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"They Cannot Choose But Look"

JOHN PHILIP JONES

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THIS IS AN ESSAY ABOUT TWELVE CHURCHES. It may strike the reader as rather optimistic that I should expect him or her to spend half an hour in my company while I dilate on a subject in which I am figuratively and literally an amateur (a problem I shall address in a minute). I must, therefore, first explain the trigger for my headlong leap into print: something beyond the two weeks I recently spent in France visiting those twelve churches that are the heroines of this essay.

At the airport, waiting for my uncomfortable but inexpensive transportation back to the United States, I was lucky enough to meet an old acquaintance whom I had not seen for twenty years. Beyond commenting on how our paunches had grown during this long period, we said little to one another. But I was delighted to see that he seemed prosperous: indeed, he remarked apologetically that he was now "um . . . a landowner." This was no surprise; he had been since birth the heir of a landed family, remarkable not only for its wealth and aristocratic pedigree but especially for the now nearly extinct species of person it has regularly produced: the cultivated gentleman (or gentlewoman) of letters.

My acquaintance's uncle was a classic example of this species, being a noted autobiographer, essayist, and writer of *belles lettres*. He was notorious (among educators) for a statement—a profound half-truth—that his education had taken place during his vacations from Eton. For us educators, this is a salutary reminder of how our professional endeavors can on occasion be perceived. But, since we tend to have longer vacations than other people, it may also confirm that we are ourselves *ipso facto* better educated than they.

It is in this precise spirit that I shall recount my recent experience of the twelve churches. And since this essay essentially concerns the impact of these edifices *on me*, I can justly claim that this is a subject

1. John Ruskin, "Influence of Imagination in Architecture," in *Sesame & Lilies, the Two Paths and the King of the Golden River* (London: J. M. Dent, 1907), 182.

about which I have greater knowledge than any specialist in Gothic architecture or medieval history. I am embarking therefore on a highly personal exploration of aesthetics, although I expect my argument to stray at times into slightly broader fields.

Churches in Europe offer those with eyes to see an enlightenment, not to speak of a low-cost entertainment, of a very high order. There is an extraordinary wealth of buildings offering refreshment and inspiration. My twelve are all on the beaten track and easy to locate; they are all within a hundred miles of Paris. Three of them, by their stunning size and scale, can be counted among the glories of Christendom. Yet they stand not in “lone splendour”; rather are they *primi inter pares*, since each of the remaining nine would come into the category of *vaut la visite* (to quote the guidebook I was using for gastronomic self-indulgence), or at the very least into the category of *mérite un détour*. The earliest of the twelve churches was begun during the first half of the twelfth century; the most recent was completed early in the seventeenth. While they are all Gothic, among them they show the development of this subtle, durable, and symbolic style from the relative austerity of its beginnings to the visual electricity of its conclusions. Most took decades and some took centuries to build.

Two of the twelve churches (Châlis; Trois-Fontaines) are in ruins, having been sacked during the French Revolution. Three others, (Beauvais Cathedral; Senlis Cathedral; Sézanne) are in pretty bad condition, judging by the dust from crumbling masonry, the large and baleful patterns of damp stain on the walls and frescoes, and also, more dramatically, by the scaffolding and plastic sheets that signal belated attempts to stem the progress of decay. (This decay may not be as bad as it appears, for reasons I shall come to presently.) The remaining seven (Châlons Cathedral; Notre-Dame, Châlons; Laon Cathedral; Notre-Dame de l'Épine; Notre-Dame, Paris; Reims Cathedral; Sainte-Chapelle, Paris) are all “sound in wind and limb.” One other categorization: six are cathedrals and large; the other six are modest in size. With churches (as with other parts of life), biggest is often—but not always—best. As the reader will discern, those churches that made the greatest impact on me were two of the smallest I visited.

