittat et sumat de lingo vitae et comedat et vivat in aeternum?' Tamquam diceret: Non adeo de interitu hominis dolendum lapsuque ipsius de paradiso lugendum. Non enim spes redeundi ab illo penitus ablata est."

<sup>28</sup> ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon* 864 A, p. 526-527.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 863 C, p. 526.

human nature although it had been driven forth from Paradise, that is, removed from the dignity of its first creation, so that it might have a means of regaining its knowledge of itself, and so that, when purged by practice and theory, and disciplined by the study of wisdom, it might have the will and power to return into its former felicity which in sinning it had abandoned. From this we may understand that the Divine Compassion exceeds the Divine Vengeance in driving man forth from Paradise.”<sup>30</sup>

Another distinctive feature of Scotus’s allegorical exegesis is its focus on the cosmic role of Christ, a feature inherited from Maximus the Confessor<sup>31</sup>. This cosmic Christocentrism better appears in a more elaborate and somewhat profounder re-reading of the same passage of Genesis, in which he makes a foray into etymologizing. As St. Jerome has observed, the Hebrew substantives ending in “im” are masculine and plural; however, the custom of both Greeks and Hebrews allows for a singular reading alongside the plural. Eriugena believes that in the case in question (the use of “cherubim” in the discussed Genesis passage) the singular interpretation is to be preferred and, quoting references to other texts of the Scriptures, he advances a case for interpreting the Cherub posted at the gates of Paradise as a symbol of the Son of God<sup>32</sup>: „In this part of Holy Scripture, then, a whole mass of symbolical names for the Word of God are accumulated. For It is called Cherubim, and a Fiery Sword that turneth every way, and the Way and the Tree of Life; by which we may see that the Word Itself never recedes from human consciousness, and that It is always most ready to enlighten us and nowhere and at no time does it permit us to be unmindful of the bliss we lost through sin, desiring that we should return to it, and until that shall be accomplished,

<sup>30</sup> ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon*, 864 A-B, p. 527; PP V (Jeauneau), p. 7-8: “Si vero solum nominis intellectum, nullam vero caelestem substantiam in hoc loco accipiamus, possumus dicere deum ante paradysum voluptatis (hoc est ante conspectum rationabilis humanae naturae), quamvis de paradiso expulsae (hoc est ex dignitate primae suae conditionis remotae), cherubim collocasse, multitudinem videlicet scientiae aut fusionem sapientiae, qua se ipsam recognosceret inque pristinam felicitatem, quam peccando deseruerat, actione et scientia purgata sapientiaeque studiis exercitata vellet et posset redire. Ubi datur intelligi plus divinae misericordiae quam vindicate in expulsion hominis de paradiso fuisse.”

<sup>31</sup> Cf. John F. GAVIN, *A Celtic Christology. The Incarnation according John Scottus Eriugena*, e-book (Oregon: Cascades Books, 2014), loc. 1373 and 1421: “Eriugena truly shares Maximus’s *Logos*-centric vision, in which all of creation comes from the Word and is deified by the Word. This allows him to accept various modes in which the Word ‘becomes thick’ (*incrasatus*).”

<sup>32</sup> Edouard A. Jauneau, the editor of *Periphyseon* suggests that Eriugena could refer here to: HIERONYMUS, *Commentarii in Esaiam*, I, i, 2 (Cf. PP V, p. 9).

by taking pity upon us It stimulates us to tread with the firm footsteps of theory and practice the journey which leads thither.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus it is Christ who prompts us to seek the return and reunion with God; it is owing to him that the process of ever deepening interpretation reveals its identity as the process of mystical ascent. This central role of Christ in effecting the movement of return holds just as well in the human individual as in the cosmic and eschatological dimension. Christ makes possible the ultimate return of the third nature and its reabsorption in the second. All human individuals will be involved in the return, which does not imply, on Eriugena’s part, any kind of universal salvation theory. What he meant was rather restitution to man of all that which belonged to him in virtue of his primeval nature. He writes:

But by this we mean not that the nature of all things will be equally blessed, but that it will be equally free from death and unhappiness. For being and living and immortality will be common to all, good and evil alike; but well-being and blessed being will be the special property of those only who are perfect in practice and theory. Or how could it be convincingly proved that that most loving Creator of rational nature should prevent the rational motion thereof from attaining its God?<sup>34</sup>

The general return (*reditus generalis*) of all physical world and all human individuals to the original condition of created nature is not in itself complete; in the case of man it is coupled with special return (*reditus specialis*). This only concerns a select few, those who will prove themselves worthy of it by their knowledge and appropriate virtues; this special return is symbolized in the biblical context by eating of the Tree of Life and it consists in being reabsorbed in God’s mysterious identity, in Divine Darkness, in the

<sup>33</sup> ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon*, 865 B–C, p. 528-529; PP V (Jeauneau), p. 9: “Multipliciter itaque in hoc loco sanctae scripturae dei verbi symbolica nomina exaggerata sunt. Nam et cherubim et flammeus gladius versatilis et via et lignum vitae appellatur, ut per hoc intelligamus quod ipsum verbum nunquam nostri cordis obtutibus recedat, et quod semper ad illuminandos nos praesentissimum sit et beatitudinis, quam praevericando perdidimus, nusquam nunquam memoriam perdere sinit, ad eandem semper redire nos volens et, donec id fiat, condolendo suspirans, perque scientiae et actionis perfectos gradus iter quod illuc ducit carpentes nos instigans.”

