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A Foreword to Eriugena's *Periphyseon*

A world in which the knowledge of the Greek roots of civilization is fading – or at least, where the direct exposure to the Greek original texts is becoming rare –, this world should reflect on how the transmission of our cultural heritage took place. John Scottus Eriugena represents an extremely interesting case: in his days (the ninth century), hardly anyone knew Greek in the West. Yet there he was, an Irish scholar who was well versed in Greek, and well acquainted with Greek philosophical literature. Through him – and, admittedly, through the visionary policy of the king of *Francia*, Charles the Bald, who attracted Eriugena to his court – Greek texts became available in translation: important works by Maximus Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite were translated by Eriugena. Moreover, on the basis of what he found in his Greek sources, Eriugena presented his own version of Neoplatonizing Christendom. *De divisione naturae*, also transmitted under its Greek title *Periphyseōn* (lit. “On natures”), constitutes a major achievement in bringing together Eastern and Western philosophical thought. Eriugena combines Augustine’s and Martianus Capella’s Latinized Neoplatonic Christianity with its Greek counterpart, which results in a very original mixture. The general flavor of the doctrine is undoubtedly Greek, opting for a spirituality that stresses the role of intellect in human divinization, whilst denying any positive determination or ultimate comprehensibility of God’s being.

Eriugena’s influence in the West has not been overwhelming. Mystics have always been keen on reading him, and late medieval thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno were adepts of Eriugena’s doctrines. Apart from that, it seems that those who were relying on Eriugena, either implicitly or explicitly, were not well regarded – indeed, ideas of followers of Eriugena were condemned on several occasions (culminating in the 1225 condemnation by pope Honorius III, who ordered that all copies of “*Periphysis*” should be burnt).¹

Yet it is perhaps exaggerated to state that “on the whole, the West has not welcomed his ideas.”² Recent studies have revealed the extent to which Anselm, Hugh of St. Victor, Alanus of Lille, and Robert Grosseteste have been influenced by Eri-

¹ See D. Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 273-277.

² J.J. O’Meara, *Eriugena. Periphyseon (The Division of Nature)*. Translation by I.P. Sheldon-Williams, re-

gena.³ This influence was, to large extent, due to the fact that from the twelfth century onwards, an abbreviated version of the *Periphyseōn* was circulating under the title *Clavis Physicae* (probably by Honorius Augustodunensis).

In 1685 Thomas Gale printed the *editio princeps* of the *Periphyseōn*, and the work continued to influence philosophers. Several scholars have pointed out links between Eriugena's work and the thought of Hegel and Schopenhauer. And the renewal of interest in the history of the Platonic tradition has brought forth a growing scholarly attention towards this medieval Latin upshot of Neoplatonism.

In the second half of the twentieth century, one can even speak of a boom in Eriugenian studies. Under the instigation of the late prof. James McEvoy, a scholarly association saw the light: the 'Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies' (SPES). This society organizes a series of conferences, the most recent of which was the eleventh, held at the University of Chicago in 2012, under the title *Eriugena and Creation*.⁴ Moreover, since a decade ago, the study of *Periphyseōn* can greatly benefit from the work of the French scholar Édouard Jeuneau, who after having published a critical edition of Eriugena's *Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John* in 1969,⁵ took on the challenge to edit the Latin text of *Periphyseōn* in a modern critical edition. The final volume appeared in 2003.⁶

One can thus hardly maintain, to-date, that Eriugena is a neglected author. Bibliographical surveys of Eriugenian studies⁷ reveal an enormous scholarly interest

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 vised by John J. O'Meara, Montréal: Bellarmin / Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987, *Introduction*, p. 21.

³ S. Gersh, 'John Scottus Eriugena and Anselm of Canterbury', in J. Marenbon (ed.), *Routledge History of Philosophy*. Volume III. *Medieval Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 120-149; J.J. McEvoy, 'John Scottus Eriugena and Robert Grosseteste', in W. Beierwaltes (ed.), *Eriugena Redivivus. Zur Wirkungsgeschichte seines Denkens im Mittelalter und im Übergang zur Neuzeit*, Heidelberg, 1987, p. 192-213; Moran, *o.c.*, p. 277-278.

