

## TWO CATHEDRALS

### *The Psychology of Architecture*

S. G. A. LUFF

**R**EFUGE for Huysmans, inspiration for Péguy, Chartres has a secret allure which escapes analysis in terms of art or religion. The psychology of architecture, once sufficiently articulate, betrays the same elusive charm which graces men in the major changes of life, the succession of bewilderment and mastery in adolescence, the *éclat* of a James Dean or the universal teddy-boy catching the imagination of a decade aware of its crossroads. I looked therefore at Chartres with a questing eye—would I be caught? should I resist? could I diagnose?

Chartres is not, at least in the factors which combine to achieve its rare effect, the work of one artist. Excluding the crypt, alterations, and some superimposed decorations, its creation spans three centuries, from the last signs of classical souvenirs in certain motifs of the west façade, to the realization, but not the fulness, of the gothic plan in its corona. The charm lies in a certain awareness of opposites bursting one from another with the improbability of butterfly from chrysalis, an inclination of the masculine in its romanesque to flirt with the feminine in its gothic, of the earth-bound yet mystic in the one to consort with the poetic yet mathematical in the other, liaison without lust, personality hovering between sexes, like a poet's perception and gentleness which does not disgrace his manhood.

Once the romanesque artist had conceived the corona—the ensemble of apse, ambulatory, and radiating chapels—the sensibility of the building raced there, as that of a man concentrates on one fine experience, or as features express a deep emotion. After Chartres, the perfection of gothic lay in the lightness of touch it conferred on its apse, how lofty a vault it could sustain, how many chapels it could radiate, how balanced their relationship with the parent body, how slender its columns and free-standing its buttresses, what harmonies of colour could be played on the simple spectrum of light, how many pinnacles suggest a new vertical direction, guiding the transformation of stone into the aspiration of prayer, lest the spatial end of the building appear to have

imposed a limit to the ambition of man, its designer. At Chartres romanesque rumbles in the crypt of Notre-Dame-Sous-Terre, *Virgo Paritura*, the Virgin who is to bring forth. Christian Madonna or pagan earth-mother, it was literally from that womb the beauty of Chartres sprang. The earliest portions of the upper church, the lower stages of the western towers, lift up their burden on buttresses slender and straight like the legs of a boy. The façade, with its royal portal of graceful statuary, brags here a few classical ornaments inherited from old pagan times, and there, with the careless enthusiasm of youth, rejects familiar habits for the craze of another paganism introduced by newcomers, men from the North, with their intoxicating fauna, ruthless energy of expression, their extravagant concepts from imagination and fable. Perhaps there is a kinship between their beasts and centaurs of corbel and capital and incipient gargoyle, and that lust for pain and horror which seems to be an inseparable accompaniment to 'growing up'. Romanesque is invariably a fusion of classical and barbarian influence with byzantine spirituality. Over the relics of classical formalism, distorted acanthus and nordic monsters, soars a pure and glorious Christ in a majesty of saints and prophets. One has only to turn to the porch of the south transept, where a similar scheme was achieved a lifetime later, to realize that the technical perfections of gothic were to be purchased at a price of blood, a shedding of the human and spiritual while men concentrated with cerebral passion on those disturbing problems—how to hold up a vault, etc. The north façade betrays the dawn of returning humanism, weak, however, in spiritual vitality; for centuries spirit and flesh were to be foes, striving to mutual loss. Indecision as to who should win, or how a synthesis is made, or when a department of life is not a department, are still root problems in Christian art when men fail to design themselves first.

Within, Chartres depends on proportion at the service of coloured light, as if charismatically aware of the future preservation of its stained glass. External wealth of sculpture changes to austerity, like a woman who relies on her figure and the lustre of her eyes. Darkness interprets light, and light divests itself of brilliance in incomparable modesties of tone. Subjects are subsidiary; if you study them, you find beauty, but their function is to contribute to a whole, not to expect individual appreciation.

Like the liturgy, which takes all the seasons to unfold and a lifetime to learn, their secrets, where indeed they are not so far from sight as to be inviolable, are measured out. The Church is a school, not teaching facts—for the most part transitory things—but immanent and abiding qualities, which are part of Truth. The beauty of the glass of Chartres is undiminishing and independent of fashion; it was made in an age which managed in some respects to slip out of the exigences of time.

So to the perfection of the corona—if we can close our eyes to the monstrous classical sculpture which usurps the altar and the eighteenth-century nonsense perpetrated on the arcade, if we except the empty choir which has obviously almost abandoned worship in shame-faced confession of its meretricious messiness. Externally, it is best seen from the banks of the Eure, where wandering streams and reeds and little rustic bridges still make up a world of personalities. A full green foreground climbs to white stone, the gentle tones of arch, arcade and buttress, strong shadows in the towers; green is repeated rhythmically in lighter tones of leaden roofs, and white in the play of light and shade in the intricacy of the flamboyant spire. A cloud or two in soft blue sky is best to complete the theme. The gothic apse does not end with the entrance of light, but externally embraces it, integrating itself with earth and heaven, consummating sacramentally a function which is the ideal of the complete man.

