Allegories of the Gothic in the Long Nineteenth Century

“The gothic gets away,” writes Henry Adams, musing on the Cathedral of Chartres in the summer of 1904: “No two men think alike about it, and no woman agrees with either” (87). Over a hundred years later, it is fair to say that medieval Gothic architecture still eludes us, not just in its own spirit and form but also as the object of such intense, even fanatical interest in Adams’s own age. Gothic religious architecture produced such a variety of responses in writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that one struggles to come to terms with the simple question of what made it so interesting and important to that moment in history. This chapter undertakes a preliminary answer to that question by proposing that, despite the variety of responses to the Gothic, one can nonetheless discern two general movements, both of them symptomatic of nineteenth-century European culture. The first is that of an inherent tension between an ahistorical aesthetics of transcendence and an emerging historical sense whereby the writer poses, explicitly or not, the question of what the aesthetic experience means in terms of contemporary social forms. In other words, the aesthetic sense is put to the test of its ethical consequences, as writers ask, essentially, “What is our relation to the past?” and when the answer to that question registers an irreparable loss, it is followed by the question “How can we construct our world anew?”

The second general movement effects a kind of withdrawal from the
larger cultural dimensions of these questions into an aesthetics of individual reality, immediate experience, and fragmentary perception, a point of view characterized by Pater’s question as he contemplates the interior of Notre-Dame d’Amiens: “What, precisely what, is this to me?” (“Notre-Dame” 113). In this discourse, the sense of spiritual and historical loss registered in the modern appreciation of medieval architecture is compensated for by a valorization of the local, the contiguous, the involuntary, and the familiar, such things as will later be endowed with redemptive status in the work of Proust.

In both of these cases, medieval religious architecture stands at the center of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century attempts to conceive of the world itself in its contemporaneity. This will seem less of a paradox if we consider, first of all, the simple fact of the imposing presence of a Gothic church or cathedral at the medieval core of nearly every European city in the nineteenth century. While standing at the center of the city’s origins, it was also likely to be the city’s tallest building. If writers and architects of the neoclassical age could afford to ignore these edifices, that was no longer possible in an age in which the city itself had become the object of intense political and aesthetic focus: the age of urban planning, urban landscape painting, the urban novel, and poetry like that of Baudelaire, who saw the city as a life form in itself. Apart from its concrete presence, Gothic architecture also served, of course, as a spectacular monument to the religious past, that is, to a sense of spiritual transcendence now cut off from religious experience and consigned to a purely aesthetic realm. As a constant and present reminder of that rupture and a charge newly assigned to art, the medieval cathedrals of Europe could not escape the allegorical if enigmatic meanings that would be assigned to them by writers of the nineteenth century.

The idea for this chapter began with the simple observation that several English and American writers of the nineteenth century had visited and recorded their impressions of French Gothic cathedrals, notably Amiens and Chartres. That is why this chapter is largely devoted to works of English-language literature. From the perspective of “English studies,” it would presumably be possible to gain an understanding of the respective sensibilities of these writers by comparing their differing responses to the architectural monuments they had visited in common. Once this fairly modest project was undertaken, however, it became clear that even such a seemingly straightforward notion as “sensibility” could not be properly understood in this context without reference to more general cultural conditions, especially insofar as Gothic architecture was above all a cultural phe-
nomenon. It represented a common project of the people in the Middle Ages, but it was also a cultural phenomenon of the nineteenth century, both as an object of architectural revival and as a focal point for reflections on the nature of an age that could only mark its radical difference from the Middle Ages. Architectural theory itself was too narrow a field for such reflections; they had to be given the freedom possible only in literary works, whether in the form of Wordsworth’s poems or in the essays of the Victorian writers who followed him. However, one cannot do justice to the question of the importance of Gothic architecture to the nineteenth century by limiting oneself entirely to English-language sources. That is why it is necessary to show how Goethe lays the foundation for such an inquiry before turning to the writers of the English-speaking world. Even with such a foundation, and even with its resonance in Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics, what follows is not so much an argument as an excursion among a series of literary occasions having in common principally their engagement with the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages.

Eighteenth-century England had its defenders of the Gothic style, such as the architect Batty Langley and the writer Horace Walpole, builder of the fanciful villa Strawberry Hill and author of the “Gothic” novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), where Gothic architecture serves primarily for melodramatic effect. Certain passages in Walpole’s *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762) offer a spirited appreciation of Gothic architecture, but always in the distinctly measured eighteenth-century language of taste.

The men who had not the happiness of lighting on the simplicity and proportion of the Greek orders, were however so lucky as to strike out a thousand graces and effects, which rendered these buildings magnificent yet genteel, vast yet light, venerable and picturesque. (1:107)

More representative of that century is a passage in Rousseau’s “Lettre sur la musique française” (1753), which compares Gothic architecture to the counterfugue in baroque music. Rousseau says of the latter, “Ce sont évidemment des restes de barbarie et de mauvais goût, qui ne subsistent, comme les portails de nos églises gothiques, que pour la honte de ceux qui ont eu la patience de les faire” (173) These are obviously the remains of barbarism and bad taste that survive, like the portals of our Gothic churches, only to the shame of those who had the patience to make them.

However, by the time Hegel began to give his lectures on fine art in the Berlin of the 1820s, medieval religious architecture had already been estab-
lished as the most immediately available and concrete manifestation of the Kantian principle of aesthetic transcendence. Noting that throughout the previous century Gothic architecture had been judged to be “crude and barbaric,” Hegel contrasts it with what he regards as the purely functional nature of classical architecture. For Hegel, the Gothic stands at the center of “the properly romantic style” because in it “mere utility and adaptation to an end are transcended (aufhebt) . . . and the house [of God] is erected freely, independently and on its own account . . . . The work stands there by itself, fixed and eternal” (*Aesthetics* 2:684) and “In its grandeur and sublime peace it is lifted . . . into an infinity in itself” (2:685). The consequences of this view of Gothic architecture are no less than a redefinition of the function of art.

The impression (*Eindruck*) which art now has to produce is, on the one hand . . . this tranquillity of the heart which, released from the external world of nature and from the mundane in general, is shut in upon itself, and, on the other hand, the impression of a majestic sublimity (*Erhabenheit*)\(^1\) which aspires beyond and outsoars mathematical limitation. (*Aesthetics* II:686)

In this and other formulations of Hegel we can recognize several elements of romantic aesthetic theory derived from Kant: the autonomy of the work of art as such, the tension between transcendent unity and the diversity of particulars, the outward form as an expression of an inward principle, the “dynamic” as opposed to the purely mathematical sublime. But for Hegel art is already “a thing of the past” in that it no longer affords the spiritual satisfaction that earlier ages sought in it; from its earlier necessity in a spiritual and religious reality it has been transferred to the realm of ideas (1:111). As Paul de Man demonstrates, Hegel’s two main theses in the *Aesthetics*, namely, that “art is for us a thing of the past” and “the beautiful is the sensory manifestation of the idea,” are in fact one and the same in that the paradigm for art is now thought rather than perception, one that, in de Man’s formulation, “leaves the interiorization of experience forever behind” (*Aesthetic* 103). The elevation of the artwork to the status of the sensory form of a transcendent idea, a movement at the heart of Kant’s and Hegel’s theories, can only take place at the expense of the stability of the category of the aesthetic as a philosophical category. In other words, once the artwork is turned loose from its traditional function in a religious or mythic context and makes its own claim to truth, the grounds on which such a claim might be made have already been undermined. De Man is
joined in this analysis by Gadamer, who finds an “internal aporia” in art’s independent claim to truth. Art traditionally derived its meaning from its function within a religious or sociopolitical framework on which it conferred splendor, beauty, and a superior existence. But wherever art seeks to impose itself only as art, it is already on the decline (Esquisses 191). These observations are especially pertinent to the newly discovered appreciation for Gothic architecture in the late eighteenth century, when medieval cathedrals became the object of intense aesthetic interest independent of their religious function. The precise nature of that interest, however, was rendered all the more unstable by both the inherently problematic nature of the aesthetic category and the emerging conditions of modernity of which it was symptomatic.

I. GOETHE AND WORDSWORTH: THE AESTHETICS OF RETURN

Hegel pays homage to Goethe for having inaugurated a fresh interest in Gothic architecture, crediting him with having brought it into honor again when the poet “looked on nature and art with the freshness of youth” (2:684). Hegel is referring to Goethe’s essay “Von deutscher Baukunst,” published in 1772 and based on the twenty-two-year-old poet’s impressions of Strasbourg Cathedral. This little essay, written in a highly subjective manner, appeared in the form of a pamphlet of sixteen pages without the name of the author, publisher, or place of publication. It is unusual in two respects. First, as Hegel notes, it marks the point of departure for a widespread movement dedicated to the revival of interest in medieval religious architecture on aesthetic grounds qualitatively different from eighteenth-century standards of taste. Goethe’s approach would prove to be symptomatic of the Gothic revival throughout Europe, whereas in Germany his essay found an immediate audience. It was favorably reviewed in the Frankfurter Gelehrte Anzeigen,2 the organ of the Sturm und Drang movement, included in Herder’s edited volume of essays by different hands, Von deutscher Art und Kunst (1773), and was continually reprinted for several years.

What is also unusual about this essay is its anomalous character in Goethe’s career; it is both his first published piece of prose and the only unreserved statement in admiration of Gothic architecture from the writer who would later become a disciple of classicism. In what has been called a “hymn in prose,”3 the young Goethe of this essay pays homage to Erwin von Steinbach, the cathedral’s thirteenth-century master builder, while
reenacting Goethe's own conversion from the received classical ideas of Laugier to a newfound faith in the Gothic. This conversion takes place in a single moment of revelation as he stands before the great edifice.

The impression which filled my soul was whole and large, and of a sort that (since it was composed of a thousand harmonizing details) I could relish and enjoy, but by no means identify and explain. . . . It is hard on the spirit of man when his brother's work is so sublime (hoch erhoben) that he can only bow and worship (nur beugen, und anbeten muss).

(Gage 107; Sauder 419)

Goethe's language alternates between this purely subjective testimony and a contemplation of the cathedral itself in ideal terms: “How the vast building rose lightly into the air from its firm foundations; how everything was fretted (durchbrochen), and yet fashioned for eternity!” (Gage 108). His cult of genius makes this transcendence an effect of the will of the artist, who imparts an active form to the work through an “inner, unified, particular and independent feeling” (109). If the present age, no longer recognizing the genius of Steinbach, has driven its sons about “after strange growths” (109), there is nonetheless hope in youth, which is still alive to the joy of life and the beauty of the earth. But earthly beauty is not enough. The essay concludes by imagining a young artist (in whom we recognize Goethe himself) who, sated with earthly beauty, will be received in the arms of heavenly Beauty so that he may, “more than Prometheus, bring down the bliss of the gods upon earth” (111).