⁴ W. Otten and M. I. Allen (eds.), *Eriugena and Creation*, Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference on Eriugenian Studies, Held in Honor of Édouard Jeuneau, Chicago, 9-12 November 2012, Turnhout: Brepols (Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia, 68), forthcoming 2014.

⁵ É. Jeuneau, *Jean Scot. Homélie sur le Prologue de Jean*, Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes, Paris: Éditions du Cerf (Sources Chrétiennes, 151), 1969.

⁶ Édouard Jeuneau, *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena. Periphyseon*. Turnhout: Brepols (Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, 161-165). *Liber primus*, 1996. *Liber secundus*, 1997. *Liber tertius*, 1999. *Liber quartus*, 2000. *Liber quintus*, 2003.

⁷ M. Brennan, *A Guide to Eriugenian Studies. A Survey of Publications 1930-1987 / Guide des études érigéniennes. Bibliographie commentée des publications 1930-1987*, Fribourg : Éditions universitaires / Paris : Éditions du Cerf (Vestigia. Études et documents de philosophie antique et médiévale, 5), 1989 ; G. Van Riel, 'A Bibliographical Survey of Eriugenian Studies 1987-1995', in G. Van Riel, C. Steel, and J. McEvoy, *Iohannes Scottus Eriugena. The Bible and Hermeneutics. Proceedings of the Ninth International Conference of the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies, Leuven – Louvain-la-Neuve, June 7-10, 1995*, Leuven: Leuven University Press (Ancient and Medieval Philosophy. De Wulf-Mansion Centre Series I, XX), 1996, p. 367-400 ; G. Van Riel, 'Eriugenian Studies 1995-2000', in J. McEvoy and M. Dunne (eds.), *History and Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena and His Time. Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference of the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies, Maynooth – Dublin (August 16-20, 2000)*,

in this author. From a wide variety of angles, people are approaching the work of this exceptional medieval thinker. Complete modern translations of *Periphyseōn* are available in English,⁸ French,⁹ German,¹⁰ Italian,¹¹ Spanish,¹² and Polish.¹³

With the forthcoming Hungarian translation of *Periphyseon* I, a new landmark is reached, which will open this remarkable book to new audiences, thus contributing to what Eriugena himself proclaims:

“Do not be afraid. For now we must follow reason, which investigates the truth of things and is not overborne by any authority, and is by no means prevented from revealing publicly to all men the things which it zealously searches out by circuitous reasoning and discovers with much toil.” (John Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseōn* I, 508D-509A)

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Leuven: Leuven University Press (Ancient and Medieval Philosophy. De Wulf-Mansion Centre Series I, XXX), 2002, 611-636.

⁸ I.P. Sheldon-Williams, *Eriugena. Periphyseon (The Division of Nature)*. Translation revised by John J. O'Meara, Montréal: Bellarmin / Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1987.

⁹ F. Bertin, Jean Scot Érigène, *De la division de la nature. Periphyseon. Introduction, traduction et notes*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. *Livre I. La nature créatrice créée. Livre II. La nature créatrice créée, 1995. Livre III. La nature créée créatrice, 1995. Livre IV. La nature créée créatrice, 2000. Livre V. La nature créatrice et créée, 2009.*

¹⁰ L. Noack, *Johannes Scotus Eriugena. Über Die Einteilung Der Natur*, Berlin, 1870-1874. Nachdruck mit einer Vorbemerkung und neuer Bibliographie von Werner Beierwaltes Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1984.

¹¹ M. Pereira, *Giovanni Scoto Eriugena. Sulle nature dell'universo (Periphyseon)*, Milano: Mondadori – Fondazione Lorenzo Valla *Libro I*, 2012. *Libro II*, 2013. *Libro III*, 2014; N. Gorlani, *Giovanni Scoto Eriugena. Divisione Della Natura*, Milano: Bompiani, 2013.

¹² Lorenzo Velázquez y Pedro Arias, *Juan Escoto Eriúgena. Sobre Las Naturalezas (Periphyseon)*. Pamplona: Eunsa, 2007.

¹³ A. Kijewska, *Jan Szkołot Eriugena. Periphyseon*, Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki, Kęty (“Ad fontes”). *Księga I*, 2009. *Księga II*, 2010. *Księga III*, 2010. *Księga IV*, 2012.