

Introduction : myth or reality

The *New Illustrated Larousse* defines the cathedral, accurately enough, as the 'episcopal church of the diocese'. We are also told, in somewhat vaguer terms, that a cathedral is a 'large monumental church exemplifying Christian medieval architecture', a key example of which would be Notre-Dame of Paris. So it is that right from the start we have to address the question of what a cathedral essentially is. For the man in the street, with no specialist interest in religious matters, a cathedral is first and foremost a large Catholic building, in the Gothic style. Many buildings declared by tourist notices to be cathedrals are in fact merely parish churches, although this in no way detracts from their essential merit or interest. It is curious to note that this error always concerns Gothic buildings, the implication being, at least as far as France is concerned, that people find it hard to imagine Romanesque or Classical cathedrals. Conversely, one is startled to find that the cathedral of Saint-Denis, the town chosen as the capital of the diocese when the department of Seine-Saint-Denis was created, was still known as a 'basilica', both by the inhabitants and by the authorities, although neither party really knew what this term meant. This designation may have served, however, to reinforce a strictly mythical notion of the Gothic, for the building is not really in the town but in a suburb held to be dangerous because it forms part of the famous red light district.

The myths surrounding the concept of the cathedral date back to the nineteenth century and, more particularly, to the Romantic movement. Through its discovery of Gothic architecture, the generation of 1830, aware both of the power of the Catholic faith and of the strength of the monarchy, was to unleash a movement of such dynamism that even unbelievers would have no choice but to adopt it as their own, while imposing a distinct, lay interpretation.

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In addition, each country responded in a different fashion to the image of its own past.

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England was the first country in Europe to be confronted with its own cultural past, and to expound a doctrine, which was indeed to inspire many foreigners. The dissolution of the monasteries, ordered by Henry VIII in 1536 and 1539, led to many of their number being abandoned. Their ruins were a source of passionate interest from an early date. Thus, in the middle of the sixteenth century, John Leland took it upon himself to describe what remained of Malmesbury Abbey, by then a cloth manufactory. Sir William Dugdale followed his example, drafting a *History of Saint-Paul's Cathedral* (London, 1658), in which he sought to preserve for posterity an account of a building which had suffered grave damage at the hands of the Puritans. He therefore explained that the engravings of Wenceslas Hollar disregarded the devastation which had been inflicted upon the building. The London Society of Antiquarians was to put this piecemeal concern on a broader footing, and thus to promote an interest in Gothic architecture. It published a journal, *Archaeologia* (1770), which contained a number of remarkable monographic studies of the English cathedrals. The high point of this tendency was *Contrasts*, a book published by Pugin in 1836, which drew the attention of the general public, in a somewhat flamboyant fashion, to medieval architecture. For the first time a close link was intimated between religion and architecture, and the superiority of medieval architecture asserted. Also, after the Houses of Parliament had burned down in 1834, he argued strongly in favour of rebuilding the monument in the Gothic style, it being his conviction that, from a moral point of view, this style was to be preferred to all others. The architect, Sir Charles Barry (1796–1860), in spite of his classical tastes, designed a Gothic monument (1836) the decor of which drew its inspiration from the neighbouring chapel of Henry VII but which, as far as the rhythm of the facade fronting the Thames was concerned, was not uninfluenced by a Palladian formalism.

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In Germany, the discovery of Gothic architecture, although occurring, as had been the case in England, in the context of Romanticism, assumed a different form. Political factors were involved, for the Napoleonic wars had profoundly

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shaken this mosaic of countries, leaving them with a thirst for unity. However, Strasburg cathedral had been regarded as a symbol of the German soul at a still earlier date. Endorsing a term (*tedesco*) which Italian humanists of the Renaissance period had applied to twelfth-century architecture, Goethe had drawn the conclusion that Gothic art was an authentically German art (*Von der deutscher Baukunst*, 1773). In his analysis of the facade of Strasburg cathedral which, somewhat fancifully, had been ascribed to Erwin von Steinbach, the poet saw it as the embodiment of an art rooted in nature. Erwin, whose tomb had just been discovered, was to assume a mythical status, rivalling that of Durer as far as invention and national genius were concerned. The writers of the *Stürm und Drang* followed Herder down the trail blazed by Goethe. A veritable resurrection of the Middle Ages occurred, with all the imbalances of an exaggerated nationalism. Nuremberg became one of the capitals of the movement, but the emphasis soon shifted from Strasburg to Köln, which was to serve as a channel for the energy of the German people for almost half a century.