This is rich and moving prose, but perhaps it is not too obvious to remark that Goethe has adapted to entirely new purposes an object constructed for Christian worship in a historical context very different from his own. Strasbourg Cathedral figures here no longer as the house of God and the Roman Catholic faith but as a monument to romantic ideals of genius and beauty, which, while abstracted from any specific religious context, are nonetheless invested with the language of religious devotion and the spirit of transcendence that, in a more traditional context, obtained only in the relation between the artwork and its theological framework. Goethe’s move, like that of Kant and Hegel, is in effect to remove from the work of art the theological and religious scaffolding from which it has traditionally derived its transcendent meaning, while still insisting on that meaning as derived from the material form of the work itself. The analysis of form, however, is in fact subordinated to a hastily assembled apparatus of personal impressions, figures of genius, and pagan deities. Compared to
the weight of the Christian tradition, this seems a rather fragile vehicle for conveying the transcendent power of even so imposing a monument as Strasbourg Cathedral. Goethe himself seems to acknowledge this fragility in his later writings on architecture.

Goethe’s travels in Italy in 1786–88 reconverted him to classical tastes, such that in 1795 his essay on Palladio reaffirms the Vitruvian principles of firmitas, utilitas, and venustas. His subsequent writings on Gothic architecture have a different tone from that of the youthful essay of 1772: more measured, analytical, knowledgeable. A passage in Dichtung und Wahrheit (Poetry and Truth, 1812) briefly revisits Strasbourg Cathedral, where this time the facade is observed in a detailed and highly ordered manner. Goethe sees the facade as a vertical, rectangular surface divided by its openings into nine fields, each of the three levels having three distinct apertures in the form of doors or windows. The point of this geometric description is to demonstrate that the agreeable impression made by the edifice is the product of its essentially classical principles of harmony and unison.

The apertures and the solid parts of the wall, and its buttresses, each has its particular character deriving from its particular function. This character is communicated step by step to the subordinate parts, so that the decoration is harmonious throughout: everything, great and small, is in its place and can be easily taken in at a glance; and so the charming (das Angenehme) is made manifest in the gigantic. (Gage 116, translation revised)

The contrast between the sublime (das Erhabene) of 1772 and the merely agreeable (das Angenehme) of 1812 marks the writer’s passage from the Sturm und Drang to the classical aesthetic mode, but equally striking is the contrast between the conclusions of the respective essays. Where the young Goethe imagined a Promethean figure bringing the bliss of heaven down to earth, the writer of 1812 concludes his treatment of Strasbourg Cathedral with a more worldly idea. Strasbourg had been French since the seventeenth century, while still fresh in memory was the Napoleonic army’s defeat of Austria, along with several German states, at Wagram in 1809. As if in defiance of this French hegemony over the German-speaking world, Goethe chooses to recall that Strasbourg was “an old German city” when the cathedral was built. He proposes to abandon the disparaging term Gothic and, “so as to vindicate our nation” decides to confer on this style of building the title “German architecture.”

In the turmoil created by the Napoleonic wars, the coincidence of the
Gothic revival with nationalistic feeling moved several nations to claim Gothic architecture as preeminently their own. In each case it was a question of defining an indigenous national architecture that would antedate and thus take symbolic priority over the classical models imported in the modern, that is, post-Renaissance, age. In Britain, Thomas Rickman’s *An Attempt to Discriminate the Styles of English Architecture from the Conquest to the Reformation* (1817) created an enduring Anglocentric taxonomy for successive styles of the Gothic by naming them Norman, Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular English. However, Chateaubriand, in his *Génie du Christianisme* (1802), had already claimed Gothic architecture for the French by identifying the religious feeling it evoked with both the institutions and the natural landscape of France.

Les forêts des Gaules ont passé à leur tour dans les temples de nos pères, et nos bois de chênes ont ainsi maintenu leur origine sacrée. Ces voûtes ciselées en feuillages, ces jambages, qui appuient les murs et finissent brusquement comme des troncs brisés, la fraîcheur des voûtes, les ténèbres du sanctuaire, les ailes obscures, les passages secrets, les portes abaissées, tout retrace les labyrinthes des bois dans l’église gothique; tout en fait sentir la religieuse horreur, les mystères et la divinité. (300)

*The forests of the Gauls passed into the temples of our fathers, and our woods of oak thus kept their sacred origin. Those vaults chiseled into foliage, those vertical supports that hold up the walls and end abruptly like broken tree trunks, the coolness of the vaults, the shadows of the sanctuary, the dark wings, the secret passages, the low doors, everything reproduces the labyrinths of the woods in the Gothic church; everything evokes religious horror, mystery, and divinity.*

The English and French claims notwithstanding, Goethe’s own preoccupation with the “patriotic idea” of Gothic as “German architecture” signals a shift from the appreciation of medieval religious architecture as the concrete form of a universal aesthetic to an interpretation of it in terms of Goethe’s own historical moment. It is clear that by this time Goethe considers Gothic architecture to be of value not in itself but only as something of historical significance. He had written to his friend Karl Friedrich Reinhard in 1810 that the subject of the Gothic “only has value for us in its proper place, as a document of a particular stage of human culture” (quoted in Robson-Scott 177).

However, it is equally clear that his youthful impressions of Strasbourg
Cathedral have marked Goethe for life, even if his aesthetic position keeps shifting with the passing of time. He returns to the subject one last time in 1823, at the age of seventy-two, writing a new essay with the old title “Von deutscher Baukunst.” Published in the periodical Ueber Kunst und Altertum, the 1823 version of the essay makes a return to the scene of the poet’s youthful rapture but from the Olympian perspective of an aged poet who has seen the romantic movement come and go. The tone is at once elegiac and mildly ironic: “Here we may recall somewhat earlier years, when the Strasbourg Münster had such an effect on us that we could not help expressing our unsolicited delight.” The effect was powerful not just for the young poet but for an entire generation that followed him: “Young and old, men and women, have been . . . overwhelmed and swept away (übermannt und hingerissen) by such impressions.” Toward the end of the essay Goethe comes back once more to that early essay in a similarly ambivalent tone: “If there is something incoherent (etwas Amﬁgurisches) about the style of that essay, I hope it may be forgiven, where the inexpressible is to be expressed” (Gage 120–22; Sauder 13.2:160–64). Goethe’s language carries overtones of violence: the overpowering feelings in the face of the Gothic have produced in the earlier essay a literally disﬁgured text. In describing his essay of 1772, Goethe has used a word so rare that it merits attention here. He has Germanicized an eighteenth-century word of unknown origin that appears in the Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française as amphigouri and is defined as either (1) burlesque writing or discourse, intentionally confused and incoherent, or (2) writing or discourse in which the sentences unintentionally present ideas in no particular order and lacking in rational sense: I understood nothing of that discourse, it’s an amphigouri from beginning to end. In the intellectual and aesthetic contexts of Goethe’s world, what this suggests is that Gothic architecture, through the overwhelming effects of the sublime, poses a challenge to the Enlightenment value of reason. Goethe’s new essay on the same subject will attempt to bring the Amﬁgurisches under control by putting both his earlier feelings and Gothic architecture in general in a rational historical perspective.

The point of the new essay is therefore to make it clear that the proper way to recognize the value of these works of the past is the historical way. This historical understanding is made possible in particular by the recent publication of illustrations of Cologne Cathedral, which has its origins in the mid–thirteenth century, making it contemporary with Strasbourg, as well as similar in style. The occasion for Goethe’s essay is in fact to recognize two new projects of historical documentation. The first is Georg
Moller’s *Denkmähler der deutschen Baukunst*, completed in 1821, which puts “before us a series of early and recent illustrations of the [Cologne] Cathedral, in which we could easily see and understand the rise, perfection and finally the decline of this style” (Gage 121). Moller’s engravings appeared at the same time as Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée’s illustrations of Cologne Cathedral (fig. 4). As Nicolas Pevsner notes, lavish picture books of the classical architecture of Rome and Greece had existed for a long time, but these German publications, with engravings in large, table-sized format (87 × 63 cm), were the first to celebrate the Gothic style. They are the logical outcome of the Boisserée brothers’ private collection of medieval art, which they put on public display in a sort of museum set up in the baroque palace on the Karlsplatz in Heidelberg. Goethe expresses the wish that the Boisserées’ published work will reach a wide audience of amateurs, so that the tourist visiting Cologne Cathedral might “no longer be left to personal feeling” or otherwise hastily formed opinion, but will “rather observe what is there and imagine what is not there like someone who is knowledgeable, and is initiated into the secrets of the masons” (Gage 122). Here Goethe reminds us that in 1823 the cathedral still remains unfinished. The proper imaginative response to the monument therefore lies not in the incoherence of “personal feeling” or in flights of the sublime but in the imagined construction of the completed cathedral based on the knowledge of what is already there. The relative powers of observing subject and monumental object have been reversed: in 1772 the sublime aspect of the cathedral produced feelings that surpassed the poet’s capacity for knowledge and expression. In 1823 it is, on the contrary, the subject’s power of knowledge and imagination that must compensate for the incompleteness of the object.

This shift from the aesthetics of the sublime to the insistence on historical mastery is in keeping with Goethe’s newfound interest in the documentation and publication of knowledge about “German” architecture. What began in the form of a personal communion between the young poet and a kindred spirit of the thirteenth century is no longer a private affair: German architecture has entered the modern public sphere through the means of mechanical reproduction and widespread dissemination and thus stands poised to regain its importance for the German people in an age of tourism, popularized culture, and political unification, even if the nature of this importance is to be completely different from its original religious function.

The form of Goethe’s 1823 essay recalls Wordsworth’s great poem
Fig. 4. Cross section of the choir at Cologne Cathedral in Sulpiz and Melchior Boisseré’s *Ansichten, Risse und einzelne Theile des Doms von Köln* (Elevations, Sections, and Details of the Cathedral of Cologne).
known as “Tintern Abbey” (1798) in the way it stages the return to a scene of youthful rapture, which only now can be fully comprehended by virtue of the greater wisdom granted the poet by the passing of time. Although Goethe began to be translated into English as early as 1780 and was known to Wordsworth,7 my subject here is a matter of formal and aesthetic affinity rather than direct influence. In “Tintern Abbey” the speaker, on a walking tour of the Wye River valley, revisits the banks of the river “a few miles above Tintern Abbey” after an absence of five years. The difference between his present state of mind and that of his former self is palpable. Endeavoring to recall his youthful response to the scene, he writes:

I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye.

Wordsworth’s poem is in part an epitaph for this earlier self wholly absorbed in the immediate presence of natural forms, echoing perfectly the sounding cataract and mirroring the colors of rock, mountain, and wood. That self must now be put to rest and be consciously repudiated as belonging to the hour of “thoughtless youth.”

—That time is past,
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures.

