# John Ruskin and the Europe of Cathedrals

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**Abstract** On his many travels Ruskin visited religious monuments, including cathedrals. The list would be long, either by mentioning his visits in his *Diaries* or by describing and analyzing monuments in his works on architecture. His interest became passionate about Gothic cathedrals, and sometimes very critical for other periods. My presentation will focus on a hermeneutics of styles and mainly the Gothic style in Ruskin's work. Through this process, I will seek to understand his positions on the question of restoration, and I will once again open the file on the discussions he is initiating on Viollet-le-Duc's work: "Let us not talk about restoration, it is a lie from one end to the other", he wrote in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

**Keywords** John Ruskin. Viollet-le-Duc. Religious monuments. Gothic cathedrals. Restoration.



## 1 The Discovery

When the young John Ruskin explored the European continent with his parents in 1833, he was following in the footsteps of the Grand Tour undertaken by young English aristocrats in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The family rented their own car and employed the services of a private courier named Salvador, who planned the itineraries, pointed out highlights, and took care of all the practical aspects of the trip. The Ruskins were also heirs to the Grand Tour because the tour on the Continent that they undertook regularly from 1833 was an essential aspect of a young man's education. It was about seeing cities, getting to know the political systems and economies of the countries travelled through, meeting important people, visiting museums and ancient monuments: in short, becoming familiar with the European civilization of which England felt a part. Moreover, on the Grand Tour, from

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the 1760s onwards, the admiration for landscapes and the visits to natural sites occupied a role that became increasingly important, until it became the core of bourgeois tourism in the Victorian era. We know how crucial this was in the young Ruskin's passion for the Alps, from his first trip onwards.

The only thing that was missing during these journeys was the learned mentor of the aristocratic tradition, who accompanied the young men to introduce them to the particularities of the countries they travelled through, to point to the masterpieces of art and architecture, to open their eyes and their souls. For John Ruskin, the role of mentor and mediator was played by the writers and scholars he read before leaving or during his travels, as well as by the draftsmen and painters whose works he admired. Among them, Samuel Prout played a prominent role, and of course, a little later, J.M.W. Turner.

If Turner was a master of landscapes, Prout, who travelled a lot by trade, had made a speciality of city paintings with their street scenes and ancient monuments. The Ruskins greatly appreciated these works, in which the attraction for the picturesque and colourful Middle Ages was marked. André Hélard recalled that the itinerary of the 1833 trip was partly suggested by the desire to see the places represented by Prout in his *Sketches made in Flandres and Germany*, which had just been published.[1] A little later, the artist also inspired the Ruskins with his sketches of Italy and Switzerland. Churches were well represented in Prout's drawings, especially the Gothic cathedrals, whose complex and delicate architecture he liked to portray, enveloping humans in the vastness of their façades, columns and naves. From Venice to Amiens, from Rouen to Strasbourg – not to mention the old buildings of England, which I shall not deal with here – Ruskin's eye was first Prout's eye.

The poems written by the young Ruskin in 1833, published in 1891 under the title *Account of a Tour on the Continent*, testify to the influence of Prout's focus on the picturesque and on a somewhat sentimental sublime. It is not necessary to quote these verses, but rather their reinterpretation made by the elderly and sick Ruskin, who relived the sensations and visions of the past by writing his memories for *Praeterita*:

> The vastness of scale in the Milanese palaces, and the "mount of marble, a hundred spires", of the duomo, impressed me to the full at once: and not having yet the taste to discern good Gothic from bad, the mere richness and fineness of lace-like tracery against the sky was a consummate rapture to me – with much more getting up to it and climbing among it, which the Monte Rosa seen between its pinnacles across the plain.[2]

This vision, where the Gothic blends with the mountain, benefitted from the help of several mediators. First of all, it was the panorama of the Alps represented by Robert Burford in the famous rotunda in Leicester Square, one or two years before the trip, in which the picturesque and the sublime merge. The quote "mount of marble" comes from Tennyson's poem *The Daisy*. Finally, a drawing by Prout – *Piazza del Duomo* – gave a beautiful graphic introduction to the young Ruskin's impressions. In Strasbourg, Ruskin had a rather negative first impression: "I was already wise enough to feel the cathedral stiff and iron-worky".[3] He adds however: "But I was greatly excited and impressed […] by finding the scene

1 Prout 1833.

2 *Works*, 35: 117.