In each church, I observed the detail inside and out. I also sat inside imbibing in tranquility the impression made by the building as a whole. The latter was if anything a more rewarding experience than the former, for a church's beauty “is revealed only to those who make themselves like its meditative creators. One does not lend admiration; it is personal. Seven hundred years ago these stones obeyed the Master's conception, which we strive to discover, to reinvent.”²

Only once did I attend a service. The experience was impaired both by my imperfect comprehension of what was going on and by the distressingly evangelical fervor of the proceedings. This essay is not, however, about explicit religious ceremonies. Rather it explores the “sermons in stone,” the implicit observances, of dead generations of ecclesiastical planners, church builders, and craftsmen in stone, glass, and wood.

Well, what impact did the whole experience make on me? I shall not describe my tour chronologically, because I am not writing a guide-

2. Auguste Rodin, *Cathedrals of France* (London: Country Life, 1965), 254.

book. My overall impressions were rich and variegated; they can be clustered into six discrete but not mutually exclusive groups.

3. Ibid., 162.

"THE VIBRANT SOUL OF ITS LIFE"³

EACH CHURCH DOMINATES ITS CITY or town as no modern building is capable of doing. This is an unmistakable impression, but the reasons for it are not all obvious. Sheer size plays a part, to be sure, but this is not the complete explanation. Judged by criteria of dimensions and mass, the Empire State Building is more impressive than any of the edifices I visited, but by no stretch of the imagination can the Empire State Building be said to contain the beating heart of Manhattan in quite the same way that Reims Cathedral can be said to contain the beating heart of its lovely city.

There are subtler forces at work.

In the first place, since historically church and town grew together, all the main roads tend to lead to or from the church. (It is interesting that in France all distances from Paris are measured from Notre-Dame.) In each town the visitor easily finds himself face to face with the church because this is where the natural flow of the traffic invariably leads him. As an extension of this point, it has always seemed to me that European cathedrals are *used*: with reverence, but still used. I shall always carry with me a mental image from my teenage years: a visit to the great cathedral of Seville, and the sight of an old farm woman who had come in to pray with two live white hens under her arms.

In the second place, because of the difficulties of transportation in medieval times, the building materials are invariably local, so that the church has the same grain and texture as the city of which it is so noble a part.⁴ This is a striking characteristic of Senlis, which remains today an essentially medieval town. The grey of the walls, of the old town houses, of the *pavé* and of the cathedral gives Senlis an indissoluble coherence and uniformity. Even the street market could be medieval; only the people's dress betrays the present age.

In the third place each church has been fitted into its setting with obvious pride and in ways that demonstrate to best effect both the total shape of the building and also its detailed features. The squares, chapter houses, and cloisters, often lovely in themselves, invariably serve to emphasize the majesty of the churches of which they are smaller, less lofty satellites.

As often as not, the churches are built on high ground: occasionally on hilltops, sometimes on smaller rises. This subtly reinforces the visual impact of their vertical lines: a design feature with powerful religious symbolism. Of my twelve churches, most striking in this respect is the mighty mass of Laon Cathedral on its hilltop; its location and power say almost everything that is to be said about the position of the Church in medieval rural society. (The marvelous gargoyles are stone statues of cattle.) A more modest example is the west front of Notre-Dame de l'Epine, which one approaches by the long rising road from Châlons-sur-Marne. Its twin spires are small and exquisite. They are

"Their truly wondrous sense of
proportion"
LAON CATHEDRAL



4. This idea is discussed in reference to the decline in the aesthetic quality of urban architecture in the nineteenth century by R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936 and 1960), 153.

not quite uniform one against the other, but even this lack of symmetry seems perfectly contrived. There is no doubt whatsoever that this church dominates the little town; journeying upwards towards it the church comes gradually into view: a jewel in a jeweler's lovely setting.

“WHAT ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE OF PROPORTIONS!”⁵

5. Rodin, *Cathedrals of France*, 173.

WE NOW COME to the most emphatic feature of all the churches I visited, a fundamental characteristic of the skeleton and composition of their construction: their truly wondrous sense of proportion. Each element in the edifice—each nave, transept, and choir, each arcade and clerestory, each vault, each window—seems miraculously harmonious with every other element.