The movement was launched by Joseph Görres who, on 20 November 1814, issued a stirring appeal concerning the cathedral and its eventual completion. The reasons advanced for such a project reflect the mood of the times, and help us to understand the extent of the movement. Köln cathedral immediately became a symbol, of the German people and of their forthcoming liberation from the Napoleonic yoke. The Emperor's wars had not only shattered a fragile equilibrium but also, more importantly, they had given a large proportion of these oppressed peoples a sense of their own identity. Görres' genius lay in having managed to turn Köln, the most remarkable Gothic cathedral in all of the German territories, into a focal point for this new awareness. The cathedral reminded Germans in the most stirring fashion possible of the virtues of the past. Even its unfinished state was significant, for it represented the abandonment of a project which, if revived, would serve to unite the energies of one and all. There was a flood of engravings of the unfinished building, an iconography which served as a constant reproach. Such representations were lent further resonance through the fact that during this same period the 'cathedral' became a pictorial motif, encapsulating in striking fashion the emotional content underlying the word, and the hope which it symbolised. Karl Friedrich Schinkel played an important role here. He had been strongly influenced by the Romantic milieu in which he lived and worked, which saw Gothic architecture as both the quintessential expression of Christianity and as a remarkable affirmation of national art. Schinkel had also read Goethe's study of 1773, and it was in this spirit that he produced a number of his highly evocative paintings. *The Gothic*

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cathedral by the water (1813), a later copy of which by Wilhelm Alborn may now be seen in the National Gallery, Berlin, was one of the most characteristic of such works, including such features as the link between water and the setting sun and, above all, the bustling human activity unfolding at the foot of the monument and giving the onlooker a clue to its true meaning. The ‘city’ is dominated by the chevet of the ‘cathedral’, by means of a massiveness which manages to be both powerful and airy. One quickly comes to realise that the building is in fact a synthesis of several cathedrals built on German territory, namely, Strasburg, Freiburg and Prague. A plan was therefore drawn, but never in fact realised, for a monument commemorating the War of Liberation of 1814–15, a cathedral taking its inspiration from monuments in both Germany (Köln, Freiburg, Strasburg), Italy (Milano) and France (Reims). Finally, the originality of the scheme lay in its centred design, which could not help but call to mind the Temple of the Holy Grail, and in the stylistic choices inspired by its flamboyant architecture.

The failure of this plan, and of many others like it, may serve in part to explain the place won by Köln cathedral in the hearts and minds of the population. Sulpice Boisserée, himself a native of Köln, was to play the crucial role here. He had learned of the importance of his city as regards the painting of the early German masters, and he had accumulated a collection of such works that was exceptional for the period. Having met Friedrich Schlegel in Paris (1803–4), he had managed to persuade him to come to Köln. Schlegel drafted his study on *Les Fondements de l'architecture gothique* (1804–5), which relied very heavily on his analysis of the city’s cathedral. In 1814, Georg Moller discovered a medieval drawing featuring the north tower and, in 1815, Boisserée unearthed a second drawing, with a representation of the south tower. Fired by these discoveries, in 1821 Boisserée commissioned an engraving of the completed cathedral, which was widely circulated. In 1815, he had persuaded Goethe to come to the Rhineland, and had drawn his attention to the building. The following year, the great poet launched an appeal for funds to complete Köln cathedral.

The whole of Germany seemed to be involved in the project. First of all, the archbishop’s see was re-established there (1821). Secondly, the Prussian state decided to assume responsibility for the completion of the edifice. In 1834, Schinkel was commissioned to draw a plan, which he did forthwith. It was necessary to begin by shoring up the cathedral and it was only through the efforts of Friedrich-Wilhelm IV of Prussia, who had ascended the throne in 1840, that work on the site became both more urgent and more extensive. In 1842, Zwirner, one of Schinkel’s pupils, laid the first stone. Work went on until

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1880. This drawn-out and delicate venture served to symbolise the fraternity of all Germans, since they were collaborating in the completion of a national monument. German sensibility had in a sense assuaged its thirst for the absolute in the realisation of this dream, the meaning of which transcended the excessively narrow framework of the various *Länder*. It had been profoundly marked by a specific ideology, as had the various expressions of Gothic revivalism in other countries. Some historians have been too ready to regard the project as the loftiest expression of German genius. Nazism was to give a new lease of life to such theories, no matter how contentious they in fact were, and no matter how often their essentially inane nature had been demonstrated.