3 *Works*, 35: 112.

so admirably expressed by Prout in the thirty-sixth plate of his *Flandres and Germany*".[4] In Germany, in most of his remarks, and more than anywhere else standing before the Cologne Cathedral during the 1859 trip, Ruskin displayed a virulent aggressiveness: "I find the German Gothic abominable. Cologne Cathedral an enormous failure".[5] Worse still, in a letter to the painter George Richmond: "Cologne Cathedral a miserable umbug – every bit, old and new, one as bad as another".[6] The two quotations do not only testify that Ruskin experienced a selective Europe and that he hardly liked Germany, neither for its architecture nor for its philosophers. They also show us that he had strong reservations about the achievements of the late Gothic, and that he abhorred architectural restorations and modern imitations of the Gothic in the nineteenth century. It should be recalled that work on the completion of Cologne Cathedral started again in the middle of the nineteenth century and was not completed until 1880. During his journey in 1859, Ruskin saw the undertaking being built.

## 2 The Truth in Gothic Architecture

During his travels on the continent, Ruskin discovered all the great Gothic cathedrals and many lesser-known churches. In France and Italy, he visited the great monuments of religious architecture up to ten times, less often in Germany and Flanders. He carefully explored certain regions particularly rich in medieval architecture, such as Normandy and Picardy, the Po plain and Tuscany. As an art historian, he carried out field studies to know the buildings to which he planned to devote important essays: in Venice, Verona or Florence in Italy, in Amiens, Rouen or Chartres in France.

Everywhere, he drew to observe and better understand the architecture, before developing explanations in writing. Drawing was for him the first appropriation of an object, and also an essential mediation towards readers and listeners. His architectural books contain many drawings; he also attached sketches to the diaries and to some letters that relate observations. In his lectures, he used to display his drawings. What he showed was rarely the entire monument, but the details on which he based his understanding and analysis. He did not define the architecture of a building by the structure of the whole, but by certain specific elements, in particular, for the Gothic, those that carry the ornamentation. In cathedrals, it is the arches of windows, the fillings and pinnacles, the floral decorations of capitals, the shape of buttresses, the niches of sculptures… that were subject to his most meticulous study.

Ruskin devotes a passionate attention to concrete things, and in particular to the construction materials. On church façades and in their interiors, he examines the stones and details their nuances. Proust had noted Ruskin's taste for mineral matter:

> Mais jamais cependant ces pierres qu'il a tant aimées ne deviennent pour lui des exemples abstraits. Sur

4 *Works*, 35: 112.

5 Letter to Mrs John Simon = *Works*, 36: 306.

6 *Works*, 36: 309.

> chaque pierre vous voyez la nuance de l'heure unie à la couleur des siècles.[7]

Each region erected its churches using the local stone that had formed in the depth of the earth over geological eras. This is for Ruskin one of the fundamental features of Gothic architecture; and this also helps to understand many of the differences between monuments. In Northern Italy, cathedrals are covered with marble; in Picardy they are built of limestone quarried in the nearby hills; in the Jura department, very old local limestone, with its yellowish colour, is used. This continuity between the earth and the building is essential in Ruskin's eyes, and led him to believe that restoration (or neo-Gothic re-creation) using new materials, such as iron, which was common in his time, was wrong, if not indeed scandalous.