The “abundant recompense” for this loss, and the occasion for the solemn grandeur of the poem’s conclusion, is the poet’s accession to an intuitive understanding of the universal by means of purer and more elevated forms of thought. After years of absence from this scene he has learned to feel a deeper presence in the world:

A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, and all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.
The poem thus follows what de Man has identified as a recurring sequence in Wordsworth’s poetry, the transformation of an “echo language” of perception and fancy into the more powerful language of an imaginative vision that claims a deeper understanding of the universe; this transformation has been made possible by the experience of temporal mutability (“Rhetoric” 54). Wordsworth’s transformation is not precisely the same as Goethe’s: it does not exactly subject youthful incoherence to the acquired discipline of historical reason, but the general movement from youthful rapture to mature wisdom is nonetheless analogous to Goethe’s. The apparently triumphant nature of this transformation, however, is invariably accompanied by a sense of anxiety arising from the connection between the loss of the earlier mode of spontaneous joy and the experience of death (53). In “Tintern Abbey,” this ambivalence is reflected in the poet’s desire to behold his former self “yet a little while” in the person of his younger sister, Dorothy, and in the prayer that she will remember this moment when in future years he is gone, that is, “where I can no longer hear / Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams / Of past existence.”

In turning for a moment back to Goethe’s 1823 essay, we note that here, too, the youthful self, overwhelmed and swept away by his impressions of Strasbourg Cathedral, is put to rest: “The impression weakened, and I could hardly remember the circumstances in which such a sight had aroused the most vivid enthusiasm in me” (Gage 120). And yet the late essay remains haunted by the early one, not only in its return to the original title but also in its conclusion, which looks forward to a new publication of the 1772 essay so as to “point up the difference between the earliest seed and the final fruit (der letzten Frucht)” (123). This last expression, like the conclusion to Wordsworth’s poem, seems to hesitate between a claim to achievement and a sense of finality derived from the poet’s awareness of irreparable loss and of his own finitude. In both cases, the Gothic serves implicitly as the architectural equivalent of this literary formulation.

This can be said in the case of Wordsworth because his title (Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798) puts the poem under the sign of a ruined twelfth-century Cistercian abbey, even if the same title slightly displaces the scene of composition from the site of the abbey, and the landscape of the poem itself remains imprecise in its location. Numerous commentators on the poem have noted that in Wordsworth’s day Tintern Abbey had become a tourist attraction in keeping with the late-eighteenth-century taste for the picturesque. With its roofless gables and pointed arches overgrown
with vegetation, the ruins of the abbey had been made famous by numerous pictures and engravings, including those of William Gilpin in 1782, Thomas Girtin in 1793, and J. M. W. Turner in 1794. It continued to be the subject of widely disseminated images well into the nineteenth century. Fanny Price, the modest and sensitive heroine of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), has a picture of Tintern Abbey in her room, “holding its station” between a cave in Italy and a moonlit lake in Cumberland (137), as in a secular, romantic version of the stations of the cross. Beginning with the publication of Gilpin’s popular guidebook *Observations on the River Wye* in 1782, the published images of Tintern Abbey share certain recurring features: they offer an upward view through the pointed arches to the sky; they bring out the contrast between the brightness of the sky and the gloom cast by the ruin’s shadows; and they emphasize the detail of stone carving along with the sharp outlines of the leaves and vines that overgrow it, as if to insist on the ultimate fusion of nature with human endeavor. This visual language of elevation, chiaroscuro contrast, and harmony between the natural and the human will be reproduced in the poetic language of Wordsworth’s lines.

The analogical relation between architectural and poetic representation, as well as the place of Tintern Abbey in the English national imagination, suggests that it figures in Wordsworth’s title for purposes that go beyond those of simply locating the landscape of the poem. The image of the ruined abbey provides a symbolic framework for the poem, setting the tone of solemnity, and lending a historical and material dimension to the motifs of return, temporality, and loss. Meanwhile, the characteristic forms of Gothic architecture as embodied in the abbey are mirrored in the landscape of the poem and in the imagery of the mind that beholds this landscape.9 Thus, “the tall rock, / The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood” figure as natural manifestations of the height, mass, and interior depth of Gothic religious architecture, whereas the poet’s “elevated” and “lofty” thoughts transfer some of these qualities to the landscape of his mind. This architectural conception of the mind is made explicit in the poet’s address to his sister, where he foresees that in his own image her mind shall be

\[
\text{a mansion for all lovely forms,}
\]
\[
\text{Thy memory be as a dwelling-place}
\]
\[
\text{For all sweet sounds and harmonies.}
\]

The ruined choirs of the abbey cannot be far from the poet’s mind, nor from his remembered perception, when he hears “the still, sad music of
humanity.” The nearness of the abbey as a place of worship is evoked in the poem’s final section, presented as a “prayer” by “a worshipper of Nature” dedicated to a “holier love.” As in the later sonnet on “Mutability,” the historical memory and material remains of monastic dissolution provide an allegorical frame for the poet’s personal history of spiritual loss and transformation.\(^\text{10}\)

II. RUSKIN: THE ETHICAL TURN

Our reading of the Gothic motif in Wordsworth and Goethe has proceeded along two main axes. The first concerns the poet’s sense of the place of Gothic architecture in the larger spiritual and social universe that he inhabits; the second shows how this architecture serves as a symbolic register for the poet’s own changing relation to that universe through time. Both of these lines of inquiry offer us an entry into the writings of the single greatest champion of Gothic architecture in the nineteenth century, John Ruskin. However, where Gothic architecture serves the romantic poet as an object to which he continually returns in order to measure the changes in his own imaginative vision, for Ruskin it has a specific function whose importance is to the modern world at large: it stands as living testimony to what human beings can collectively achieve in conditions of social and spiritual harmony.

Ruskin wrote three major works on architecture. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1848) is the result of the young writer’s travels in France and northern Italy; as an analysis of architectural form it is concerned mainly with statuary, carving, and other forms of surface decoration, but it also introduces a series of “lamps,”\(^\text{11}\) or principles, according to which the Gothic style in particular reflects the spiritual and ethical life of a people in their noblest forms: Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory, and Obedience. Ruskin’s approach is largely religious in nature, being based on the conviction that “in this primal art of man, there is room for the marking of his relations with the mightiest, as well as the fairest, works of God” (VIII:102). While Ruskin continued with *Modern Painters* (1843–60), he also published the three volumes of his second book on architecture, *The Stones of Venice*, between 1851 and 1853. This work applies many of the ideas in the *Seven Lamps* to a single city, but it also includes a more general essay on “The Nature of Gothic.” Ruskin’s final work on architecture, *The Bible of Amiens*, was written late in life and was intended as the first of ten volumes on the material vestiges of Christianity in the Middle Ages. I shall
concentrate on “The Nature of Gothic” and The Bible of Amiens as repre-
senting, respectively, Ruskin’s principal theoretical statement on medieval
architecture and his most extended commentary on a single Gothic edi-
ifice.

Ruskin represents an important departure from the romantic idea of
the Gothic found explicitly in Goethe and Hegel and implicitly in the
early Wordsworth. That idea elevated Gothic architecture to the level of an
aesthetic ideal whose claim to truth had worked itself loose from its reli-
gious function. The form itself attained to the sublime and thus tran-
scended the ritual and mythic context to which it had once been subordi-
nated. In contrast to this aesthetic tradition, Ruskin proposed a
profoundly ethical reading of Gothic architecture, inspired by the Evangel-
ical Protestantism in which he had been raised and by the social and polit-
ical conditions of his own time. Where Goethe and Hegel had sought to
abstract the Gothic from religion on aesthetic grounds, Ruskin sought to
demonstrate how, in an age of industrial exploitation, egotistic material-
ism, narrow-minded positivism, and general philistinism, Gothic architec-
ture served as a lesson in spiritual truth. This project was both more radi-
cal and more wide ranging than that of Ruskin’s Victorian contemporary,
Augustus Welby Pugin, who as a Roman Catholic sought a return to
Gothic architecture as the proper setting for Christian worship. If Pugin’s
work is limited by its doctrine and nostalgia, Ruskin’s reading of the
Gothic, at least in its original form, is both more humane and more rele-
vant to his age; it amounts to a serious, if idiosyncratic, critique of the po-
litical economy of the modern world.

In The Stones of Venice, the ethical nature of Ruskin’s Gothic is already
evident in his definition of the “moral elements” of the style—Savageness,
Changefulness, Naturalism, Grotesqueness, Rigidity, Redundance—and
in its analogies with human character (10:184). Like every human being,
every Gothic building is individual; it differs in some important respect
from every other and is characterized by a distinction between its internal,
moral nature and its external, material form. The Gothic is indeed as much
a quality of the human soul as it is an architectural style; it is “this grey,
shadowy, many-pinnacled image of the Gothic spirit within us” (10:182).
This image has a temperamental affinity with Wordsworth’s metaphor of
the mind as a “mansion for all lovely forms,” but the ethical character of
Ruskin’s Gothic extends beyond romantic metaphor to a more material
consideration of architecture as a product of the time and space of human
labor. Anticipating the theories of social justice later to be developed in
Unto This Last (1860) and Fors Clavigera (1871–84), The Stones of Venice connects the “savageness” of Gothic architecture to the spirit of revolution sweeping Europe in 1848–49. The very imperfection of Gothic ornament is a sign of freedom from the servile uniformity of classical architecture, a form of degradation that the machine age has once again imposed on its workers.

It is verily this degradation of the operative into a machine, which, more than any other evil of the times, is leading the mass of the nations everywhere into vain, incoherent, destructive struggling for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves. (10:194).

Ruskin’s notion of “revolutionary ornament” (10:188) allows for the free execution of the workman’s powers, in contrast to the dehumanizing precision of industrial methods, which make men into mere parts of a machine. The division of labor that characterizes modern industrial life is in fact the division of men that leads to the “universal outcry against wealth, and against nobility” (10:194). The goblins and monsters of Gothic sculpture, however savage, are “signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone” (10:193). The changefulness and variety of the Gothic likewise bear witness to the workman’s freedom from the enslavement of a uniform style, as does the naturalism of the Gothic: free to represent what subjects he chooses, the workman “looks to the nature that is round him for material” (10:215). The rigidity of Gothic architecture conforms to “strength of will, independence of character, resoluteness of purpose, impatience of undue control, and that general tendency to set the individual reason against authority” (10:241). Even the redundant style of the Gothic is testimony to the workman’s uncalculated bestowal of the wealth of his labor.

