

BOOKS

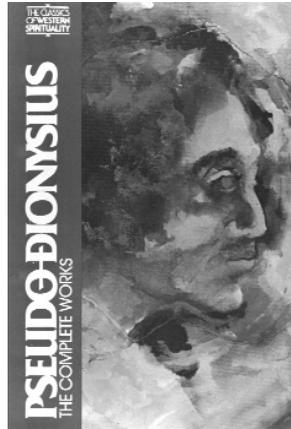
The Pseudo-Dionysius and Christian Platonism

The *Complete Works* of the Pseudo-Dionysius is necessary reading for any serious student of the fight within Christianity against the philosophy of Aristotle. The importance of the *Commentary* written by Paul Rorem, is limited to the light it sheds on the influence of Platonism on St. Thomas Aquinas, who is falsely portrayed as an Aristotelian, and on the historical influence of the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius on Christian aesthetics. Otherwise, Rorem's commentary reflects the fact that, as he writes, he is "a theologian within the tradition of the Lutheran Reformation."

The story behind the Pseudo-Dionysius is one of the most interesting in the history of Christianity. It was long thought that the writings attributed to him were those of the Dionysius, whom the Apostle Paul converted through his speech on the Unknown God in Athens at the Areopagus (Acts 17:34). However, as Rorem points out, by the Sixteenth Century it was discovered that Dionysius was a pseudonym adopted by an unknown Christian Platonist who lived sometime in the Fifth or Sixth Century A.D.

Interestingly, in his speech Paul refers to the opening lines of the poem "Phaenomena" by Aratus of Soli. "From Zeus let us begin; . . . full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. For we are also his offspring. . . ." This poem is based upon the prose work bearing the same title by Eudoxus, a pupil of Plato who pioneered the method of negative proof through exhaustion.

Although Rorem fails to note the above connection, perhaps the most important contribution his book makes is to further expose the lie that Thomas Aquinas was an Aristotelian. This reviewer has documented elsewhere that Aquinas was a Christian Platonist in the tradition of St. Augustine and



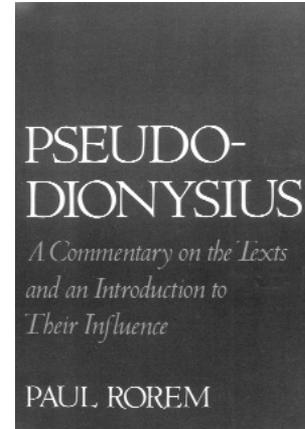
**Pseudo-Dionysius:
The Complete Works**
by Colm Luibheid
Paulist Press,
Mahwah, N.J., 1987
312 pages, paperbound, \$12.95.

Dionysius (SEE "Why St. Thomas Aquinas Is Not an Aristotelian," *Fidelio*, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring 1993).

Rorem points out that, from 1246 to 1252, Albert the Great lectured on the entirety of Dionysius' writings, first in Paris and then in Cologne. Thomas Aquinas was his student and scribe. Thomas' lecture notes (the earliest work from his hand) were transcribed and became Albert's written commentaries. Aquinas himself later wrote a full commentary on Dionysius' *The Divine Names*. Rorem further reports that one student counted 1,702 explicit quotations from Dionysius spread through Aquinas' works.

Rorem concludes, "Until recently, Thomist scholarship has tended to emphasize the impact of Aristotle upon Aquinas, an emphasis that has unnecessarily minimized the Neoplatonic and Dionysian influence." He also writes, "In general, there were more, and more significant, avenues of Neoplatonic influence upon Thomas than most scholars, especially Thomists, have been willing to acknowledge."

Rorem correctly emphasizes the



**Pseudo-Dionysius:
A Commentary on the Texts
and an Introduction
to Their Influence**
by Paul Rorem
Oxford University Press,
New York, 1993
267 pages, hardbound, \$39.95.

influence of Dionysius on St. Bonaventura and also on Ruysbroeck, a close associate of Gerard Groote, the founder of the Brotherhood of the Common Life. However, the most disappointing weakness of his commentary is that it gives only passing reference to the influence of Dionysius on the founder of modern science, Nicolaus of Cusa. A more thorough treatment of the influence of the Dionysian works on Cusanus would have rendered his commentary more substantive.

Impact on Cusanus

Anyone serious about studying the works of Dionysius would be well advised to begin by reading Cusanus' *On the Not-Other*, which includes extensive quotes from *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *The Divine Names*, *The Mystical Theology*, and the *Letters*.

The influence of Dionysius on Cusanus is also evident in the latter's early work, *On Catholic Concordance*, where he develops the idea of national

sovereignty and government by the consent of the governed.

