

Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita

THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

Chapter I

What the Divine Gloom is

Trinity, which exceedeth all Being, Deity, and Goodness!¹ Thou that instructeth Christians in Thy heavenly wisdom! Guide us to that topmost height of mystic lore which exceedeth light and more than exceedeth knowledge, where the simple, absolute, and unchangeable mysteries of heavenly Truth lie hidden in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness, and surcharging our blinded intellects with the utterly impalpable and invisible fairness of glories which exceed all beauty! Such be my prayer; and thee, dear Timothy, I counsel that, in the earnest exercise of mystic contemplation, thou leave the senses and the activities of the intellect and all things that the senses or the intellect can perceive, and all things in this world of nothingness, or in that world of being, and that, thine understanding being laid to rest, thou strain (so far as thou mayest) towards an union with Him whom neither being nor understanding can contain. For, by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things, thou shalt in pureness cast all things aside, and be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the Ray of that divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.²

These things thou must not disclose to any of the uninitiated, by whom I mean those who cling to the objects of human thought, and imagine there is no super-essential reality beyond; and fancy that they know by human understanding Him that has made Darkness His secret place. And, if the Divine Initiation is beyond such men as these, what can be said of others yet more incapable thereof, who describe the Transcendent Cause of all things by qualities drawn from the lowest order of being, while they deny that it is in any way superior to the various ungodly delusions which they fondly invent in ignorance of this truth? That while it possesses all the positive attributes of the universe (being the universal Cause), yet in a stricter sense It does

¹ "Super-Essential, Supra-Divine, Super-Excellent."

² "The Super-Essential Ray of Divine Darkness."

not possess them, since It transcends them all, wherefore there is no contradiction between affirming and denying that It has them inasmuch as It precedes and surpasses all deprivation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions?

Such at least is the teaching of the blessed Bartholomew.³

For he says that the subject-matter of the Divine Science is vast and yet minute, and that the Gospel combines in itself both width and straitness. Methinks he has shown by these his words how marvellously he has understood that the Good Cause of all things is eloquent yet speaks few words, or rather none; possessing neither speech nor understanding because it exceedeth all things in a super-essential manner, and is revealed in Its naked truth to those alone who pass right through the opposition of fair and foul, and pass beyond the topmost altitudes of the holy ascent and leave behind them all divine enlightenment and voices and heavenly utterances and plunge into the Darkness where truly dwells, as saith the Scripture, that One Which is beyond all things. For not without reason⁴ is the blessed Moses bidden first to undergo purification himself and then to separate himself from those who have not undergone it; and after all purification hears the many-voiced trumpets and sees many lights flash forth with pure and diverse-streaming rays, and then stands separate from the multitudes and with the chosen priests presses forward to the topmost pinnacle of the Divine Ascent. Nevertheless he meets not with God Himself, yet he beholds—not Him indeed (for He is invisible)—but the place wherein He dwells. And this I take to signify that the divinest and the highest of the things perceived by the eyes of the body or the mind are but the symbolic language of things subordinate to Him who Himself transcendeth them all. Through these things His incomprehensible presence is shown walking upon those heights of His holy places which are perceived by the mind; and then It breaks forth, even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold them, and plunges the true initiate unto the Darkness of Unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things and to none else (whether himself or another), and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is wholly Unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding.

³ No writings of St. Bartholomew are extant. Possibly D. s inventing, though not necessarily.

⁴ In the following passage we get the three stages tabulated by later Mystical Theology: (1) Purgation, (2) Illumination, (3) Union.

Chapter II

How it is necessary to be united with and render praise to Him Who is the cause of all and above all.

Unto this Darkness which is beyond Light we pray that
5 we may come, and may attain unto vision through the loss
of sight and knowledge, and that in ceasing thus to see
or to know we may learn to know that which is beyond
all perception and understanding (for this emptying of
10 our faculties is true sight and knowledge), and that we
may offer Him that transcends all things the praises of
a transcendent hymnody, which we shall do by denying
or removing all things that are-like as men who, carving
a statue out of marble, remove all the impediments that
15 hinder the clear perceptive of the latent image and by this
mere removal display the hidden statue itself in its hidden
beauty. Now we must wholly distinguish this negative
method from that of positive statements. For when we
were making positive statements⁵ we began with the most
20 universal statements, and then through intermediate terms
we came at last to particular titles,⁶ but now ascending
upwards from particular to universal conceptions we strip
off all qualities in order that we may attain a naked knowl-
edge of that Unknowing which in all existent things is
25 enwrapped by all objects of knowledge, and that we may
begin to see that super-essential Darkness which is hidden
by all the light that is in existent things.