Ruskin’s concern for the nature of labor reminds us that he is an exact contemporary of Marx, who in 1844 had conceived the notion of “alienated labor” as an estrangement from nature: “The worker can create nothing without nature, the sensuous exterior world. It is the matter in which his labour realizes itself, in which it is active, out of which and through which it produces” (79). But where Marx’s theories are based on a material theory of history as the effects of class conflict, Ruskin’s are based on a nineteenth-century version of English Protestant Christianity. For Ruskin, the meaning of labor in its relation to Gothic architecture is therefore significantly different not only from other nineteenth-century theories of labor, such as Marx’s, but also from what that meaning would have been
for those who built the cathedrals of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. What is known of the latter suggests that the medieval stonemason considered himself as engaged in the sacred duty of building the house of God according to the geometrical model of the universe itself. As the architectural historian Hanno-Walter Kruft puts it, “[T]he cosmos was a work of architecture, God himself its architect, and mathematical ratios relating to the structure of the cosmos, music, and architecture [were] identical” (36). Although the medieval workman would have possessed a variety of skills, all thoughts of individual freedom or originality of interpretation would have been subordinated to the notion of duty, to the communal function of the cathedral, and to its symbolic import according to well-known scholastic norms. This point of view is supported by various medieval works of architectural theory, including the only surviving masons’ lodge book of the Middle Ages, an early-thirteenth-century work of Villard de Honnecourt based on “the rules and precepts of geometry” as taught in the university quadrivium (Kruft 37).

Whereas for the Middle Ages Gothic architecture bore a conventional metaphorical relation to the divine design of the universe, for Ruskin it bears an essentially metonymic relation to the spirit of the medieval artisan, whom he conceives of as a nineteenth-century Protestant. By devoting his attention to decoration rather than architectonic structure, Ruskin is able to read the sculpted forms of the Gothic as concrete evidence of a spiritual condition located in the individual. According to modern ideas of the artist as an independent creator and of the identity between artist and work, sculpted decoration becomes the trace of the artisan’s hand that directly translates his imaginative power. To some degree, Ruskin follows Hegel in seeing the Gothic as the external expression of the inner life. Hegel attributes the intense variety of the Gothic, for example, to the need for the “inmost heart” to render itself manifest to contemplation by interrupting and breaking up wherever possible the inert and essentially lifeless mass of stone material (Aesthetics 2:696). However, in a more Christian formulation of the same relation between inner life and external form, Ruskin attributes the changefulness of the Gothic to an inner sense of imperfection: “Our building must confess that we have not reached the perfection we can imagine, and cannot rest in the condition we have attained.” He adds, in a lively play on words, that “the work of the Gothic heart is fretwork still” (10:214). If we compare this to Goethe’s exclamation on Strasbourg Cathedral, “how everything was fretted (durchbrochen), and yet fashioned for eternity!” (Gage 108), the difference is between an achieved
unity of the temporal and the eternal made possible by a sense of the sublime, and a perpetual striving toward that unity, which itself remains unrealized in the consciousness of sin.

Ruskin’s most explicit references to the Protestant faith come in the context of his analogies between architectural form and the spiritual character of the individual Christian. The Gothic at its best transcends both the “monkish enthusiasm” of the early period (10:238) and the excessive rudeness and rigidity analogous to extreme Puritanism, which can lose itself in “frivolity of division, or perversity of purpose” (10:242). The “utmost nobleness” of the Gothic expresses in its every line “the very temper which has been thought most averse to it, the Protestant spirit of self-dependence and inquiry” (10:242). It is a spirit that Ruskin has learned from contemporary religious figures such as Henry Melvill Gwatkin and John Charles Ryle, author of an essay on “Self-inquiry,” which in *Practical Religion* (1878) inveighs against a merely formal religion in favor of an “inward Christianity” and “the paramount importance of close self-examination.”

Ryle, an evangelical Anglican clergyman, was among Ruskin’s most admired examples of religious fervor at this time of his life. Ryle defined the distinctive nature of his faith according to the importance given to five doctrines: the supremacy of Holy Scripture as the only test of truth, the awareness of human sinfulness and corruption, the experiential knowledge of Christ, the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man, and the outward, visible work of that Spirit in the life of man (Landow, chap. 4). All of these articles of faith figure in Ruskin’s appreciation of the Gothic. Taking Ryle’s doctrines in reverse order, we have seen the importance for Ruskin of the outward, visible form of architecture as a reflection of the inner spirit of the individual. Ryle’s insistence on the individual experience of Christ has its counterpart in Ruskin’s personal testimony to the immediate power of the spiritual experience conveyed by the Gothic churches he has visited in Venice, Verona, Rouen, and elsewhere. Ruskin’s awareness of human sinfulness and corruption is apparent in his analysis of the changefulness and “fretwork” of the Gothic as the confession of inherent imperfection, not to say original sin. Finally, the Gothic church itself is for Ruskin a three-dimensional rendering of the spiritual truth of Holy Scripture.

This last and most important point accounts for Ruskin’s insistence on the reading of architectural detail; the criticism of a building is to be conducted “on the same principles as that of a book,” so that its appreciation will depend on the “knowledge, feeling, and not a little on the industry and perseverance of the reader” (10:269). That is, the spectator as reader
must come to an understanding of the Gothic through personal diligence, not through the passive acceptance of doctrine. Ruskin’s idea of architectural history, moreover, is inspired by the history of revelation in Scripture, with an evangelistic emphasis on the New Testament. For Ruskin there are three fundamental forms in architectural history: the Greek architecture of the lintel, the Romanesque architecture of the rounded arch, and the Gothic architecture of the gable, or pointed arch. The Greek, based on the principle of the simple stone beam, is the worst of the three and is “always in some measure barbarous” (10:252). The highest glory of the Romanesque is that it has no corruption, and “perishes in giving birth to another architecture as noble as itself” (10:253). This new architecture is the Gothic, which attains to perfection in the middle of the fourteenth century, a moment Ruskin earlier celebrated as “the Lamp of Truth,” when “the rudeness of the intermediate space had been finally conquered, when the light had expanded to its fullest, and yet had not lost its radiant unity, principality, and visible first causing of the whole” (8:89). The three stages of architectural history, classical, Roman, and Gothic, thus stand in an analogous relation to the three human dispensations defined by the history of revelation through Scripture: pagan, Judaic, and Christian. The pagan Greek in his barbarism remains ignorant of the God of Israel; the Old Testament, if not graced by the presence of Christ, has the merit of prophesying the coming of the Savior; and the New Testament declares the fulfillment of that prophecy in the revelation of Christ’s presence in the world.

The importance Ruskin gives to the practice of reading is directly related to what he calls the spirit of inquiry, a spirit to which, he claims, England in the nineteenth century owes whatever greatness it has, that is, to the habits of “stern self-reliance, and sincere upright searching for religious truth” (10:243). In this manner Ruskin manages to transform the religious architecture of the Middle Ages into the concretization of the idealized spirit of England in his own age, a spirit of inquiry that goes beyond religion to the development of the natural sciences and medicine, to the recovery of literature and the establishment of the “necessary principles of domestic wisdom and national peace” (10:237). Ruskin is often read, not without reason, as ideologically conservative and nostalgic for a utopian past. But his profound influence on the thought and the aesthetic values of his century is the product of his reflection on the most troubling questions of that age. In *The Stones of Venice* his appreciation of medieval religious architecture is quite deliberately made relevant to the crises of the nineteenth century—those of spiritual doubt, revolutionary turmoil, and the alienat-
ing effects of an industrial economy—all experienced alongside the con-
tinuing search for knowledge and social progress as the inherited ideals of
the Enlightenment. At his best, Ruskin registered these crises with feeling
and sought ways to redemption with an eloquence that surpassed that of
his evangelical models.

Like Goethe, Ruskin returns to the subject of Gothic architecture late
in life, with the publication of *The Bible of Amiens* in 1885. In Ruskin’s case,
the book marks a return to religious belief, or to at least a determined will
to believe, after his crisis of faith in the late 1850s. However, where Goethe’s
writings on the subject had progressed with the poet’s age from a sense of
the sublime to one of historical mastery, Ruskin moves in the reverse di-
rection: his attempt in *The Stones of Venice* to make the Gothic relevant to
his own historical moment gives way to an idealized sense of the Gothic as
belonging to an irrecoverable past, an almost mythic formulation that cor-
responds to a more general disillusionment with the decadence of moder-
nity. Ruskin’s book on the cathedral of Amiens—the “Bible” of his title by
virtue of the scenes from Scripture represented in its sculpted ornament,
was intended as the first of a ten-volume series entitled *Our Fathers Have
Told Us: Sketches in the History of Christendom for Boys and Girls Who Have
Been Held at Its Fonts*. Each volume was intended to tell the story of Chris-
tian history by focusing on a different locality in the thirteenth century;
besides Amiens, there were to be other volumes on the cathedrals of
Rouen, Chartres, and Notre-Dame de Paris. Each was to follow the design
of *The Bible of Amiens*, which is divided into four chapters: the first three
tell the story of the arrival of Christianity in the region, the early history of
the Church there, and the building of the cathedral. The fourth, “Inter-
pretations,” consists of a detailed commentary on the cathedral itself as the
observer moves into and through its space.

Despite the subtitle of the series and whatever Ruskin’s original inten-
tion, *The Bible of Amiens* is not particularly written for “boys and girls.” Its
style is little different from that of Ruskin’s other works designed for the
general public, except perhaps for a decline in the writer’s powers brought
on by age and occasional fits of madness. It demands on the part of the
modern reader a certain erudition in its lengthy footnotes devoted to Gib-
bon and its citations of Latin and medieval French poetry. The fourth
chapter is written in the form of a learned tourist guidebook, and even to-
day serves that purpose well. One hopes that Ruskin is not addressing chil-
dren when, admiring a particularly beautiful part of the cathedral, he dis-
misses the reader who might not share his enthusiasm by saying, “you need
not travel farther in search of cathedrals, for the waiting-room of any station is a better place for you” (33:130). The book as a whole is treated as an accomplished literary work by its French translator, Marcel Proust, and that is how I propose to treat it here. That being said, it must also be observed that Ruskin’s book on Amiens lacks the complexity, the nuance, and the eccentric, feverish brilliance of *The Stones of Venice*. Instead, it bears the signs of a willed return to traditional moral certainties at the end of a life marked by mental illness, mourning, spiritual crisis, disappointed love, and disillusionment with the age. In contrast to the progressiveness of Ruskin’s earlier work, the orientation here is fixed exclusively on the cultural past, beginning with the series title, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, which suggests the most traditional form of the transmission of cultural and religious value.