This is exemplified most strongly in the mutual relationship of the three dimensions of length, breadth, and height. In French churches particularly, ways are found to incorporate sometimes dizzying heights without destroying the overall grace and harmony of the design. Beauvais, one of my twelve churches and the loftiest in France, caused Rodin to feel “total astonishment. The mind strives to comprehend the past and to penetrate it with new sight. . . curves, rules, palpitations of the stone against a murky sky where the imagination gropes and glimpses.”⁶ Absolute size does not, however, matter as much as the relationship of the elements to one another. Sainte-Chapelle, another of my churches and a tiny one, creates a breathtaking impression of height contrived entirely by shapes and proportions.



“A powerful vein of humor runs through”

LAON CATHEDRAL

What is so truly remarkable is that such harmony never leads to monotony. Within the basic structure of cruciform design, the different and developing phases of the Gothic style allow infinite variation. The wonder is that each particular variation in its specific setting has, virtually without exception, a total rightness about it.

The methods by which the medieval architects achieved all this are largely a mystery. Trial and error probably played its part, leading builders to develop pragmatic guidelines about what would and would not hold together physically; by the end of the Middle Ages they had indeed developed advanced skills in this. But the greater contribution must surely have come from that quality so unerringly detected by Ruskin, whose appreciation of buildings was confined more to detail than to overall style but who was forced to admit that “[n]ot by rule, nor by

6. *Ibid.*, 253.

7. Ruskin, "Influence of Imagination on Architecture," 165.

study, can the gift of graceful proportionate design be obtained; only by the intuition of genius can so much as a single tier of façade be beautifully arranged."

*"A combination of reality,
spirituality, and innate
elegance"*
REIMS CATHEDRAL



8. Rodin, *Cathedrals of France*, 155.

"OH, NOBLE RACE OF ARTISANS!"⁸

WE NOW COME TO THE SMALLER THINGS: the work of generations of craftsmen: the masons, the wood carvers, the glass workers. In what ways can one generalise about such a dazzling profusion of skilled and artistic endeavor? The first thing we must admit is that some of these details are better than others. But even those few examples of craftsmanship that in our wisdom we condemn as having some artistic deficiencies have two endemic qualities that in most cases offer a compensation to delight both the spirit and the intellect.

First, a powerful vein of humor runs through this work. It is found not just in the gargoyles—although the gargoyle is surely the most ubiquitous symbol of the medieval world—but rather in all details of the craftsmanship of European churches: in the expressions on the faces; in the relationships among the figures; in other and unexpected juxtapositions. We can sense the grin on the face of the mason as he chips away at the stone. Second—a different but related point—is that the statuary and glass can often give us a pleasurable *frisson* of insight into the domestic details of life in the Middle Ages: the toil of the laborer, the coming of the seasons, feudal service, domestic life in cottage and court. Our knowledge of daily life in the Middle Ages remains fragmentary, but ecclesiastical art provides some of the few vivid glimpses we have of the life of the times, flashes of illumination penetrating the darkness of the past. (Another example, but a secular one: the Bayeux Tapestry. This is artistically a deplorable piece of work. But where would our historical knowledge of the Norman Conquest be without it?)

Now, what of the majority of craftsman's work in the churches that is of the highest quality? There is an inspiration here transcending our understanding; I shall speculate on its origins later. Some of the work is almost miraculous. The statuary in particular can possess a combination of reality, spirituality, and innate elegance that is of a far higher order than that exhibited by most paintings of the time, which are all too often crippled by their inability to handle perspective. (As I have said already, this essay presents a personal point of view.)