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The rediscovery of Gothic architecture in France was never so ardent and passionate an affair as it had been in Germany, even though the difficulty of addressing so different a reality produced a somewhat febrile state of mind. The myth took longer to assume a definite shape. Its focal point was Notre-Dame of Paris, a building of crucial significance not only in the history of architecture but in politics also. Notre-Dame has never been the object of such outlandish arguments as Köln had occasioned, and it has never served as the symbol of the desire for independence of a people that had suffered oppression for a number of years. National unity had been so long established that it was not at issue. I do not propose to rehearse the emergence of a sensibility responsive to Gothic art, for many excellent studies have been devoted to the question in recent years, and they serve to bring out the complexity of the phenomenon. My aim, rather, will be to discern just what, in relation to the discovery of the Gothic, the meaning of the cathedral was taken to be. By contrast with what took place in England and in Germany, it is only through reference to literature that one may grasp the particular qualities of the cult of the Gothic in France. For it was literature alone that served there to unify, and to draw into a genuine current of opinion, what had been up until then no more than a number of disparate and ill-founded perspectives. For more than a hundred years, Victor Hugo's famous novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), was to exert an influence upon the more open-minded, both specialists and amateur enthusiasts. In this novel, one of the most intriguing contributions to French Romanticism, the author depicted a medieval world which readers could readily imagine, and to which later generations remained profoundly attached. Even the cathedral fire seemed to prefigure the

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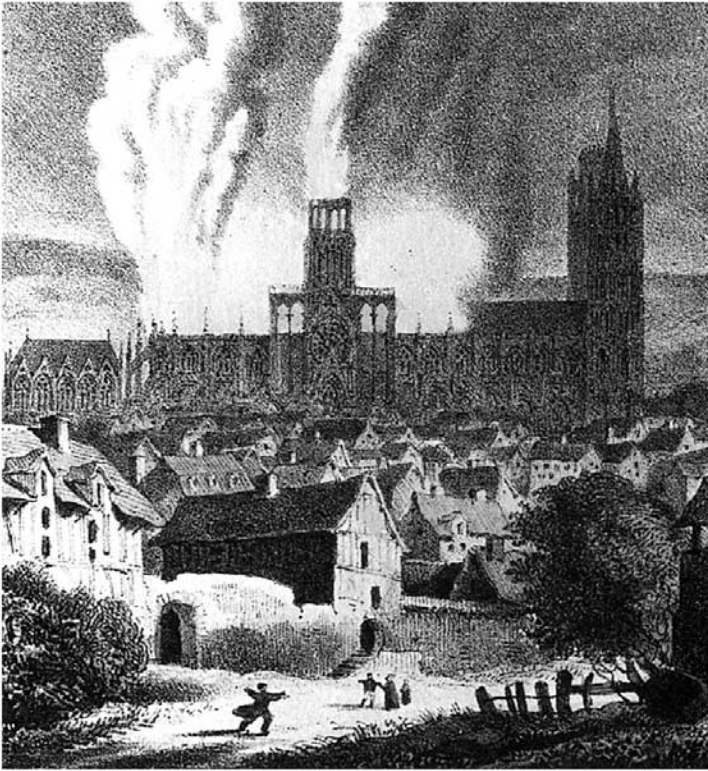


Fig. 1 The spire and roofs of Rouen cathedral ablaze, 15 September 1822.
 Lithograph by Périaux, from an original drawing by Langlois.

blaze which, in 1836, set alight the timber frame and the roofing of Chartres cathedral, and which by the same token seemed to suggest a confusion between a Hugoesque world and reality. After 1918 the gargoyles on Reims cathedral, now kept in the Palais du Tau, spat lead. Aside from the imaginative aspects of the work, which reality was soon to copy, two other elements helped to give the novel a quality all its own. The first concerns the subject which serves as the guiding thread of the book, namely, the cathedral itself, conceived as a living, palpitating being, and not merely as a cold edifice which had been mutilated in the course of the Revolution and for a long time neglected. The second concerns the ideas elaborated upon by Hugo, which were in no way contingent but rather involved themes which had undergone a long process of maturation in his mind and which, aside from a few points of detail, were never to vary. The majority of them have been incorporated into public knowledge to such a degree, owing