<sup>34</sup> ERIUGENA, *Periphyseon*, 868 B, p. 532; PP V (Jeauneau), p. 13: “Hoc autem dicimus, non quod natura in omnibus aequaliter futura sit beata, sed quod in omnibus morte et miseria futura sit libera. Esse enim et vivere et aeternaliter esse commune erit omnibus, et bonis et malis; bene autem et beate esse solis actione et scientia perfectis proprium et speciale erit. Aut quomodo verisimile potest approbari ut piissimus rationabilis naturae conditor rationabilem ipsius motum ne eum attingat prohibeat?”

fourth and last of the four modes of the Universe's subsistence, which is mysteriously described as the nature which neither is created nor creates. In this ultimate absorption man will be filled with God as air is filled with light, yet not even in this union will he lose his separate status as a subject.

Eriugena's reading of the Paradise story strikes one as highly original and somewhat surprising. Compared to the traditional interpretation it has a distinct paradoxical flavor. Not least surprising is Eriugena's idea that Paradise essentially concerns the future (albeit eschatological) as much as it does the past. Paradise is no reality that once existed in space and time—in history, albeit mythical. Paradise is the ultimate objective set before man, something to conquer rather than recollect. As it is essentially the case with Eriugena, his Paradise-story is identical with his eschatology. This is why the deciphering of the meanders of the Paradise story reveals itself as identical, in the last analysis, with the journey towards mystical union.

*Translated by Roman Majeran*

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MISTYCZNA INTERPRETACJA  
WYGNANIA I POWROTU DO RAJU  
W *PERIPHYSEON* ERIUGENY

Streszczenie

W ostatnich latach pojawiło się kilka ważnych publikacji podkreślających znaczenie szeroko pojętej interpretacji alegorycznej w literaturze starożytnej (prace Petera T. Strucka, Mikołaja Domaradzkiego). Interpretacja alegoryczna widzi w odczytywanym tekście zagadkę, która ma doprowadzić czytelnika do głębszej wiedzy szczególnego rodzaju, która zakryta jest przed oczyma „niewtajemniczonych”. Stąd w tego typu interpretacji ogromną rolę odgrywa język, który „odkrywając – zakrywa”. Szczególnego znaczenia interpretacja alegoryczna nabrała w nurcie neoplatońskim, w którym filozofii zostały przypisane funkcje religijne (upodobnienie do boga, powrót do ojczyzny). Najważniejsze cechy tej neoplatońskiej alegorezy przedstawił Peter T. Struck w artykule *Allegory and ascent in Neoplatonism*, pokazując, w jaki sposób interpretacja alegoryczna mogła się stać drogą prowadzącą do mistycznego zjednoczenia.

W niniejszym artykule uwaga autorki została skupiona na tych elementach alegorycznej egzegezy, które mogą być użyteczne w prezentacji specyfiki Eriugeny egzegezy motywu wygnania i powrotu do raj.

MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION  
OF THE EXILE AND RETURN TO PARADISE  
IN ERIUGENA'S *PERIPHYSEON*

S u m m a r y

Over the recent years we have welcomed a number of significant publications (in particular the contributions by Peter T. Struck and Mikołaj Domaradzki) highlighting the importance of allegory and allegorical interpretation in ancient literary culture. The allegorical approach to literary text identifies the literary work as a puzzle, the solving of which introduces the reader to a profounder kind of knowledge, a knowledge that is hidden from the eyes of the “uninitiated.” This kind of interpretation implies a special understanding of the function of language, which “by revealing—conceals”. Allegorical interpretation assumed paramount importance in Neoplatonism, the philosophy which attributed religious functions to the philosophical endeavor of man (such functions as assimilation to God and return to man’s (spiritual) fatherland). The most salient features of the Neoplatonic allegorism have been presented by Peter T. Struck in his article *Allegory and ascent in Neoplatonism* complete with the account of the role attributed to allegory as a guide along the path leading to mystical union.

In this article attention has been focused upon those elements of the Neoplatonic allegorical exegesis, which may be of use in exploring the specifics of Eriugena’s interpretation of the themes of the exile from and return to the paradise.

*Translated by Roman Majeran*

**Słowa kluczowe:** interpretacja alegoryczna, mistyczne wstępowanie, neoplatonizm, Eriugena, raj.

**Key words:** allegorical interpretation, mystical ascent, Neoplatonism, Eriugena, Paradise.

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