The glass has other qualities. Despite frequent crudity in its representational expression, the best French glass uses color in ways that are literally and figuratively dazzling. The characteristic blue of the glass in Chartres (which I did not visit on this journey) and in Paris's Notre-Dame and Sainte-Chapelle (which I did) has an *éclat* which is unique and almost incomparable. And it is not one blue but a spectrum of different blues, as the sunlight tracks across the sky and strikes a myriad of shades from the glass panes from its different angles of illumination.

The quality heightening our pleasure in all these details both inside and outside the churches is of course our imaginative and emotional involvement. We get caught up in the experience of our senses, and our feet leave the earth. "Remember that when the imagination and feelings are strongly excited, they will not only bear with strange things, but they will *look* into *minute* things with a delight quite unknown in hours of tranquility."⁹

"BUTTRESSES THAT THRUST INTO THE AIR WITH SO MUCH GENIUS AND MEASURE"¹⁰

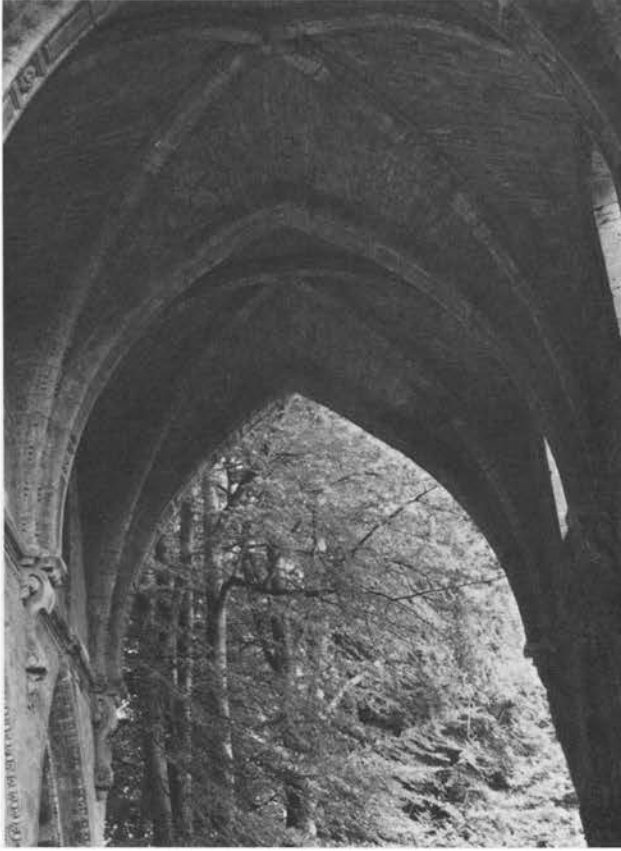
I HAVE WRITTEN about the location of the churches and about their natural beauty in the whole and in the part. But our common sense must tell us that, obvious as these things are, they do not compose the salient feature of medieval churches. To a Britisher, with the overdeveloped sense of history of his race (and *a fortiori* one who

9. Ruskin, "Influence of Imagination on Architecture," 178. (Ruskin's emphasis.)

10. Rodin, *Cathedrals of France*, 152.

*"Their antiquity, their
permanence"*

TROIS-FONTAINES ABBEY



is writing these words in an American city), the first characteristic of the twelve churches must be their antiquity, their permanence.

Even the three edifices in dreadful physical condition have an underlying soundness and robustness of construction that one *knows* will enable them to withstand worse trials than the neglect and pollution of the twentieth century. And even the two ruins have an astonishing durability. One feels that they were built as they are today; indeed they have remained precisely intact in their present state of picturesque decay for three years short of two centuries.