Chartres is not unique in style, plan, or period, but it is rare in this articulate consciousness that it expresses an achievement; not in terms of pride, though gothic was young, out to break records, to challenge the validity of its own laws. Chartres inherited old ideas, grew and experienced a new pattern on the threshold of its possibilities. These were carried to fulness elsewhere, in many ways, in different places; the gothic family broke up and went off in all directions. To meet its highest expression, wherever that is, would be impressive; but who wants just to be impressed? It hurts our *amour propre*, and in any case, the just impressive is not lovable. Achievement that faltered, or even won, but came home with an injury, exposes itself to our sentiments, and in fact we seldom appreciate deeply, to be honest, with anything else. Such is Beauvais. That old challenge, the vault, caused heartache among architects. To translate stone into light, to pin up vaults on ribs tricked out by sheer calculated mathematical skill, was a heady

wine. That skill was often frustrated, but sometimes covered up its blunders ingeniously with contrivances which justified themselves, like the inverted arches of Wells. We appreciate the confidence shown in us by the architect who thrust internal buttresses through the choir aisles of Gloucester. At Beauvais the vault hit its record at an internal height of nearly one hundred and sixty feet, three and a half times the width. It crumbled; the effort was repeated and, with varying fortunes, sustained. Success carried off the canons, who were perhaps even more infatuated with an ideal than the men they employed. Funds that might have built a nave were squandered on a steeple four hundred and fifty feet high, which survived four years, to collapse like a seal on the tines, for the date was 1573, and Christendom was no more intact than the task it inspired; faith and unity were not in the mortar.

The last phase of English gothic is styled 'perpendicular', but the essential genius of the style from its inception was its vertical *élan*. If this realization flagged in England it was for many reasons. It was partly because our great churches were rebuilt piecemeal. Norman building had been so extensive that replacement by later styles often went no further than the choir, or in hard times just adapted or encased the romanesque fabric. The monastic character of our cathedrals and the development of prolonged eastern arms with extra transepts also helped to concentrate rebuilding to one end of the church; so did the wealth of shrines. The architect had scant opportunity to conceive a design as a whole and his employers laid such emphasis on the prolongation of the English churches that finally this seemed to possess a certain enchantment. When the vertical potentialities of a style already two hundred years old at last dawned on the architect his interpretation was confined to notebook elevations of single bays, geometry not dreams, perpendiculars drawn on a plane, not vertical aspirations. Who could allege that St George's, Windsor, or Henry VII's Chapel at Westminster, considered as wholes, express a vertical *élan*? They are repetitions of the inherited formula with a perpendicular motif applied. The characteristics of English gothic are tranquillity and order, and in its plans, reflections of our social structures; it is not a meter of human forces. It is not surprising that the intellectual origins of the Reformation were elaborated in France.

The first builders to replace the modest Carolingian cathedral at Beauvais were dilatory at their task. The present choir did not take shape till the late thirteenth century, when the destiny of the new style was not only apparent but challenging every builder. By 1284 six bays and the apse had soared to the record, column and buttress trained in harmonious support of a sustained note planned to be the pride of a little French bishopric and the glory of mathematics at the service of faith. The vault broke. The work was resumed; additional piers interrupted the arcade but enhanced its vertical rhythm. Beauvais, like the finest human personalities, acquired character from error and correction and perfected itself in the trials of its growth. Only within a few weeks of the sixteenth century were steps taken to inaugurate the transepts, and finally, while heresy combated the exhausted forces of Christian culture and humanism worried it to seek foreign adventures, a central steeple of stone and wood compassed an inspiration which was no longer the authentic expression of its time. In token thereof, within four years it fell. The impulse which had prompted the construction of transepts was to sustain the lofty choir, and if plans were made to open up the nave the necessity of retaining crossing and tower directed them. Expedients, not inspiration; the part, not the whole. Perfections and imperfections were dominated by one pursuit, the conquest of natural forces by natural means, but the supernatural meaning was fading.

The defeat of the architects of Beauvais, the frustration of their plans, realized the excellence which remains. Without the distraction of a lantern disturbing internal unity, the medieval *leger-demain* of its exalted apse deceives the spiritual eye, the ending that is not limit, a conclusion of matter inviting to speculation in space and adventure in spirit, a wall that is a passing away of stone and an apotheosis of light. Had the nave been completed, the vision of the observer from the transept would not have been compelled with the same startling acuity.

In the last century the tiled roofs of ambulatory and chapels were removed, opening the first range of lights in the false triforium. These have been filled with warm modern glass which unhappily tends to dissipate rather than diffuse colour. Contrasted with the lighter colours of the open triforium and the pale light of the slender clerestory windows, a theme of transmission of light unfolds, essentially gothic, unlike that romanesque purpose

of Chartres, which only admits light through the sacramental matter of imagery and colour. Adolescence has grown into medieval manhood, chivalrous, crusading, tilting at wind and sky, tarnishing his shield with the sins of battle, but emerging at the last an admirable man, an essay in that marriage of spirit and flesh, matter and ideal, limited capacity and infinite aspiration, with which God crowned the servility of this world. Beauvais evolves through the human cycle of trial, error, correction, perseverance, and rests finally in the humility of imperfect success.

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### NOTICE

The English edition of *Chance and Providence*, by William G. Pollard (Scribner; n.p.), which was reviewed in our March issue, will be published in the autumn of this year by Messrs Faber and Faber.