In the sixth chapter of the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, "On the Nature of Gothic", also published separately, Ruskin proposes six specific elements of Gothic, corresponding to six qualities of the builders. The third category is *Naturalism*. This category is developed by a new subdivision, which ranges artists into three classes: Purists, Naturalists in a narrow sense, and Sensualists. Ruskin bases the tripartition, as always, on criteria located at the border between aesthetics and morality: namely the rejection of evil in the works of the Purists, the rejection of good in those of the Sensualists, while artists of the second class, the class of the Naturalists, accept both good and evil:

> The second, or greatest class, render all that they see in nature unhesitatingly, with a kind of divine grasp and government of the whole, sympathizing with all the good, and yet confessing, permitting, and bringing good out of the evil also. Their subject is infinite as nature.[8]

Reading the examples given by Ruskin – all painters' names, from Giotto to Turner, from Fra' Angelico to Salvator Rosa – we understand that his tripartition reformulates the opposition between idealism and realism, and condemns certain forms of realism which Ruskin considers extreme. But the most interesting issue for us is the statement that "the Gothic builders were Naturalists", because they put *the love of truth* above all. This love is characterized by the concern to faithfully reproduce nature, evidently in plant ornaments, but also in narrative contents. Ruskin gives here an example that he uses in several other works: the flames of hell represented in the porch of the Saint-Maclou church in Rouen. He described it, starting with a very interesting remark:

> The Gothic inventor does not leave the sign in need of interpretation. He makes the fire as like real fire as he can; and in the porch of St. Maclou at Rouen, the sculptural flames burst out of the Hades gate, and flicker up, in writhing tongues of stones, through the interstices of the niches as if the church itself were on fire.[9]

This statement on the explicit meaning of the sign in Gothic art, follows and concludes a comparison with a mosaic at Torcello representing the same scene in a symbolic way – "the purgatorial fire is represented in the mosaic of Torcello (Romanesque) as a red stream, longitudi-

7 Ruskin-Proust 1904, 76.

8 *Works*, 10: 222.

9 *Works*, 10: 232.

nally striped like a riband, descending out of the throne of Christ, and gradually extending itself to envelope the wicked.[10] Ruskin thinks that the Gothic artist does not work with symbolism, but what we could define as with *indexicality* in the sense given by C.S. Peirce (1932). For him, the iconic sign in Gothic sculpture seems to be an index: the similarity between sign and object becomes a *trace* of the thing. Thus the sculpture of fire is a *trace* of the flame, the stone itself becomes fire. But he cannot do without the "as if". We should understand that Naturalism (or Realism) – truth as a trace of the thing – begins with the choice of the stone in its most concrete and geographically anchored materiality. Because the stone is at the same time sign *and* presence, it maintains its efficiency through the activity of the workmen, from the quarryman to the stonemason, and of the sculptor. These professions of the real are the alpha and omega of the Gothic. Unlike other artists and writers, in particular Goethe, who discovered Gothic (which he called "German art") through his admiration for the architect of Strasbourg Cathedral, Erwin von Steinbach, Ruskin did not praise the architects of the great cathedrals; he even doubted their existence as individuals. He held no romantic belief in individual genius: his admiration goes to the anonymous craftsmen, to their simple work and the joy they find there. As we know, this is the central thesis of *The Nature of Gothic*.

However, Gothic Naturalism is not only about an orientation towards things, but about transforming this orientation into a spiritual path. As the central category between Purism and Sensualism, it therefore welcomes an idealism that is not epistemological, but religious. The stones of the walls and floors, the efflorescence of the capitals, the branches of the pinnacles and the lace of the roses decorating the façades, the stories carved on the porches and the light flashing from the windows, the elevation of the naves, all this material reality, unified and transformed by art, leads to God.

## 3 "Read the Building"

The porches and the chapels of the Gothic cathedrals with their numerous sculptures constitute important stages in this path to God. They both offer together the materiality of the stone and the representation of the world – the world where men live, and the other world, where they aspire to go. To the pilgrim, a sculpture represents a real fact and a statement, a geological and an eschatological reality, both as *trace* and as *meaning*. Statues belong to the monument not only as an ornament but also as a discourse. They conduct a sacred conversation with the visitors, bringing them the rustle of thousand stories of vices and virtues, of sublime and grotesque features, of feasts and seasons, of damnation and martyrdom, of prophets and saints. In *The Bible of Amiens*, Ruskin devotes a long chapter to the presentation of the countless statues that populate the building, a chapter he calls "Interpretations" and to which he gives the form, sometimes critical, of a guided tour of the cathedral. There is a sense in which we can say that sculptures make cathedrals, precisely, they are a book, a *Bible*. Unlike Victor Hugo in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Ruskin does not think that "This [the book] will kill that [the ca-