In Chapter VII of the *Hunt for Wisdom*, Cusanus traces the basis for his discovery of the species of transcendental numbers through the problem of the quadrature of the circle, to the ninth chapter of Dionysius' *The Divine Names*. Cusanus writes, "the great Dionysius asserts in the ninth chapter of *On Divine Names*, that that first eternal is inflexible, inalterable, unmixed, immaterial, most simple, not indigent, inaugmentable, irreducible, has not become, is always existing."

He then says: "I take two of these, namely, the inaugmentable and the irreducible, and hasten with them to the hunt, and I say that the inaugmentable cannot be greater; therefore it is the maximum. The irreducible cannot be smaller; it is therefore the minimum. Hence, because it is equally the maximum and the minimum, it is in no way smaller, since it is the maximum, and in no way greater, since it is the minimum, but rather the most precise, formal, and exemplary cause and measure of everything great or small."

Cusanus then applies this isoperimetric, minimum-maximum conception of the infinite, as transcending that which can be described as lesser or greater, to the domain of aesthetics: "As I have shown in the booklet *On Beryllus*, in the enigma of the angle, the maximum and at the same time minimum angle is necessarily the most adequate formal cause of all angles which can become. And it is not only the formal cause, but also the efficient and final cause (as Dionysius shows, where he writes concerning beauty). For Beauty, which is that which it can be, is inaugmentable and irreducible, since it is at the same time the maximum and the minimum, is the actuality of all potential-to-become-beautiful, effecting everything beautiful, and as far as its capacity admits, conforming and converting it to itself."

In his commentary on *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Rorem documents the influence of this Dionysian work, as well as the writings of St. Augustine, on Christian aesthetics. For example, he points out that during the Ninth Century Hilduin, abbot of St.-Denis, had identified the Pseudo-Dionysius with the

legendary Denys of earliest Christian history in France and had completed a Latin translation of the Dionysian writings around 835. Suger, abbot of St.-Denis from 1122 to 1151, based the birth of Gothic architecture upon the Dionysian concept expressed in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, that "the appearances of beauty are the signs of an invisible loveliness."

The key scientific concept developed by Dionysius is that emphasized in Lyndon LaRouche's essay "On the Subject of Metaphor" (*Fidelio*, Vol.1, No. 3, Fall 1992). Knowledge can only be transmitted between two human beings, not linearly, but rather metaphorically through paradox. In *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius emphasizes that "incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are." The purpose of beautiful art, therefore, is to lift our minds above the incongruities of the visible domain to the invisible domain of God, Who, as Beauty itself, is the self-similar cause of all incongruous dissimilarities.

—William F. Wertz, Jr.

Murder Will Out

There are no doubt many more cover-ups locked away in the dusty closets of Her Majesty's Government, and in the musty attics of Britain's landed aristocrats. Here's one that has been brought to light after the passage of a mere four hundred years. The death of playwright Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's contemporary, author of the biting dramas, *The Jew of Malta*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *Tamberlaine* among others, is now proven beyond doubt to have been murder, and not the casual accident of a "bar-room brawl" which was the standing cover story until now.

Charles Nicholl's book is thoroughly researched, from sources in England and Continental Europe, and very well documented. For one who has known for years that murder was, so to speak, the name of the game, the book is a real delight to read. One to put away for the

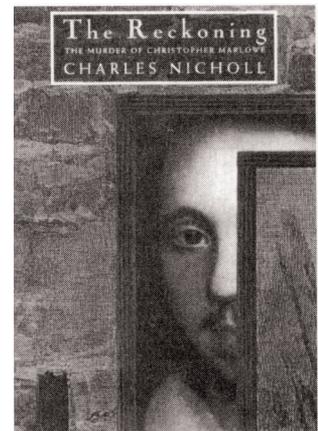
autumn, as the daylight hours draw shorter, and evening becomes the time to relax with a good book that is a bit unusual.

Not one for the beginner perhaps, but well worth the effort.

Nicholl is not satisfied with clearing up the question, "murder or not?" He also takes a stab at getting to the proverbial bottom of things.

There he finds—no surprise for anyone who has been around over the last couple of generations—Her Majesty's Privy Council and the intelligence network put together by the Venetian *eminence grise*, the thug Elizabeth I called "my Moor," Francis Walsingham.

Yes, it seems that Marlowe's murder was sanctioned by Elizabeth's Privy Council; his presence in the town of Deptford, one mile up river from the Queen's favorite palace at Greenwich, arranged from within the Privy Coun-



The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe
by Charles Nicholl
Harcourt Brace, New York, 1994
413 pages, hardbound, \$24.95

cil; his companions at Mistress Bull's house (Frizer, Skeres, and Poley), all part of the shadowy underworld of Walsingham's plots and counter-plots. And, Mistress Eleanor Bull herself,