The symbolic economy of *The Bible of Amiens* is based on a mythology of origins and purity at the center. For Ruskin, the foundations of the Cathedral of Amiens are prepared, centuries before the first stone is laid, by the provident convergence of a natural landscape, a people, and a faith. The landscape is named in the first chapter as being “by the rivers of waters” (33:25) where the Somme fans out into streams to form a Venice of the North. “This limestone tract, with its keen fresh air, everywhere arable surface, and everywhere quarriable banks above well-watered meadow, is the real country of the French. Here only are their arts clearly developed” (33:36). The banks will be quarried for the building of the cathedral, thus bringing together the true landscape and the true architecture of France. The people who build the cathedral are direct descendants of the Franks, whom Ruskin considers the true French, as opposed to the Gauls, Romans, Burgundians, and so on. They have migrated to this country from the gloomy Rhineland “under the Drachenfels” in order to found a nation here (33:53). The word *Frank* itself signifies to Ruskin “Brave, strong, and honest above other men . . . in a most human sense Frank, outspoken, meaning what they said, and standing to it, when they had got it out” (33:67–68). It is here that Clovis was baptized by Saint Rémy and was crowned the first Christian king of the Franks in 481 in Notre-Dame des Martyrs, thereby founding the kingdom of France in the first cathedral of the French nation. In a miraculous historical conjuncture of racial character, earth, and religious devotion, everything prepares for the building of the present cathedral and its consecration by Saint Louis in 1264. Not even the Cathedral of Saint-Denis, coronation and burial place of kings, is more essentially French than Amiens, the character of whose people, “intelli-
gently conservative and constructive,” with “an element of order and crystalline edification,” finds its consummation in the form of the cathedral itself (33:76).

Apart from having created this mythic context, Ruskin may be credited with having written the first systematic architectural reading of a medieval Gothic cathedral, as opposed to merely recording impressions of its most striking features. Even Viollet-le-Duc, the other great theorist of Gothic architecture in the nineteenth century, does not have a comparably detailed interpretation of a single building. In the manner of a Protestant reading of the printed Bible, Ruskin’s Bible is both intimately personal and highly methodical, while the practice of reading is understood as bringing the subject into the presence of revealed truth, a process by which the subject is himself transformed. The rigorous modalities of this procedure, however, are tempered by the conventions of travel writing, with its conversational tone and practical navigation of time and space. Ruskin makes a casual approach to the cathedral through the winding streets of Amiens, finding himself as if by accident before the portal of the south transept, above which stands the Vièrge dorée, her head tilted pertly to the side. Ruskin’s description of this statue is notable for its irreverence: “A Madonna in decadence she is, though for all, or rather by reason of all, her prettiness, and her gay soubrette’s smile” (33:128). The “decadence” in question is that of the fourteenth century, when the pretty Madonna, looking like one of the girls of the town, replaced the sober statue of Saint Honoré and so began a downward slide toward anarchy: “And thenceforward, things went their merry way, straight on, ‘ça ira, ça ira,’ to the merriest days of the guillotine” (33:128–29). Ruskin’s irreverence toward the Catholic Madonna is therefore in fact a form of nostalgia for the original sanctity of her honored place over the south portal.

Ruskin’s itinerary takes him through the south door into the nave, where his eyes rise in awe toward the clerestory: “[I]t is not possible for imagination and mathematics together, to do anything nobler or stronger than that procession of window, with material of glass and stone—nor anything which shall look loftier, with so temperate and prudent measure of actual loftiness” (33:130). He compares the sensation to that of beholding the Staubbach falls in the Berner Oberland, made part of the iconography of romanticism by Turner’s watercolors and Byron’s Manfred. He then moves up the aisle and out the west door, pausing on his way to interpret the epitaphs of those buried under the floor, including the cathedral’s builder, Robert de Luzarches. Ruskin has reversed the usual direction
of passage through a cathedral, which is to enter through the west door and proceed eastward to the intersection of transept and choir, traditionally regarded as the holiest place in the cathedral, as this is where the host is raised at the altar in the Roman Catholic mass. Instead, Ruskin’s pilgrimage culminates not in the heart of the sanctuary but before the biblical text inscribed in statuary form on the cathedral’s western exterior. His reading begins with the central figure of Christ himself, the Beau Dieu over the main door, to whom Ruskin gives the words of John 14:6: “I am the Way, the truth and the life.” In this figure of prosopopoeia, Ruskin effectively unites the written and spoken biblical word with its three-dimensional representation in stone, a procedure he pursues throughout his interpretation of the facade, as his reading radiates outward from the center for an exposition of fifty pages before returning to the figure of Christ, who, holding the Bible in his left hand, raises his right in what Ruskin interprets as the promise of Luke 10:28: “This do, and thou shalt live” (33:170).

The moral lesson of The Bible of Amiens is that the cathedral serves as an example of what can be built by faith and that it should thus serve as an inspiration to those who, if they have not faith in the manner of the thirteenth century, at least acknowledge that the things promised by faith are to be desired. The book’s eloquent conclusion (“vraiment sublime,” says Proust) is therefore written in the optative mode: if the reader would care for eternal life supposing its promise to be true, if he would care to meet his companions after death, and would want, if it were possible, “to walk in the peace of everlasting Love,” then this desire itself is declared to be the reader’s love, hope, and faith, and thus to confirm the promises of “our Lord and of his Christ” (33:174). By means of this rhetorical tour de force Ruskin offers a doubting Victorian public a spiritual alternative to the secular faith in culture promoted by Matthew Arnold. But unlike Arnold, Ruskin has abandoned his former interest in the real conditions of his age, so his examples of faith remain nostalgically rooted in what is for him the social and spiritual perfection of the Middle Ages. However, the most important criticism of Ruskin comes from his greatest disciple, Proust, in the preface to his 1904 translation, La Bible d’Amiens, where he finds “idolatry” in the following circumstance of Ruskin’s writing.

Les doctrines qu’il professait étaient des doctrines morales et non des doctrines esthétiques, et pourtant il les choisissait pour leur beauté. Et comme il ne voulait pas les présenter comme belles mais comme vraies,
The doctrines he professed were moral and not aesthetic doctrines, and yet he chose them for their beauty. And as he wanted to present them not as beautiful but as true, he was obliged to lie to himself about his reasons for adopting them.

This criticism could only come from a student of the finer points of aestheticism. It says that Ruskin’s religion is a religion of beauty that mistakes itself for a religion of pure faith; he professes the doctrines of the good and the true not because of their goodness and truth but because of the beauty of these doctrines. It is as if Ruskin were on some level already aware of what Gadamer and de Man would later observe, that wherever art seeks to impose itself only as art, that is, independent of its function within a religious or mythic context, it is already on the decline. Ruskin has attempted to restore that religious and mythic function but has done so in a cultural context that will not sustain it.

III. BACKWARD GLANCES: JAMES, PATER, ADAMS

Henry James, Venice, 1892. Gazing across the Grand Canal at the Ca’ Foscari—a noble example of fifteenth-century Venetian Gothic—James finds it “a masterpiece of symmetry and majesty” but notices that it is visibly “kept up” and therefore wonders whether he is right to think so highly of it: “We feel at such moments as if the eye of Mr. Ruskin were upon us; we grow nervous and lose our confidence” (Collected 325). The confession is from James’s Italian Hours, published in 1909 but based on impressions gathered seventeen years earlier. It testifies to the authority of Ruskin established by the publication of The Stones of Venice (1851–53), but its expression of doubt, however ironic, is also symptomatic of the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century Gothic architecture no longer has the power of an ideal: neither aesthetic, as in the early Goethe; religious, as in Chateaubriand; architectonic, as in Viollet-le-Duc, nor ethical, as in Ruskin. Instead, writing on Gothic architecture is based on more personal and local occasions; it generates meaning as a function of the subjective experience of distinct and lived moments.

Italian Hours belongs to the series of travel writings that James began with the publication of A Little Tour of France in 1884, illustrated with drawings by Joseph Pennell. The tone of these writings is set in the intro-
duction to *A Little Tour*, where James offers his “light pages” as a demonstration that there is more to France than Paris and as “aids to amused remembrance” (18). The modesty and casualness of these remarks, however, should not allow us to forget that James’s travel writings record the impressions made by some of Europe’s greatest monuments on one of the finest sensibilities of the modern era. The nature of these impressions differs qualitatively from those we have documented from writers of earlier generations. It is not that the sense of the sublime is altogether lost for James. Standing before the cathedral of Chartres in 1876 and looking up at the great southwestern facade, he notes “the clear, silvery tone of its surface, the way three or four magnificent features are made to occupy its serene expanse, its simplicity, majesty, and dignity—these things crowd upon one’s sense with a force that makes the act of vision seem for the moment almost all of life” (679). However, what distinguishes this language from the traditional discourse of the sublime is the emphasis on “sense” rather than some nobler faculty; the location of agency in “the act of vision” rather than in some external, transcendent power; the fleeting nature of the “moment”; and the restraint registered by the strategically placed *almost* in “almost all of life.” James’s universe is always partial and contingent; he consciously refuses the absolute and unconditional. Returning to Venice for a moment, one senses the hint of ironic distance when he reports that many find the great middle stretch of the Grand Canal, the “long, gay, shabby, spotty perspective” between the Foscari and the Rialto, to be *dull*, but he imagines it was not dull for Lord Byron, who lived in one of the palaces there, where “the writing-table is still shown where he gave the rein to his passions” (329). It is not so much that James is unwilling to give rein to his passions but that, even before the majestic front of Chartres, what he experiences are not passions but “impressions.” For Edmund Burke, the passion caused by the sublime, which includes elements of astonishment and horror, is occasioned by the incommensurability of human understanding to the object it beholds. But if James finds the harmony of Chartres inexpressible, it is not, for him, a matter of the human subject’s inadequacy to the sublime object. Rather, it is a problem of aesthetic translation from one art form to another: “The impressions produced by architecture lend themselves as little to interpretation by another medium as those produced by music” (679). Having observed the Cathedral of Chartres from twenty different angles at every hour of the day, he has gained a certain sense of familiarity with it, “yet I despair of giving any
coherent account of it” (678). For James, there seems to be no satisfactory way of getting a building into writing.

Faced with this radical incommensurability between writing and architecture, James’s response is one of invention: rather than being the object of description and analysis, Gothic architecture becomes the setting for narrative digression and literary allusion. James’s discussion of the twelfth-century Cathedral of Tours is dominated by Balzac’s “terrible little story” *Le Curé de Tours* (1843), one of the French writer’s truly depressing *Scènes de la vie provinciale*, in which the unsuspecting Abbé Birotteau falls victim to the rapacity of his landlady, Mlle Gamard, and his envious rival, the Abbé Troubert. James goes round the north end of the cathedral to find the real house of the fictional Mlle Gamard; in the courtyard of this house is anchored one of the flying buttresses of the church itself. “All this part of the exterior of the cathedral is very brown, ancient, Gothic, grotesque; Balzac calls the whole place ‘a desert of stone’” (30). Indeed the cathedral seems more real, and acquires its true significance for James, in Balzac’s novella than in its actual presence. In a way, James solves the problem of the mutual impermeability of writing and architecture through recourse to the mediating function of literary memory: he experiences the real Cathedral of Tours by entering the imaginary space it occupies in Balzac’s novel. In addition to the phrase cited above by James, Balzac had evoked the house of Mlle Gamard and the adjacent Cathedral in the following terms.