10 *Works*, 10: 232.

thedral]".[11] On the contrary, for him, the building comes from the book and returns to the book, in a movement of *translatio* that doubles and perpetuates itself in an upward spiral movement, because they both involve the same *readability*. He writes: "you will have to discover whether [the sculpture] is legible (and, if legible, it is nearly certain to be worth reading)".[12] The last paragraph of *The Nature of Gothic* ends with the well-known formula: "Read the sculpture", of which I quote here the last sentence:

> Thenceforward the criticism of the building is to be conducted precisely on the same principles as that of a book; and it must depend of the knowledge, feeling and not a little of the industry and perseverance of the reader whether, even in the case of the best work, he either perceive them to be great, or feel them to be entertaining.[13]

I have been tempted to relate such a sentence to the philosophy of hermeneutics, whose modern developments belong to the years in which Ruskin wrote his most important books about art and architecture. Schleiermacher was a contemporary of Ruskin. As a theory of interpretation – particularly of texts – originating in Protestant theology and appropriated in the reading of the *Bible*, we might think that hermeneutics has similarities with Ruskin's idea of reading churches like books. But, after having examined this hypothesis, I concluded that it has to be rejected. It seems much more relevant to think that the 'method' of interpretation promoted by Ruskin is close to that of *comparatism*, the science, or better the methodology appropriate to compare languages and texts, but also organs, skeletons, fossils, plants, and so on. Comparison as a way to establish the structure or to understand the functions of two or more objects that seemed similar, was a method that was theorized at the end of the eighteenth century and flourished in the Nineteenth, in the natural sciences, from anatomy to botany, and also in the historical disciplines such as philology, and studies in folklore and mythology.

Ruskin often proceeds by connecting as many objects or as many occurrences as possible, bringing the data together and comparing them, I will venture to say *on the surface*, as on a table or a ground plan (or as on a drawing or a painting), and not in the depth of a hidden meaning that would need to be revealed or unveiled by an interpretative approach. He thinks that, for a discerning eye, everything should be seen. Backwards and forwards, inside and outside are structured in the same way:

> For the outside of a French cathedral, except for its sculpture, is always to be thought of as the wrong side of the stuff, in which you find how the threads go that produce the inside or right-side pattern.[14]

The metaphor of weaving is particularly appropriate for a "stuff" of stone; in the Latin languages, *tissage* (weaving) and *texture* have the same root. Throughout Chapter IV of *The Bible of Amiens*, on the interpretation of the Cathedral-Bible, we can find various instances that help us to better understand Ruskin's approach of connections and comparisons, whether in synchronic or in diachronic perspectives. Ruskin returns several times to

11 Hugo 2009, book 5, ch. 2.

12 *Works*, 10: 269.

13 *Works*, 10: 269.

14 *Works*, 33: 130.

the idea of the *texture* of the building, which formulates not only an image of interpretation, but also a definition of how the building was built. Bénédicte Coste, the editor of a recent French translation of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, notices that fact in her introduction: "L'édifice civil ou religieux est un texte : il se construit, il se décrira comme tel".[15]

Before concluding my paper, let us dwell for a while on a specific example. In a lecture on the Valley of the Somme delivered by Ruskin at the Royal Institution in January 1869, we have several occurrences of the metaphor of reading, – i.e. "In reading this architecture, you will read infallibly the faults of its builders. So we proceed to read this bit of work".[16] The lecture, which begins with a remarkable description of Abbeville and the Valley of the Somme, deals with the decline of Gothic at the end of the fifteenth century, starting with the example of St. Vulfran's Church, built in a flamboyant Gothic style. From this address I shall retain two points, which I have already mentioned that find here a dazzling wording. The first concerns the primacy of matter, of this it will suffice to give one quotation:

