Life and Writings of Pseudo-Dionysius

Pseudonymous author whose actual identity and even ethnic background are unknown.

From internal evidence (late Neo-platonic influence) and external evidence (references to Pseudo-Dionysius in other works) lived and wrote in fifth century A.D.

Texts which form the basis of our Western translations (into Latin and English) are in Greek, but versions also exist in Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic.

[I am not sure if anyone knows the original language in which they were composed.]

Original Dionysius the Areopagite was a figure mentioned in the New Testament as being converted by St. Paul's preaching in Rome.

Pseudo-Dionysius maintained the fiction in his writings of their being addressed to Timothy, the addressee of two of St. Paul's Epistles.

In the Middle Ages Dionysius and Pseudo-Dionysius were thought to be the same person, and in addition were identified with St. Denis, a third-century missionary who was martyred in France.

The tangle of identities was not resolved until the nineteenth century, the delay being mostly due to an obliviousness to the historicity of things which pervaded medieval thought.

Main Existing Works of Pseudo-Dionysius

The Divine Names

The Celestial Hierarchy

The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy

The Mystical Theology

General Character of thought:
Marked dependence on non-Christian Neo-Platonists (seemingly on Proclus, but perhaps on Iamblichus, whom I do not know in detail--I have not sorted out in my own mind the relation between Iamblichus and Proclus--was Proclus largely dependent on Iamblichus or was he an original thinker?)

"Mystical" flavor, consisting mainly in a continued emphasis on the hiddenness and unknowability of the divine--also a predominant theme in Proclus.

Source of Interest for Philosophy:

A complex theory of predicating attributes of God in which divine unintelligibility is reflected by the aptness of predicated of Him contradictory attributes -- God is thought of as a Non-being which is above Being.

(Of the four works mentioned, I have read only The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology. I have never seen the others in English translation.)

An interesting series of texts on Divine Darkness:

From Plato's Sophist:

"Stranger: And as classes are admitted by us in like manner to be some of them capable and others incapable of intermixture, must not he who would rightly show what kinds will unite and what will not, proceed by the help of science in the path of argument? And will he not ask if the connecting links are universal, and so capable of intermixture with all things; and again, in divisions, whether there are not other universal classes, which make them possible?

Theaetetus: To be sure he will require science, and, if I am not mistaken, the very greatest of all sciences.

Stranger: How are we to call it? By Zeus, have we not lighted unwittingly upon our free and noble science, and in looking for the Sophist have we not entertained the philosopher unawares?

Theaetetus: What do you mean?

Stranger: Should we not say that the division according to classes, which neither makes the same other nor makes the other the same, is
the business of the dialectical science?

Theaetetus: That is what we should say.

Stranger: Then, surely, he who can divide rightly is able to see clearly one form pervading a scattered multitude, and many different forms contained under one higher form; and again one form knit together into a single whole and pervading many such wholes, and many forms, existing only in separation and isolation. This is the knowledge of classes which determines where they can have communion with one another and where not.

Theaetetus: Quite true.

Stranger: And the art of dialectic would be attributed by you only to the philosopher pure and true?

Theaetetus: Who but he can be worthy?

Stranger: In this region we shall always discover the philosopher, if we look for him; like the Sophist, he is not easily discovered, but for a different reason.

Theaetetus: For what reason?

Stranger: Because the Sophist runs away into the darkness of not-being, in which he has learned by habit to feel about, and cannot be discovered because of the darkness of the place. Is not that true?

Theaetetus: It seems to be so.

Stranger: And the philosopher, always holding converse through reason with the idea of being, is also dark from excess of light; for the souls of the many have no eye which can discern the vision of the divine."

From The First Letter of Paul to Timothy:

"...until our Lord Jesus Christ appears. That appearance God will bring to pass in his own good time -- God who in eternal felicity alone holds sway. He is King of kings and Lord of lords; he alone possesses immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light. No man has ever seen or ever can see him. To him be honour and might for ever! Amen."
From On Mystical Theology:

"But you, dear Timothy, in your earnest study of mystical insights, leave behind sensations and intellectual activities, all things sensible and intelligible, all non-beings and beings, and be lifted up in an unknowable manner to the unity of what is above all being and knowledge, insofar as that can be reached. For, by an irresistible and purely unconditioned going-out from yourself and from all things, you will be lifted up to the supersubstantial ray of divine shadow, setting aside all things and turned loose from all things."

The Three-fold Way of Theology:
Affirmation, Predication, and Super-Eminence

God (1) is all things, because he is their cause -- he (2) is not any of things, because he is above them all, even Being and Mind, and yet again he (3) is all things as containing them in a higher way, and thus is super-being, super-mind, super-life, etc. The affirmations and negations are not opposed to each other, because they are transcended in a higher synthesis which reflects the unity which is above all plurality and opposition.

Thus the logic which is applicable to intelligible things is not applicable to God, because as being beyond intelligibility he unites affirmation and negation in a higher synthesis.

He appears truly only to those who "climb above every ascent of all the holy peaks" and enter into the divine darkness.

The affirmative way begins with the highest beings, for they are closest to their cause, and of all things, they are most nearly true of God.

The negative way begins with the lowest things, for they are farthest from their cause, and of all things, they are most nearly to be denied of God.

Selected Portions of Exodus which Pseudo-Dionysius seems to be citing in Mystical Theology, Chapter 1

"...and the Lord said to him [Moses], 'Go to the people and hallow them today and make them wash their clothes. They must be
ready by the third day, because on the third day the Lord will
descend upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.'

"...Moses came down from the mountain to the people. He
hallowed them, and they washed their clothes. He said to the
people, 'Be ready by the third day; do not go near a woman.' On the
third day, when morning came, there were peals of thunder and
flashes of lightning, dense cloud on the mountain and a loud
trumpet blast; the people of the camp were all terrified.

"...Then he said unto Moses, 'Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron,
Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. While you
are still at a distance, you are to bow down; and then Moses shall
approach the Lord by himself, but not the others. The people may
not go up with him at all.

"...Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of
the elders of Israel, and they saw* the God of Israel. Under his
feet there was, as it were, a pavement of sapphire, clear blue as
the very heavens; but the Lord did not stretch out his hand toward
the leaders of Israel.

"And Moses prayed, 'Show me thy glory.' The Lord answered, 'I
will make all my goodness** pass before you, and I will pronounce
in your hearing the name JEHOVAH. I will be gracious to whom I will
be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have
compassion.' But he added, 'My face you cannot see, for no mortal
man may see me and live.' The Lord said, 'Here is a place beside
me. Take your stand on the rock, and when my glory passes by, I
will put you in a crevice of the rock and cover you with my hand
until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you
shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.'

"...And the Lord came down in a cloud and took his place
beside him and pronounced the name JEHOVAH. Then the Lord passed in
front of him...."

"...At length Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two
stone tablets of the Tokens in his hands, and when he descended he
did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been
speaking with the Lord...."

* or "they were afraid of"
** or "character"

[Text and notes from The New English Bible.]