How can it be that with their inadequate education and knowledge, their primitive building techniques, and their complete lack of any power greater than human and animal muscle to do the heavy work, the medieval builders constructed their buildings in such a way that they have held together for seven hundred years and appear likely to hold for a further seven hundred? To my grandfather, an architect, it was a source of constant wonder that the early

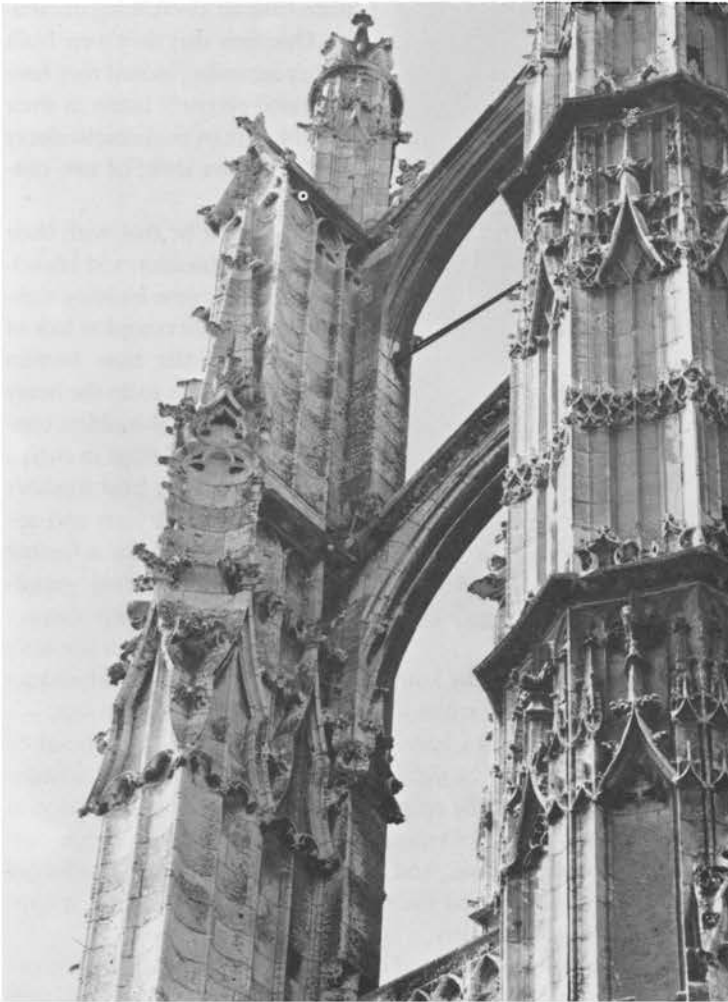
builders even developed the knowledge of mechanics and mathematics needed to calculate the stresses to their vaulting and buttresses.

A certain amount (as I have already suggested) was discovered by trial and error. It would be difficult to imagine a situation as disheartening, and crushing to the religious faith of the medieval builder, as the amazing outpouring of treasure and the even more profligate outpouring of inspiration, skill, and labor over the course of decades, all followed one dark night by the crash of falling masonry. But it happened—alas!—with regularity.

One of the best documented examples of such trial and error occurred at Ely Cathedral, which rises triumphantly over the dull lands of East Anglia in England and provides one of the few good reasons to visit this desolate, damp, windblown, and depressed agricultural region. One day, shortly after the cathedral was completed, the stone vaulting at the crossing of the nave and the transept fell to earth with a spectacular reverberation. The whole fabric of the edifice was in imminent danger of terminal collapse.

A local craftsman hurriedly improvised a new support: an octagonal timber lantern (a turret admitting light), which was both functionally

efficient and pleasing to the eye. Indeed it has ever since continuously cast daylight into the choir and nave, given pleasure to countless generations of worshippers as they have looked upward, and managed to hold together the thousands of tons of stone of which the cathedral is built. It has, moreover, done these things with a degree of mechanical efficiency, since it has performed its functions without substantial repair or major attention since the year 1342. Not a bad example of the very robustness and durability of medieval construction I have been talking about.



*“Constructed their buildings
in such a way that they have
held together for seven hundred
years”*

BEAUVAIS CATHEDRAL

“IT GROWS SPINDLE SHAPED IN RISING”¹¹

ii. Ibid., 189.