Situated au nord de Saint-Gatien, cette maison se trouve continuellement dans les ombres projetées par cette grande cathédrale sur lequel le temps a jeté son manteau noir, imprimé ses rides, semé son froid humide, ses mousses et ses hautes herbes. (41)

Located on the north side of Saint-Gatien, this house was continually in the shadows cast by the great cathedral on which time has thrown a coat of black, printed its wrinkles, and given seed to its damp coldness, its mosses and its tall weeds. (41)

We may acquire a sense of the particularity of James’s sensibility with respect to the Gothic by seeing what he later writes about Balzac in an essay originally written as a preface to the English translation of the *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (1902) and later published in both *Notes on Novelists* (1914) and *The Art of Fiction* (1948). Even a single sentence of Balzac’s materially dense prose, with its shadows, old stones, and humid mosses, pro-
vides a convincing example of what principally interests James in Balzac: his obsession with things, his local color, “thick in his pages at a time when it was to be found in his pages almost alone” (*Art* 31). Balzac has created a “terrible mess of matter” (36) that is “drenched in the smell of the past” (35), as if his estranged view of the modern world were one from out of the Middle Ages. Balzac’s world is a massive labyrinth he has built around himself, which he can only attempt to bore through. The incompatibility of architecture with writing that James has claimed for his own work seems not to apply to Balzac, for whom the old stones of Tours serve as the very foundation for the construction of his fictional universe. Indeed, James regards the old Gothic cathedral as a kind of metaphor for the mass and material complexity of Balzac’s world. While viewing that world with sympathy and admiration, James distinguishes his own writing from Balzac’s as “working in the open” (36), which is James’s way of designating the novel of consciousness as opposed to the novel of the concrete, palpable world defined by the horizon of one’s birth and race, even given the latter’s infinite social complexity:

When we work in the open, as it were, our material is not classed and catalogued, so that we have at hand a hundred different ways of being loose, superficial, disingenuous, and yet passing, to our no small profit, for remarkable. (36)

James presents his own work with characteristic self-deprecation, but he nonetheless disengages it qualitatively from that of Balzac. His “ways of being loose” are ways of being free from the massive, confining world in which Balzac’s imagination struggles with so much exertion. James would claim to be less weighty than Balzac, but he is also more subtle and agile, more true to the fugitive nature of consciousness itself. The particular nature of his artistic temperament is to seize on what is transitory and contingent and to find human truths there.

James’s thoughts on these matters may help us to understand the studied impertinence with which, unlike Balzac, he treats the mossy old stones of the Cathedral of Tours. At those moments when, almost out of a sense of duty, James applies himself to the description of architectural detail, he cannot always resist the temptation to fanciful invention. Above the balustrade on the upper southwest facade of Chartres, extending from tower to tower, there is a row of sixteen niched statues of the kings of France. The little gallery below the row of kings has for James a “peculiar
charm”: he imagines them, of a late afternoon, “strolling up and down their long balcony in couples, pausing with their elbows on the balustrade, resting their stony chins in their hands, and looking out, with their little blank eyes, on the great view of the French monarchy they once ruled, and which has now passed away” (Collected 680). They have become, in the writer’s imagination, figures of the late nineteenth century: the idle, nostalgic members of the dispossessed aristocracy who inhabit the novels of Henry James.

We have seen how, at Tours, James deserts the cathedral proper to explore the deserted labyrinth of alleys behind it. At Chartres as well, he strays from the central object of touristic interest in search of fresh impressions. His article on Chartres concludes not with the cathedral itself but with a scene just outside the old city gate of washerwomen who come to dip their colored rags into the yellow stream of the ditch that flows beneath the moldering wall.

The old patched and interrupted wall, the ditch with its weedy edges, the spots of colour, the white-capped laundresses in their little wooden cages—one lingers to look at it all. (683)

The scene is painterly rather than architectural, and it is likely that James’s perception here is conditioned by the visual arts; the subject of les lavandières, or washerwomen, often rendered in scenes of architectural ruin, was already favored in the eighteenth century by Fragonard and Robert Hubert. The subject was attractive for the striking contrasts it afforded between the sensual forms of the women stirring the water and the imposing antiquity of their architectural surroundings. Closer to James’s own time, laundresses, or blanchisseuses, were a subject for such artists as Louis Français, Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, and Edgar Degas.  

James’s own language is visually impressionistic in its naming of colored forms—patches, edges, caps, and spots—all composed in a lingering glance; it anticipates the lyrical juxtaposition of images that modernist poetry would later explore. Moreover, it is instructive to compare this passage to one in Ruskin, who, in Modern Painters, recounts a similar excursion down to the banks of the Somme, where the dyers and spinners form a “picturesque” scene. Ruskin notices the unhealthy and melancholy faces of the working poor, and remarks, “I could not help feeling how many suffering persons must pay for my picturesque subject and happy walk” (6:20). In this comparison James comes out as a purer aesthete than
Ruskin, but there are other moments, inspired by the particular atmosphere of Gothic architecture, that force James to confront the question of its contemporary meaning.

As a final instance of what we might call productive distraction, let us join James at Rheims in 1877, where he has sought a moment of rest from his exploration of the thirteenth-century cathedral by sitting down on a little stool, from which he leans against one of the choir stalls. James thus finds himself at the very heart of the cathedral, at the intersection between the nave and the transept. As he gazes upward and loses himself in “the large perfection of the place,” he is suddenly confronted by a beadle who stands before him, motioning him to depart “with an imperious gesture.”

A look of silent protest from the writer produces a distinct gesture of displeasure from the beadle, and James is obliged to retire from the “sacred precinct” (740). The anecdote is first of all remarkable for the way the writer’s own body figures as an alien presence in the sacred space, while James also dramatizes, in his self-deprecating way, the contestation of that space between the traditional prerogatives of the clergy and the insistent if polite requirements of the tourist. The choir stalls are now occupied by elderly men in red capes who begin to chant, and James discovers that the impending vesper service was the reason for his expulsion. However reasonable this might be, his thoughts nonetheless turn in irritation from the architectural to the political; he finds his expulsion to be an example of the arbitrary authoritarianism of the Catholic Church and thus finds a new reason to resent the Church’s support for the forces of reaction against the attempt to consolidate the political gains of France’s fledgling Third Republic. James is, among his other qualities, a product of his own time and place: an American Protestant imbued with democratic feeling. However refined his aesthetic sensibility, he now feels compelled to confront the question of what the Gothic cathedral means for the modern era. On one hand, he feels called upon to recognize the generosity and hospitality of the institution responsible for erecting the magnificent structure about him. On the other hand, he has fallen out the state of mind favorable to such acknowledgment, and he asks himself to what extent that lapse is “unbecoming.” Simply put, how does one feel about the magnificence of the cathedral when one realizes that the institution that built it, and is ennobled by it, is an enemy of liberty and social justice? It is a question he imagines thousands asking themselves, in the conflict “between the actively, practical liberal instinct and what one may call the historical, aesthetic sense, the sense upon which old cathedrals lay a certain palpable ob-
ligation” (742). James’s solution to this conflict is characteristically modern: in his mind, the concept of the “sacred” is redefined out of its religious sense in order to define the sense of duty characterized by the anti-Catholic passion as it burns in the breasts of certain radicals, as in the “sacred duty” to resist oppression. James does not claim to be one of these radicals, but he finds this sense of the sacred congenial to the present occasion, so that he can once more appreciate in good conscience the beauty of Rheims Cathedral: “I raised my eyes again to the dusky splendour of the upper aisles and measured their enchanting perspective, and it was with a sense of doing them full justice that I gave my fictive liberal my good wishes” (742). In other words, the enchantment of medieval architectural form is now identified with the Enlightenment cause of justice, joining aesthetic response to noble sentiment in a manner particular to James’s era. However, a stylistic difference between Ruskin and James is that the latter does not treat such matters with entire seriousness; he remains a slightly comical figure in his own eyes. The principal result of the little operation just described is to restore his “equanimity,” making him able, in what risks being perceived as a “rather vulgar feat of gymnastics” to climb the cathedral towers, scramble over expanses of roof, and admire a series of stone eagles unaccountably sculpted with human legs. James asks of the anonymous sculptor, “Why did he indulge in this ridiculous conceit? I am unable to say, but the conceit afforded me pleasure. It seemed to tell of an imagination always at play, fond of the unexpected and delighting in its labour” (742), the imagination, in other words, of a Henry James.

James’s sense of play amounts to both a gesture of refusal and a recognition of otherness. He refuses the constraints of Balzac’s universe, in its confinement of experience to the objective world of things, property, and institutions, just as he refuses for more obvious reasons the authority of the Catholic Church. The sheer mass of Balzac’s world represents a totalizing force that, from James’ point of view, can be compared to that exercised by the Church in the Middle Ages; the Gothic cathedral stands as a concretized metaphor for this determination of the spirit within a universal institutional framework. James’s resistance to both the fictional world of Balzac and the institutional world of the Church registers at the same time his freedom of consciousness—working in the open, as it were—and his profound sense of difference, his solitude and strangeness. His expulsion from the precincts of the choir in Tours Cathedral is in this sense an allegory of his condition of otherness: celibate but not priestly, a writer without the material of a national, social life descended from the Middle Ages.
such as provides ground for the fiction of a Balzac or Victor Hugo. In his fictional version of the life of James, Colm Tóibín imagines him as a young man reading Balzac for the first time and sensing already that “he himself would never possess a subject so richly layered and suggestive, as sharply focused and centered, as the France of Balzac’s *Human Comedy*” (150). The cathedrals of Tours and Chartres are part of that France, and Balzac’s novels, in their devotion to the representation of French life, make them part of the collective meaning assigned to that life. It is in the shadow of such monuments that James affirms the lonely freedom of his exile. Ultimately, then, for all their seeming formlessness, these travel notes tell a story, with James himself as his own Jamesian protagonist, an uprooted American wandering over the old stones of Europe, confronting his own weightlessness with pleasure and apprehension.

Whatever their narrative force, the formal and expressive freedom of these writings is precisely what Walter Pater claims for the essay as the literary form best adapted to the spirit of modernity. According to Pater, in an early essay on Coleridge, modern thought cultivates the relative in place of the absolute, and the essay is “the literary form necessary to a mind for which truth itself is but a possibility, realisable not as general conclusion, but rather as the elusive effect of a particular personal experience” (“Coleridge’s” 48). In his book on Pater, Wolfgang Iser remarks that just as the modern, relative spirit has used the ancient absolutes in order to grasp its own otherness, “the essay is for Pater the modern form that gains its shape against the background of earlier shapes to be discerned in the history of forms” (18). The essay is distinguished from other literary forms in its openness to random and subjective experience; it is “a form which deconstructs itself in order to represent open-endedness, unrelatedness and endlessness as facts of experiential reality” (19). Viewed in this light, Pater’s essays on architecture acquire a special meaning. On one hand, architecture itself becomes the experiential reality against which the essay takes form, in a dialectical manner. On the other hand, the open-endedness of the essay can serve as an analogy for certain architectural forms. The question of “translating” architecture into writing is thus put aside in favor of a more dialectical and dynamic relation between the two arts.

