

Gothic Architecture

October 1 2001

The Modern Narrative and the Post-Modern
Turn

Readings

P. Frankl, *Gothic Architecture* 2000 ed. P. Crossley, "Introduction" by Crossley, pp. 7-31

J. Bony, *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th and 13th Centuries*, Introduction, pp 1-3

W. Sauerländer, "Mod Gothic"

M. Davis, : "Sic et non"

P. Crossley, "Back to the Forest"

"Medieval architectural history has clung not only to positivist visual theories of style, "development" and the genius of the great "architect", but it has also retained modernist paradigms that isolate the object in plans and cross sections that have nothing to do with medieval subject positions, rooted as they are in production and not reception... Fearful of interdisciplinarity medieval architectural historians still run for the measuring rod."

Michael Camille, *Art History in the Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, 1994.

Let us first recognize the agenda, which we can associate with the recent prevalence of "endism". I define "endism" as the attempt to take control of the agenda by marking out mutually exclusive divisions and termini. The approach allows the scholar to assume the judgmental tone of a prophet of the apocalypse. Michael Davis ("Sic et Non") has called these "prophets" the "border police."

We are not obliged to follow their orders.

How do ideas impose themselves? Consider the power of "the intellectual stock market." Spate of recent articles on "the state of the discipline." The current fashion for historiography may lead us to produce one-dimensional derogatory sketches of the great contributors to the field.

But remember that the new is not so new as it purports to be and the old not so old.

Gothic is itself associated with the apparent triumph of the "new"

But at the same time, Gothic reconciles the old and the new. "The recollection of the past is the promise of the future" (Abbot Suger)

The windows of the south transept at Chartres.

1. The Modernist myth
Paul Frankl and Jean Bony

Paul Frankl, *Gothic Architecture*, Pelican History of Art, 1962. New edition edited by Paul Crossley. "The only concerted attempt at a cultural history of Gothic."

Frankl was born of a Jewish family in Prague on 22 April 1878. Grew up in Prague and Munich in cities dominated by *Jugendstil* architecture as well as medieval buildings. Doctoral degree at Munich on Gothic stained glass in southern Germany. His mentor in Munich was Heinrich Wöfflin.

Frankl's *Habilitationsschrift* (*Principles of Architectural History*), dedicated to Wöfflin, was a response to W's *Renaissance und Baroque*.
Chair of Art History at Halle-Wittenberg University in 1921 attempted to establish general rules for architectural style--led to *Das System der Kunstwissenschaft*, Leipzig, 1938. Attempts to organize all artistic data into broad categories ("things" "persons" "time" and "place") then into more complex categories ("membrism," "akyrism," "regularism"). Little reference to the work of art. It made little impact.

1933/4 Nazis expelled Frankl from his chair at Halle. 1938 came to the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton. *The Gothic. Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries*, 1960. *Gothic Architecture*, 1962, corrected plate proofs on 29 January and died the next day.

A long life working on a set of principles that were there from the start (like Gothic which "developed from one basic principle").

Frankl's was a metaphysical quest. There is an "essence" in Gothic. Frankl, the victim of xenophobia, found in Gothic a phenomenon that he thought expressed universal human values and transcended national boundaries

The problem of "style"

Is it a conventional term created from the attempt to devise a system of classification? For Frankl, trained in the tradition of Hegel, "style" was a real active agency or force--a powerful and objectively existing fact. "To regard stylistic classification as conventional leads to superficiality. We are not trying to find comfortable divisions but to find the essence of each individual work and its position on the ladder of development." Style is "a unity of form governed by a few basic principles." These principles shape the forms of art as natural laws determine physical behavior. Concept best understood through the formulation of opposites.

Principles of architectural "Style" (derived from Wöfflin)

1. Spatial form: the organization of the space we move in. Demonstrated through principle of

ADDITION (Romanesque) vs DIVISION (Gothic)

- Toulouse, Saint-Sernin, late 11th-12th C
“Romanesque”
- Amiens, Notre-Dame, 1220-1269
“Gothic”

2. Manipulation of mass and surface creating
"corporeal form" with its mechanical
behavior

STRUCTURE (Romanesque) vs TEXTURE
(Gothic)

- Caen, Saint-Etienne, begun 1060s
- Amiens Cathedral nave

3. Optical form: the superficial play of light, color and surface effects. Includes also the kinetic effects of the building as we move around it.