A POINT WHICH HAS TWICE BEEN mentioned in this essay and which is a matter of considerable importance is the vertical thrust of all Gothic architecture: an emphasis that grew as the style evolved and that is illustrated most vividly in the

12. George Henderson, *Chartres* (Harmonsworth, Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1968), 14.

13. Rodin, *Cathedrals of France*, 185.

14. *Ibid.*, 189.

15. *Ibid.*, 134.

16. *Ibid.*, 160.

smallest of the churches I visited, Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, where the effect is contrived by the manipulation of shapes and proportions alone.

The emphasis and repetition of verticality is a constant reminder to the observer of endeavor and aspiration: of the upward flight of the human spirit. Medieval culture is rich in images of journeying upwards: "the ascension of Christ, passing out of sight of his disciples among the clouds, the similar assumption of the Virgin, the ladder of Jacob sloping up from earth to heaven."¹² If I were asked to name the most dynamic (and consistent) abstract symbolism brought to mind by the churches I visited, it would be this.

Rodin wrote of Reims: "Completely black columns are around the chancel; this is stone in prayer, a waterspout that rises to God."¹³ This is essentially the same thought expressed with a different metaphor. In yet another context, Rodin develops the notion that in the regions above, there takes place an elemental animal struggle, but a conflict out of which order is born.¹⁴ This is a civilized although anachronistic thought, the equation of the highest aesthetic pleasure with rationality: "[T]here is no enduring originality other than taste and order."¹⁵

This brings me to the last of the thoughts prompted by my visits to the twelve churches.

"A REFLECTION OF DIVINITY"¹⁶

THE PROFOUND IMPACT that these churches can make upon the observer is compounded of religious and historical feelings, but most of all of constant and at times intense aesthetic stimulation. But this stimulation is associated essentially with sensibility, symmetry, ordered progress, clearly defined symbolism, robustness, and controlled energy: qualities central to Western civilisation no matter how we choose to define it. This combination of powerful stimuli prompts many questions, but the most important of these must be concerned with the source of the intellectual and spiritual inspiration of the many and largely unknown designers, builders, and craftsmen who together constructed that loveliest of all human artifacts, the medieval church.

One's admiration and gratitude for this achievement is increased by the certain knowledge of the crushing poverty of the age that produced it, and of the primitive nature of the tools and technology available to the builders. Despite these seemingly impossible handicaps, the builders of the Middle Ages overcame all physical obstacles and produced vast numbers of edifices of great beauty and extreme and lasting strength. The builders' persistence, their aesthetic feeling, and above all their unerring sense of fitness, mark them as profoundly civilized people. And the deficiencies in their education, the undoubted crudity of their lives, and the probable unsavory nature of their personal habits do not detract from this in any way; rather these things emphasize their good fortune in being able to leave behind permanent evidence of their best qualities rather than of their worst (which is the lot of the majority of humanity).



"The vertical thrust of all Gothic architecture"
NOTRE DAME DE L'ÉPINE

Yet, knowing the stupendous scope of the enterprise and the weakness of the means available to achieve it, doubts must remain about whether these men could alone and unaided have done the job that they accomplished so powerfully.

A prominent agnostic philosopher recently commented that the scientific evidence for the divinity (as opposed to the historical origins) of Christianity is not merely thin but nonexistent. And while this is not the time or place to engage seriously in debate on such a subject, it is axiomatic, from the deep religious beliefs of numerous scientists in the most rigorous disciplines, that objective empirical substantiation is not a universal precondition of faith. Indeed it is likely that subtler and more oblique types of evidence may exercise on occasion a decisive influence. One such type of evidence is the thunderbolt of inspiration and the unremitting frenzy of creative endeavor, activities that can be appreciated by the outside observer not so much in themselves as in their products; and such products are all around us in the richest profusion. Nowhere is such profusion more evident than where the limbs relish the still and the cool, where the eyes devour the blue of the ancient glass, and where the imagination takes wing among the intaglio of the tympana and the sinuous relief of the vaulting.