Chapter III

*What are the affirmative expressions respecting God, and
30 what are the negative.*

Now I have in my Outlines of Divinity set forth those
conceptions which are most proper to the affirmative
method, and have shown in what sense God's holy na-
35 ture is called single and in what sense trinal, what is the
nature of the Fatherhood and Sonship which we attribute
unto It; what is meant by the articles of faith concerning
the Spirit; how from the immaterial and indivisible Good

⁵ Namely, in the *Divine Names* and in the *Outlines*.

⁶ In the *Divine Names* D. begins with the notion of Goodness (which he holds to be possessed by all things) and proceeds thence to Existence (which is not possessed by things that are either destroyed or yet unmade), and thence to Wisdom (which is not possessed either by unconscious or irrational forms of Life), and thence to qualities (such as Righteousness, Salvation, Omnipotence) or combinations of opposite qualities (such as Greatness and Smallness) which are not, 'in the full sense, applicable to any creature as such. Thus by adding quality to quality ("Existence" to "Goodness," "Life" to "Existence," "Wisdom" to "Life," "Salvation," etc., to "Wisdom") he reaches the conception of God. But he constantly reminds us in the *Divine Names* that these qualities apply adequately only to the manifested Godhead which, in Its ultimate Nature, transcends them.

the interior rays of Its goodness have their being and remain immovably in that state of rest which both within their Origin and within themselves is co-eternal with the act by which they spring from It; in what manner Jesus being above all essence has stooped to an essential state in which all the truths of human nature meet; and all the other revelations of Scripture whereof my Outlines of Divinity treat. And in the book of the Divine Names I have considered the meaning as concerning God of the titles Good, Existent, Life, Wisdom, Power and of the other titles which the understanding frames, and in my Symbolic Divinity I have considered what are the metaphorical titles drawn from the world of sense and applied to the nature of God; what are the mental or material images we form of God or the functions and instruments of activity we attribute to Him; what are the places where He dwells and the robes He is adorned with; what is meant by God's anger, grief, and indignation, or the divine inebriation and wrath; what is meant by God's oath and His malediction, by His slumber and awaking, and all the other inspired imagery of allegoric symbolism. And I doubt not that you have also observed how far more copious are the last terms than the first for the doctrines of God's Nature and the exposition of His Names could not but be briefer than the Symbolic Divinity. For the more that we soar upwards the more our language becomes restricted to the compass of purely intellectual conceptions, even as in the present instance plunging into the Darkness which is above the intellect we shall find ourselves reduced not merely to brevity of speech but even to absolute dumbness both of speech and thought. Now in the former treatises the course of the argument, as it came down from the highest to the lowest categories, embraced an ever-widening number of conceptions which increased at each stage of the descent, but in the present treatise it mounts upwards from below towards the category of transcendence, and in proportion to its ascent it contracts its terminology, and when the whole ascent is passed it will be totally dumb, being at last wholly united with Him Whom words cannot describe. But why is it, you will ask, that after beginning from the highest category when one method was affirmative we begin from the lowest category where it is negative? Because, when affirming, the existence of that which transcends all affirmation, we were obliged to start from that which is most akin to It, and then to make the affirmation on which the rest depended; but when pursuing the negative method, to reach that which is beyond all negation, we must start by applying our negations to those qualities which differ most from the ultimate goal. Surely it is truer to affirm that God is life and goodness than that He is air or stone, and truer to deny that drunkenness or fury can be attributed to Him than to deny that the may apply to Him the categories of human thought.

Chapter IV

That He Who is the Pre-eminent Cause of everything sensibly perceived is not Himself any one of the things sensibly perceived.

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We therefore maintain that the universal Cause transcending all things is neither impersonal nor lifeless, nor irrational nor without understanding: in short, that It is not a material body, and therefore does not possess outward shape or intelligible form, or quality, or quantity, or solid weight; nor has It any local existence which can be perceived by sight or touch; nor has It the power of perceiving or being perceived; nor does It suffer any vexation or disorder through the disturbance of earthly passions, or any feebleness through the tyranny of material chances, or any want of light; nor any change, or decay, or division, or deprivation, or ebb and flow, or anything else which the senses can perceive. None of these things can be either identified with it or attributed unto It.