Pater’s *Some Great Churches in France* was originally published in the form of two essays, respectively on Amiens and Vézelay, that appeared in successive issues of the periodical *Nineteenth Century* in March and June 1894 and were later reprinted in the posthumous *Miscellaneous Studies* (1895). Pater’s title, as well as the travels he made in preparation for this
work, allow us to suppose that had he lived longer he would have added essays on Auxerre, Autun, and Chartres. Indeed the second chapter of his unfinished novel *Gaston de Latour* (1896) includes a rich evocation of the Cathedral of Chartres, with its “gift of a unique power of impressing” (28). Had Pater completed the project we imagine him to have undertaken, it would have rivaled in scope that other unfinished work on the great French cathedrals, Ruskin’s *Our Fathers Have Told Us*. However, where Ruskin’s work is consciously didactic in its avowed purpose of transmitting Christian traditions, Pater’s by comparison is free of doctrine, including the anti-Catholic sentiment that at moments animates James’s thoughts at Chartres. In his writing on Amiens and Vézelay, Pater demonstrates how the essay embodies the modern form of subjective freedom, in dialectical relation to the material reality of archaic architectural forms.

One way to compare Pater’s essay on Amiens with Ruskin’s is to follow the respective movements that each makes through the space of the great cathedral. Ruskin approaches the cathedral indirectly through the winding little streets of the town, coming suddenly upon the south door. We have seen how he enters through that door and passes through the nave and out the main door, ending his visit before the great western front. Pater’s movement through the same space is more conventional, passing through the west door and advancing to the heart of the sanctuary, where he pauses before the Eucharist suspended in the central bay, with “all the poor, gaudy, gilt rays converging towards it” (119). The nature of Pater’s journey, however, is not one that builds toward a narrative climax but rather one of expansion and overture. His entrance into the nave is experienced as an opening out into light.

Light and space—floods of light, space for a vast congregation, for all the people of Amiens, for their movements, with something like the height and width of heaven itself enclosed above them to breathe in.

Pater’s attention is naturally drawn upward, to the clear glass of the great windows of the triforium. It seems to him that the entire building is composed of its windows, as if those who built it had had for their sole purpose to enclose as large a space as possible with glass (110).

Once he has stepped through the western doorway, the entire space of the cathedral is at once visible and intelligible, from the triforium to the “realms of light which expand in the chapels beyond; the astonishing boldness of the vault; the astonishing lightness of what keeps it above one; the
unity, yet the variety of perspective.” Everything is “full of excitement” (109). In his enthusiasm for space and light, for the clarity and intelligibility of the space, and for the properties of large expanses of glass, Pater anticipates some of the values that, a generation later, modernist architecture would put into practice. The modern form of thought represented by the essay is thus combined with an early expression of the modernist aesthetic.

The end of Pater’s essay ascends to the height of the great western towers of Amiens and from there takes in the prospect of the surrounding country—a wide architectural region to which belong

Soissons, far beyond the woods of Compiègne, . . . with St. Quentin, and, towards the west, a too ambitious rival, Beauvais, which has stood however—what we now see of it, for six centuries. (121)

The overall movement of the essay, then, begins in the singularity of a moment and spreads outward from there into a much wider expanse of space and time. The lived moment in the individual space of consciousness is indeed at the origin of Pater’s vision. His desire to know “precisely what, is this to me” (113) arises not out of egotism, but rather from a sense of his own temporal and temperamental difference from those who built and first worshipped in the churches of the Middle Ages. It is precisely this historical difference that grants compensation for his inability to see the cathedral with medieval eyes, “something verily worth having, and a just equivalent for something else lost, in the mere effect of time” (113). This just equivalent is provided in material ways by, for example, the fading of medieval coloring to reveal the rich texture of the stone underneath. But it also lies in the subjective freedom with which Pater responds to the Gothic, as if he were able to endow it with new meaning by virtue of his historical distance from its origins.

In contrast to Gothic revivalists working in the Catholic context, such as Pugin and Joris-Karl Huysmans, and even in some degree to Ruskin, Pater interprets the form of Gothic architecture in human and secular, rather than religious terms. He insists on the secular nature of Amiens as a “people’s church” and to this principle attributes its splendor, space, and novelty. The great expanse of the nave, built all on one level, is designed to accommodate the entire population of Amiens and to make possible “the easy flow of processional torrent” (107). The pillars, with their softened angles and graceful compassing, are designed for the same purpose, “to carry a multitude conveniently round them” (108). The form, function, and materials of architecture are thus interpreted in terms of real human experi-
ence. Pater’s tactile sense of the cathedral, as something made for the bodies and senses of the faithful, is fully consistent with his own sensual impressions of light, space, matter, and movement. When Pater defines Gothic construction as “consolidation of matter naturally on the move, security for settlement in a very complex system of construction” (108), one hears echoes of the conclusion to his *The Renaissance* (1868), where only a “quickened, multiplied consciousness” can do justice to the ceaseless motion of the object world and its inward counterpart of thought and feeling, as if the excitement of the movement suspended in stone had seized a form grown perfect in its own historical moment.

Returning to Hegel for a moment, it becomes possible to gauge the distance between his ideas and Pater’s fin-de-siècle aesthetic. In one of his lectures on “romantic architecture,” Hegel had said that art now had the dual function of producing, on one hand, a “tranquillity of the heart” released from the external world, and, on the other hand, the “impression of a majestic sublimity which aspires beyond and outsoars mathematical limitation” (2:686). Both effects take place in the subject of aesthetic experience, whereas Hegel leaves open the question of whether the “impression” (*Ein- druck*) of sublimity is merely that or a real apprehension of a transcendent order, as Blake or Shelley would claim. In contrast, Pater is resolutely materialist; his aesthetic affirms immanence over transcendence and stands against abstraction, “nothing of mystery in the vision, which yet surprises, over and over again” (109). What he seeks is not the tranquillity of the heart, but rather the “excitement,” the sense of being alive that art produces in the subject. Pater’s emphasis on the nature of the moment, whether of subjective perception or historical existence, leads him to see in Amiens not just a certain method of construction but also something distinct in human achievement. Unlike Ruskin, he sees the surrounding country of Picardy as unfertile ground for the imagination: a flat, drab region of “cheerless rivers” (121). To have made something great and beautiful just here is to have intervened with immense effort in the natural course of things; Pater’s metaphor is from Isaiah 52:3: “a root out of a dry ground” (122).

This idea of the cathedral is in keeping with Pater’s more general theory of *expression*, which again distinguishes him from Ruskin. As Iser points out, Ruskin sees no essential difference between expression and communication in art: artistic expression is but a means to communicate the moral and natural truth of a world whose beauty is accessible to everyone. But for Pater, expression is self-expression, the objectification of an inwardness
“seeking to establish superiority over the ‘burdensome character’ of experience” (Iser 27). According to this model, the Cathedral of Amiens expresses the inner spirit of a people in their effort to overcome the conditions of their own meager existence in an inhospitable landscape. On the level of the individual artist, Pater claims that the popular, almost secular teachings of the thirteenth century created a new spirit by means of which art became personal. The artist in such an environment makes his own way of conception and execution prevail: he “renders his own work vivid and organic” (Pater 116). Whereas for Ruskin the harmony of landscape, people, and cathedral in Amiens makes a perfect unity that can only be looked back on with admiration and regret, for Pater it is precisely the discord between a sterile landscape and the achievement of Amiens that renders the cathedral exceptional and provides an implicit analogy for the nineteenth-century artist seeking to express his inward reality amid the hostile cultural landscape of modernity, populated as it is by the barbarians and Philistines against which Matthew Arnold wrote in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). More than the capacity to appreciate the rough texture of stone that has lost its color, this is what constitutes the “just equivalent” for what has been lost since the thirteenth century: the image, in the cathedral of Amiens, of a willed dialectic between the confusion of the object world and the expressive power of an inward spirit to impose itself on that world. It is through such expression, through its power to inscribe itself as architecture on the landscape or writing on the page, that the inner world of the artist makes use of its freedom.

“The expression concerns us; the construction concerns the Beaux Arts” (Adams 106). This is Henry Adams in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904), a work that carries into the twentieth century the literary meditation on architectural expression and cultural memory that characterizes the work we have examined of Goethe, Ruskin, James, and Pater. In his description of the Cathedral of Chartres, Adams here is addressing the question of the use of flying buttresses, and his point is that whereas their virtue as structural supports is a matter for the École des Beaux Arts (the principal institution for the training of architects in France), what concerns him and his readers is the “expression they gave to a church” (106), whether this expression be understood as religious or as purely aesthetic. The precise nature of what is being expressed in medieval religious architecture, and to what extent the object of that expression can be understood by the modern mind, are the questions posed by Adams’s essay. His ap-
proach to these questions is made under the sign, as it were, of Wordsworth’s “Intimations” ode (1807), quoted in the opening paragraphs of Adams’s first chapter. His use of Wordsworth reminds us of the importance of the subject of personal memory in modern literature and of the ways it has been related to that of cultural memory. Indeed, the “problem” posed by the presence of medieval architecture in the modern age can be understood as one of cultural memory and its analogy in the personal memory of the individual subject.

Let us recall the argument of Wordsworth’s ode: as mature human beings we have lost the memory of our heavenly origins, which can nonetheless be recovered through an imaginative act, that of the recollection of early childhood, the age at which, freshly issued from heaven, we still lived in its divine light. Adams’s device is to transpose this myth onto the historical dimension: the earliest manifestations of Gothic architecture, in the twelfth century, represent a childhood of the human spirit whose divine dimension has been lost but which might be recovered through a form of recollection that returns to the state of childhood: “The man who wanders into the twelfth century is lost, unless he can grow prematurely young” (7).

Adams reminds us of the conditions that Wordsworth poses for the success of this endeavor: in a “season of calm weather” one can still have sight of the “immortal sea,” which brought us hither from our origins, and can even travel there to see the children sporting on the shore. In other words, in the right frame of mind we can return to the twelfth century and bear witness to the spirit that alone could produce the monuments of Mont Saint Michel and Chartres: “Our sense is partially atrophied from disuse, but it is still alive” (8).

Adams’s visit to Chartres is thus conducted as a quest that is at once historical and personal. Standing before the southwest front, he sees the Christ over the central door, flanked by a scene of the Ascension over the left door and a statue of the seated Virgin over the right door: “Here is the Church, the Way, and the Life of the twelfth century that we have undertaken to feel, if not to understand” (70). The search for this feeling will not be through the central, “royal” door where Christ figures in all his majesty but through the adjacent south door of the Virgin, who, in her qualities of mercy and intercession, belongs to the people rather than to the Church.