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to the huge success of the novel, that they now seem to be mere commonplaces. Their origin was soon to be forgotten. Emile Mâle, in his thesis on the thirteenth century (1898), acknowledged the debt he owed to Hugo, and Henri Focillon followed suit, in his *Art d'Occident* (Paris, 1938). I do not want to labour arguments that have already been spelled out at length by Jean Mallion, in *Victor Hugo et l'art médiéval* (Paris, 1962), but propose instead to emphasise a number of points which may help the reader to understand just how the myth of the cathedral was consolidated. The doctrine has been considerably reinforced since Hugo's day. Its central tenets include the unity of the arts, the primacy of architecture with respect to the other arts, and the claim that architecture is a form of expression that is by its nature spiritual. Hugo had tried to define the conditions for creation, whether material (climate, geography and materials) or social. It was in this area that his thinking appeared most original, as he drew a sharp contrast between Romanesque art, as Gerville had defined it a short time before, and Gothic art. The distinction was based upon a sociological analysis which, although admittedly somewhat perfunctory, at least had the virtue of being boldly drawn. Hugo claimed that there was a connection between form and social class. Indeed, in his view, authority in the medieval period was vested in two different classes in succession. Romanesque art reflected the rule of a priesthood: 'There is a pervading sense of authority, unity, of what is impenetrable, absolute, of Pope Gregory VII; the priestly caste is everywhere, the people nowhere'. With the coming of the Crusades, the authority of the priesthood was undermined and the people reclaimed its rights: 'The face of Europe had changed and, in like fashion, the face of architecture had changed too; like civilization, it had turned a page ... From this point on, the cathedral was invaded by the bourgeoisie, by the commune and by liberty' (*Notre-Dame de Paris*, Book 5, Chapter 2). Architecture was above all a social and a collective art. Architecture died when the ties between art and society were sundered.

Hugo was naturally led to analyse more precisely the role of the creator, and so to introduce the notion of 'collective creation'. Once he had adopted this notion, he tried to render it more systematic: 'The greatest works of architecture are not so much individual as social creations; they are better seen as the giving birth of peoples in labour than as the gushing stream of genius. Such works should be regarded as the deposit left by a nation, as the accumulations of the centuries, as the residue of successive evaporations of human society, briefly, as a kind of geological formation' (3, 1). These peremptory assertions were tempered, however, by Hugo's decision to reintroduce the individual creator in the course of the second stage:

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The cathedral itself, a building that in former times was so dogmatic, had now been invaded by the bourgeoisie, by the commune and by liberty, and so eluded the priest and fell into the hands of the artist. The artist built after his own fashion. He bid adieu to mystery, myth and law and in their stead he welcomed phantasy and caprice. Provided that the priest still had his basilica and his altar, he could raise no objection. The four walls now belonged to the artist. The book of architecture no longer belonged to the priesthood, to religion or to Rome, but to the imagination, to poetry and to the people.

(5, 2)

The shift from the first to the second period was effected by means of transitional works, among them the cathedral of Paris:

The colossal work of a man and a people ... a prodigious product of all the forces of an epoch in which, upon every single stone, one could see burst forth in a hundred different ways the phantasy of the workman disciplined by the genius of the artist; a form of human creation, in a word, powerful, and fruitful like the divine creation, from which it seemed to have wrested its twofold character of variety and unity.

(5, 2)

If Victor Hugo placed so much emphasis upon the differences between Romanesque art, where the churches were 'sombre, mysterious, low and as if overwhelmed by the weight of the semicircular arch', and Gothic art, with its 'tall, airy churches, rich in stained glass and sculpture... communal and bourgeois as political symbols; free, capricious and unfettered as works of art' (3, 1), he had nonetheless set out to show that the evolution of 'art was achieved without trouble, without effort, and without reaction, as if obeying a tranquil, natural law' (3, 1). The comparison with nature, already operative in the writings of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and, after him, in those of Chateaubriand, was adopted by Hugo as his own and indeed taken much further. He likened the cathedral to a forest: 'The pillars are thick trunks, at the pinnacle of which the sheafs of fillets interweave like shadow-laden branches' (*En Voyage*, vol. II, 1839, 'Midi de France et Bourgogne', p. 275).

If I have placed such emphasis upon some of the ideas formulated by Victor Hugo, it is because they exerted an immediate and profound influence upon the minds of his contemporaries, who could not help but be impressed by the breadth of his vision. These ideas were not intrinsically original, for a number of them had been formulated by, among others, Sulpice Boisserée, whose writings Hugo had read with care. His contribution, however, was to make such ideas so familiar that a whole generation was in some way marked by them. Didron, in his introduction to his *Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne...* (Paris, 1845), did not

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conceal his debt to Hugo and, indeed, dedicated the work to him. Many other scholars could be mentioned, and there were a host of literary persons who, after reading the novel, paid their very first visit to the cathedral of Paris, meditated upon Hugo's sublime pages, and succumbed to the strange enchantment worked by such an admirably described monument.