> All flamboyant architecture is essentially chalk architecture, – it is built of some light, soft, greasy stone, which you can cut like cheese, which you can drive a furrow into with your chisel an inch deep, as a ploughman furrows his field. Well, of course, with this sort of stuff, the workman goes instinctively in for deep cutting.[17]

The passage continues in the same humorous but serious vein, to the point of explaining the proliferation of "flamboyant" shapes in the ornaments, and fanciful appearances in the sculptures, starting from the specificity of the limestone drawn from the quarries of Picardy. The demonstration that applies to Abbeville also applies, explains Ruskin, to "all late northern works" – which means to all the Northern Gothic buildings built during the fifteenth century.

The second point concerns the comparative method. Although very limited in scope and circumscribed, the lecture on St. Vulfran's and other churches of the Valley of the Somme, may be compared to Ruskin's great books. It is full of references to other Gothic buildings: Rouen, Chartres, Reims, Strasbourg, Verona and Florence, as well as English buildings, such as Chester and Newcastle Cathedrals. To confirm the use of a comparative method, it suffices to read the first paragraph of Chapter IV in *The Bible of Amiens*, which I have mentioned several times. One can be sure that Ruskin's important essays on architecture are like *hubs*, namely systems of echo and links of wonderful complexity and intensity. Ruskin's architectural drawings themselves often combine comparisons of details: windows, pinnacles, ribs, statues, façades fragments etc. Ruskin's many journeys and stays to study Gothic cathedrals call out and respond to one another in an illuminating closeness. The reader is invited to explore, through his own eyes and mind, the routes that cross through of the Europe of cathedrals that Ruskin knew and loved so well. The publishers of the *Complete Works* have tried to do justice to this constant linking in their General Index:[18] anyone who consults it will notice Ruskin's prodigious comparative capacity.

15 Ruskin 2011, 8.

16 *Works*, 19: 250.

17 *Works*, 19: 251.

18 *Works*, 39.


**Figure 1** Édouard Baldus, *Amiens*, 1855. Albumen print from wet collodion negative. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund 1986. CC license

## 4 Conclusion

Unlike the comparatist scholars of his own time, who worked in historical linguistics or in folkloric or mythological history, Ruskin did not aim to reconstruct primary models. "Mother-cathedrals" from which later edifices would come, or ideal types that would provide the key to the structures of many churches that were built – both revealing national styles or moments of evolution – does not seem to be the focus of his research. It is an essential character of his thought, that its comparatism aims to specify local or historical peculiarities, to understand the singularities of such and such a building, ornament or style. The scales of the comparison can vary, of course, from the single object to the regional churches or stylistic grouping. His great joys as a researcher are realized when he discovers the perfect embodiment of a form, an absolutely unique and representative achievement. That may be part of a building, such as, in Amiens, the apse of the Cathedral which he calls, quoting Viollet-le-Duc, "The Parthenon of Gothic Architecture",[19] or a statue of the Virgin Mary that he greatly admires.

Although one cannot agree with all of Marcel Proust's remarks in his essays on Ruskin, the great French writer had such a fine and empathic understanding of Ruskin that I cannot find a better conclusion than quoting his "Preface" to the translation of *The Bible of Amiens*:

> Il pouvait, en effet, passer d'un pays à l'autre, car la même âme qu'il avait adorée dans les pierres de Pise était celle aussi qui avait donné aux pierres de Chartres leur forme immortelle. L'unité de l'art chrétien au Moyen Âge, des bords de la Somme aux rives de l'Arno, nul ne l'a sentie comme lui, et il a réalisé dans nos cœurs, le rêve des grands papes du Moyen Âge : « l'Europe chrétienne ».[20]

Let us leave the great popes sleeping in their tombs, and keep the dream of a Europe unified by art and culture.

19 *Works*, 33: 121.

20 Ruskin-Proust 1903, 61.

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