Stop a moment to see how she receives us, remembering, or trying to remember, that, to the priests and artists who designed the Portal, and
to the generations that went on the first and second crusades, the Virgin in her shrine was at least as living, as real, as personal an empress as the Basilissa at Constantinople! (71–72)\textsuperscript{19}

This attempt at memory and this search for feeling define the mode of Adams’s first chapter (“Towers and Portals”) on the cathedral proper. The transition to the next chapter (“The Virgin of Chartres”), however, is marked by the writer’s actual passage into the sanctuary, where he must take ten minutes to accustom his eyes to the light. It is in this blind interval that he begins to realize that his quest is in vain; the twentieth century will never recover the feeling that built the cathedral of Chartres, for “the gothic gets away . . . it casts too many shadows” (87). Sobered by this realization, he now puts the Wordsworthian disposition at an ironic remove.

What is curious to watch is the fanatical conviction of the gothic enthusiast, to whom the twelfth century means exuberant youth, the eternal child of Wordsworth, over whom its immortality broods like the day. (87)

Adams finds that in such a person the “youthful yearning for old thought is . . . disconcerting, like the mysterious senility of the baby that

Deaf and silent reads the eternal deep, Haunted forever by the eternal mind.” (87)

The quotation from the “Intimations” ode is inexact, but the intention is clear: Adams must distance himself from the mythic illusions of the romantic model; his response to the Gothic henceforth alternates between persistent statements of purpose—“we have set out to seek the feeling” (183)—and expressions of irremediable loss.

This sense of loss, of a failure to properly comprehend, is repeated before each of several of the cathedral’s most remarkable architectural details. This is the case, for example, in the use of grisaille in the windows of the choir. Grisaille is a technique of coloring glass using only shades of gray so as to create a kind of shimmering, sculptural effect. As a technical reference on this effect, Adams cites a passage from Viollet-le-Duc that reveals, unexpectedly, an almost Paterian sensibility.

The solid outlines then seem to waver like objects seen through a sheet of clear water. Distances change their values, and take depths in which the eye gets lost. With every hour of the day these effects are altered,
and always with new harmonies which one never tires of trying to un-
derstand. (151)

For Adams, however, a complete understanding is beyond the reach of his age. *Grisaille* is just one branch of an entire system of lighting and fenê-
trage, which “will have to remain a closed book because the feeling and the experience which explained it once are lost, and we cannot recover either” (152). In the absence of such experience, Adams’s solution to the problem of describing the cathedral takes the form of a dramatic and historical mise-en-scène based primarily on the images in the stained glass windows. Where Ruskin relies on sculpture and Pater on materials and architectonics, Adams is almost entirely devoted to the two-dimensional images offered by windows. The northwest and southeast ends of the transept, for example, place in opposition two rose windows: the Rose of France, donated in 1230 by Queen Blanche of Castille; and, facing it from the south, the Rose of Dreux, donated by Pierre de Dreux, the noble Breton warrior who revolted against Blanche in the 1230s and was later to die in the Crusades. The Rose of France shows an image of the Virgin with a scepter in her right hand and her Son seated on her knees; it is an allegory of Blanche’s own rule and of the future reign of her son Louis. The Rose of Dreux opposes to this image the fierce scenes of the Apocalypse, dominated by the figure of Christ as emperor of heaven. As Adams points out, Pierre de Dreux “carries the assertion of his sex into the very presence of the Queen of Heaven” (175). This presence is most strikingly recorded in the window known as Notre-Dame de la Belle Verrière, to the right of the choir, just above the altar. It is to this image that Adams turns at the conclusion to his visit of the cathedral, finding that the Virgin and the prophets around her remain “as calm and confident in their own strength and in God’s providence as they were when Saint Louis was born, but looking down from a deserted heaven, into an empty church, on a dead faith” (186).

This judgment is without possibility of appeal and effectively marks Adams’s break with the Wordsworthian notion of a return to origins. But Adams retains enough of the romantic sensibility to want, by means of imagination, to fill the void left by the vision of the past as empty and dead. That space will be filled by the eternal figure of the feminine.

Throughout his essay, Adams’s emphasis on the figure of Mary is consistent with his contention that Chartres was built primarily as a shrine to this deity rather than as a place of public worship (97) and that Gothic ar-

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Architecture is essentially feminine. *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* is in effect a kind of hymn to the feminine principle. The chapter on the three most important “queens” of the Middle Ages (Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marie de France, and Blanche of Castille) begins by declaring, against Pope, that the “the proper study of mankind is woman,” followed by the suggestion that “nature regards the female as the essential, the male as the superfluity of her world” (187). For Adams, the great period of Gothic architecture is defined by a series of female reigns. It begins when Eleanor of Aquitaine becomes Queen of France in 1137, continues through the life of the poet Marie de France, and ends with the death of Blanche of Castille in 1252: “For a hundred and fifty years, the Virgin and Queens ruled French taste and thought” (193). The nature of that rule is reflected in the respective characters of the three women celebrated there. Eleanor of Aquitaine, “the greatest of all French women” (198), figures as the principle of feminine law and strength while being at the same time a woman who did what pleased herself: “While the Virgin was miraculously using the power of spiritual love to elevate and purify the people, Eleanor and her daughters were using the power of earthly love to discipline and refine the Courts” (200). Marie de France celebrated the spirit of courtly love in her lays, and under her authority the noble lesson of that ideal lasted for centuries as the standard of taste (202). Blanche of Castille, as regent of France following the death of Louis VII in 1226, successfully resisted the revolt of the barons, including Pierre de Dreux, whose rose window faces hers in the transept of Chartres. Tradition holds that she inspired the love poems of Thibaut de Champagne, and their secret love is held to be a thirteenth-century version of the story of Tristan and Isolde. Adams’s argument is that the art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including Gothic architecture, owes its particular grace and power to the influence of these women, and to the feminine principle in general. Commenting on Thibaut’s verses to Blanche, he compares their eloquent simplicity to “the simplicity of the thirteenth-century glass,—so refined and complicated that sensible people are satisfied mainly to feel, and not to understand” (214). Adams thus brings about an association between the feminine and Gothic architecture through the mediating figure of poetry.

In his treatment of the Virgin, as well as these historical figures, a number of elements are combined in Adams’s work to form the feminine principle. The cult of the Virgin, figure of mercy, emanates from the people and not from Church doctrine; she is present to them with a reality that
never belonged to the Son or to the Trinity, just as women in general form a counterforce to the masculine hierarchy of the Church and to the male monastic tradition. The Virgin is so much a person of the people that even in Adams’s own age she is “little to the taste of any respectable middle-class society” (244). By the same token, the “feeling” that Adams seeks vainly to recover, but of which he sees evidence everywhere in the Gothic, belongs to the province of the Virgin and the other female figures of his essay; it is implicitly opposed to the intellectual principle represented by the fathers of the Church. The various manifestations of the feminine principle in Adams give it a quality of multiplicity, as well as irregularity and even non-rationality, as implied in the very title Virgin Mother. In his chapter on the miracles of Notre Dame, Adams writes, “If the Trinity was in essence Unity, the Mother alone could represent whatever was not Unity; whatever was irregular, exceptional, outlawed; and this was the whole human race” (248). The Virgin, and by extension the eternal feminine, is outside of doctrine.

So ends our excursion. This chapter began with the observation of a tension between two strains in nineteenth-century responses to Gothic architecture: the aesthetic, which celebrates architectural form independent of its originally sacred function; and the ethical, in which the writer attempts to come to terms with the significance of Gothic architecture for his own time. The first two sections have sought to show how the essential conflict between aesthetic transcendence and ethical value is manifested in three key literary figures of the early and mid–nineteenth century: Goethe, Wordsworth, and Ruskin. In all three, the tension between the aesthetic and the ethical is combined, according to the temperament of the individual writer, with the more subjective discourse of personal impression, experience, perception, and memory. It is this discourse that becomes more pronounced in the writers treated in the third section, which registers the twilight of the influence of Gothic architecture as reflected in late-century literary sensibilities: James’s ironies, Pater’s insistent questioning, and Adams’s sense of incomprehension and of the radical otherness of the medieval world that built these monuments to a kind of faith his generation can no longer experience.

What unites the several writers studied here is the sense of spiritual, cultural, and personal loss inspired by the survival of Gothic architecture;
their works constitute, collectively, a series of negotiations with that loss that leads to a more modern accommodation of it. Adams registers that loss as definitively as it is possible to do, his sense of loss extending from personal experience to the aesthetic and historical realms. But for this loss there is something gained: “abundant recompense,” as Wordsworth writes in the “Intimations” ode, or Pater’s “just equivalent.” Having complained that the Gothic gets away, it turns out that Adams has, after all, discovered a way to speak of the Gothic: it is for him the architectural embodiment of the feminine principle in its irregular, multiform, and fragmentary nature, its organic relation to the people, its disruption of hierarchical relations, its elusiveness, and its appeal to feeling, emotion, and the sense of the miraculous. In these ways Gothic architecture opposed the Romanesque tradition with its origins in the monasteries, just as women stood symbolically in opposition to the male institutions of the Church. In all of these qualities, combined with Adams’s emphasis on the emotional effects of hard-cut images, we may discern the early signs of a modernist aesthetic, one that can come into being only with the conscious abandonment of romantic mythologies and the clear-eyed vision of a deserted heaven, an empty church, and a dead faith. Adams’s treatment of the Gothic is a swan song, made at a time of waning literary interest in the subject; it seems to acknowledge that the great questions of what medieval religious architecture means to the nineteenth century have been played out if not fully answered, and that they now must give way to other, more urgent questions and ways of seeing.

With these questions in mind, the development described in this chapter’s last section, “Backward Glances,” should be seen as a consequence of the tension between the tendencies outlined in the first two sections. That is, the tension between sublime transcendence and ethical value that we witness variously in Goethe, Wordsworth, and Ruskin is translated, later in the century, into the language of immediate subjective experience. This kind of experience still makes claims to aesthetic and ethical value, but these claims are more modest, and more contingent on individual sensibility, than those of romanticism. I would also make the point that this translation functions as a prefigurement of modernism in both architecture and literature. The ethical and the aesthetic will remain distinct values in the twentieth century, but architectural modernism will seek to serve both of them in structures that propose a functional beauty liberated from the burden of history in favor of the sensory experience of space and light. Literary modernism, for its part, will find both aesthetic and ethical value
in various forms of immediate if fragmentary experience: Proust’s involuntary memory, Joyce’s epiphanies, Woolf’s “moments of being.” This is to propose a way in which the changing responses to Gothic architecture in the long nineteenth century serve as a ground for understanding the transition from romantic and Victorian sensibilities to those of both literary and architectural modernism.