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Chapter V

That He Who is the Pre-eminent Cause of everything intelligibly perceived is not Himself any one of the things intelligibly perceived.

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Once more, ascending yet higher we maintain that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion, or at rest, and has no power, and is not power or light, and does not live, and is not life; nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood; nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence; nor do existent beings know It as it actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are; nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is it darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to it; for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to It, we apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature-free from every limitation and beyond them all.

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The Divine Names, Chapter IV

On the Beautiful

1. Now let us consider the name of "Good" which the Sacred Writers apply to the Supra-Divine Godhead in a transcendent manner, calling the Supreme Divine Existence Itself "Goodness" (as it seems to me) in a sense
5 that separates It from the whole creation, and meaning, by this term, to indicate that the Good, under the form of Good-Being, extends Its goodness by the very fact of Its existence unto all things. For as our sun, through no choice or deliberation, but by the very fact of its existence, gives
10 light to all those things which have any inherent power of sharing its illumination, even so the Good (which is above the sun, as the transcendent archetype by the very mode of its existence is above its faded image) sends forth upon all things according to their receptive powers, the rays of Its
15 undivided Goodness.

[...]

7. This Good is described by the Sacred Writers as Beautiful and as Beauty, as Love or Beloved, and by all other Divine titles which befit Its beautifying and gracious fairness. Now there is a distinction between the titles "Beautiful"
20 "Beauty" applied to the all-embracing Cause. For we universally distinguish these two titles as meaning respectively the qualities shared and the objects which share therein. We give the name of "Beautiful" to that which
25 shares in the quality of beauty, and we give the name of "Beauty" to that common quality by which all beautiful things are beautiful. But the Super-Essential Beautiful is called "Beauty" because of that quality which It imparts to all things severally according to their nature, and because
30 It is the Cause of the harmony and splendour in all things, flashing forth upon them all, like light, the beautifying communications of Its originating ray; and because It summons all things to fare unto Itself (from whence It hath the name of "Fairness"), and because It draws all things together in
35 a state of mutual inter penetration. And it is called "Beautiful" because It is All-Beautiful and more than Beautiful, and is eternally, unvaryingly, unchangeably Beautiful; in capable of birth or death or growth or decay; and not beautiful in one part and foul in another; nor yet at one time and

not at another; nor yet beautiful in relation to one thing but not to another; nor yet beautiful in one place and not in another (as if It were beautiful for some but were not beautiful for others); nay, on the contrary, It is, in Itself and by
5 Itself, uniquely and eternally beautiful, and from beforehand It contains in a transcendent manner the originating beauty of everything that is beautiful. For in the simple and supernatural nature belonging to the world of beautiful things, all beauty and all that is beautiful hath its unique
10 and pre-existent Cause. From this Beautiful all things possess their existence, each kind being beautiful in its own manner, and the Beautiful causes the harmonies and sympathies and communities of all things. And by the Beautiful all things are united together and the Beautiful is the beginning
15 of all things, as being the Creative Cause which moves the world and holds all things in existence by their yearning for their own Beauty. And It is the Goal of all things, and their Beloved, as being their Final Cause (for 'tis the desire of the Beautiful that brings them all into existence),
20 and It is their Exemplar from which they derive their definite limits; and hence the Beautiful is the same as the Good, inasmuch as all things, in all causation, desire the Beautiful and Good; nor is there anything in the world but hath a share in the Beautiful and Good. Moreover our Discourse
25 will dare to aver that even the Non-Existent shares in the Beautiful and Good, for Non-Existence is itself beautiful and good when, by the Negation of all Attributes, it is ascribed Super-Essentially to God. This One Good and Beautiful is in Its oneness the Cause of all the many beautiful and
30 good things. Hence comes the bare existence of all things, and hence their unions, their differentiations, their identities, their differences, their similarities, their dissimilarities, their communions of opposite things, the unconfused distinctions of their interpenetrating elements; the providences of the Superiors, the interdependence of the Co-ordinates, the responses of the Inferiors, the states of permanence wherein all keep their own identity. And hence
35 again the intercommunion of all things according to the power of each; their harmonies and sympathies (which do not merge them) and the co-ordinations of the whole universe; the mixture of elements therein and the indestructible ligaments of things; the ceaseless succession of the recreative process in Minds and Souls and in Bodies; for all
40 have rest and movement in That Which, above all rest and all movement, grounds each one in its own natural laws
45 and moves each one to its own proper movement.