The imposing personality of Victor Hugo should not be allowed to obscure the existence of those others who, during the same period, helped to mould the imaginary conception of the cathedral. Two of their number took the trouble to theorise, and thereby to reduce their analyses to a systematic form. Viollet-le-Duc has been much studied, but Ludovic Vitet (1802–73) has only recently re-emerged from the shadows, even though the role he played, both in practical terms and as a writer, was by no means a negligible one. He served as Inspector of Historical Monuments, an office to which he was appointed by Guizot on 23 October 1830 and which he held up until 1834, when Prosper Mérimée succeeded him. In 1837, the Count of Salvandy founded the Committee of Arts and Monuments, the aim of which was to encourage and coordinate archaeological researches, amongst which the study of cathedrals was to occupy a prominent place. Ludovic Vitet was commissioned to write a monograph on Noyon, while Lassus, an architect, was responsible for drafting a similar work on Chartres.

The publication of Ludovic Vitet's study of Noyon cathedral, in 1845, was of crucial importance, for it was the first monograph to be based upon texts and upon the actual analysis of the monument. It aspired in this respect to rival the work which Sulpice Boisserée had written on Köln, and which had been translated into French in 1823. Vitet's monograph also reflected a new concern with illustration. The volume containing the written text was complemented by an album of plates in which plans, cross-sections, elevations and architectural details had been drawn with the greatest care. Vitet even went so far as to call upon the expertise of one of the great architects of the period, Daniel Ramée (1806–87). If Noyon was given so important a place in the history of Gothic architecture, it was because Vitet believed that a very early date could be ascribed to the monument. He imagined that it had been embarked upon immediately after the fire of 1131, long before work began on Saint-Denis. More important still were the new theories, which played a considerable role at the time, partly because of their clarity of exposition, and partly because the high standing in official milieux enjoyed by their author ensured that his views gained a wide hearing. Vitet had derived some of these theories from Victor Hugo, especially all those arguments which concerned the evolution of architectural

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forms and sociological explanation. On the other hand, he represented a particular current of thought, which may be characterised as agnostic, if not anti-religious and positivist. Finally, one cannot rule out the possibility that Ramée gave him valuable assistance. This architect, himself born in Germany, was familiar with both the German and the English architectural literature. He later went on to publish a *Manuel de l'histoire de l'architecture chez tous les peuples et particulièrement de l'architecture en France* (1843), in which a number of Vitet's theories were elaborated further.

In many respects, Viollet-le-Duc belonged to this same intellectual current, to which he gave a further, and quite spectacular development. In addition, he had the merit of expounding to a wide audience, both through his various writings and through his actions, the arguments which he professed. Even today, such arguments inform many discussions of medieval architecture, and this is even more apparent in the case of Gothic architecture. I do not propose to rehearse the whole analysis advanced by this famous architect, but what was involved was a system of thought designed to provide a global account of a reality the extraordinary diversity of which had profoundly impressed him. Viollet-le-Duc's ideas were further developed in his *Dictionnaire*, the first volume of which was published in 1854, but earlier formulations were sketched out ten years before in a series of articles published, from 1844 on, in Didron's *Annales archéologiques* ('*De la construction des édifices religieux en France*'). One thus has to accept that it is difficult to identify the authorship of certain arguments propounded at around the same date by Lassus, Verneilh and Vitet, who held very much the same views, and who tended to publish in the *Annales*. The general public, however, was convinced that the theory, as far as medieval rationalism was concerned, had emerged fully fledged from the brain of Viollet-le-Duc.

In order to shed some light on the great debate of the mid-nineteenth century on the cathedral, which preoccupied both scholarly and professional milieux, I want to discuss a few of the central issues. Viollet-le-Duc's position was expounded in 'Cathédrale', an article published in 1854 which in many respects rehearsed the lines of argument advanced by Victor Hugo and Vitet. He too posited a link between urban growth and the building of cathedrals. The populations of the towns had reacted against the monastic and feudal order by constituting themselves as 'communes'. The bishops used such emancipatory movements to their own advantage by building or rebuilding their cathedrals 'with the vigorous participation of the local population'. Using a formula sufficiently striking to persuade the most sceptical of his readers, Viollet-le-Duc