FRONTALITY (Romanesque) vs
DIAGONALITY (Gothic)

also UNITY (Romanesque) vs
MULTIPLICITY (Gothic)

[4. Purposive intention: the social and religious agenda--more on this later]

Overall conclusion:

Romanesque is a style of BEING

Gothic is a style of BECOMING in
which forms look “organic” and
“complete”

This leads to the belief that there was a perfect Gothic building--a "final solution." The task of the historian is to assess how specific buildings exemplified ever more clearly the "essential principles" of Gothic. It all began when "the Gothic style evolved from within Romanesque church architecture when diagonal ribs were added to the groin-vault." Frankl counters the technical/functional argument that the rib was a structural element transforming it rather into an aesthetic principle. Contributed to the principle of "texture" that developed from the top down, from the inside outside.

- Saint-Denis, Abbey Church, ambulatory vaults, 1140-44

What was the driving force? Gothic style was both "immanent" and "transcendent." There was a common cultural root like the center of a hub.

The immanent force was a dialectic. Developments are set up by opposing forces in a style that are reconciled and integrated as "the Gothic style, so to speak, discovers its true nature." The rib vault pointed the way forward to a clearer articulation of its latent principles. Each successive cathedral is a "correction" of the last until the "final solution" is reached in the normative perfection of the cathedral of Cologne. The "essence" of each building is revealed when its position is clarified "on the ladder of development."

Question: where does the dialectic exist?

Frankl tries to insist on the importance of human creativity and accident: "This is not like a search for the North Pole which already exists, but is a chain of creations, providing a chain of surprises..." Yet the language he uses leads to belief that the force is impersonal and the path predetermined. "The side views of Romanesque churches are wonderfully closed; those of Gothic churches wonderfully open. This is what the two styles demanded." [Can a style demand?].

- Saint-Germer-de-Fly, Abbey Church, begun 1130s (closed external massing)

- Amiens Cathedral choir, 1230s-50s
(open exterior massing)

The architect becomes the executor, not the maker of style. There was a Gothic spirit at work as style developed "immanently" solving its own artistic problems. We are seeking "a secret force which provided every sphere of human activity with a spiritual factor, the spiritual aim, and the spiritual sense of direction by which all immanent processes converged, by which all spheres remained related to one another, and which created a style common to all cultural spheres."

Institutionally Gothic corresponded to the time of Pope Innocent III, Saint Dominic, and Saint Francis in which for the first time the Church saw itself as a fully unified entity in which every individual was a part. This concept leads to the definition of a kind of "Gothic man" who lived a shared set of values--aesthetic, emotional and spiritual. "we can surrender to being lifted far above ourselves by [Gothic] and translated into a sphere in which we can test the highest all-embracing harmony of existence."

Yet at the same time his system allowed for departures from the norm, characterized as "akyrism"--rescued "odd" buildings from obscurity. The vaults of Lincoln. The opposite was the "classic" solution which embodied a short-lived moment of equilibrium. The nave of Amiens where "the formal conditions imposed by the rib vault organically permeate the whole structural system..

When *Gothic Architecture* came out in 1962 it reflected German values of a period half a century earlier. It emerged into an alien world dominated by post World war II optimistic archaeological positivism coming principally from France. Represented by Jean Bony, Sumner McKnight Crosby and Robert Branner (Columbia) who commented that Frankl's book should have carried the date "1920" rather than 1962. Easy to ridicule it as quaint, outdated, impersonal, abstract and excessively "spiritual."

Concepts like "diagonality" (*Gestalt* theory) are too abstract and too universal. The "texture" of Gothic comes from Anglo-Norman linear organization of the unvaulted elevation as much as it comes from rib-vault. No treatment of the role of the patron, economic infrastructure, secular architecture/ The idea of "Romanesque man" and "Gothic man" produces impossible generalizations. The image of a spoked wheel as a model for cultural history is too simplistic.

- Caen, Saint-Etienne, choir c.1200
(the linear network of Anglo-Norman
architecture)

J. Bony, *French Gothic Architecture of the 12th and 13th Centuries*, U Cal., 1983.

"modernist" (read W. Sauerländer, *Mod Gothic*). Bony had studied in the 1920s with Henri Focillon at the Sorbonne.

Focillon had attempted to find the organizing framework for stylistic change in what he called a "Life of Forms." Provides an example of the search for system behind Gothic form. and a search for orderly patterns.

The layering of Bony's work. *French Gothic Architecture* was written over at least two decades from the 1960s to the 1980s. It grew out of the Mathews Lectures delivered by B. in 1961. It reflects the problems of representing the complexity of "Gothic" in the classroom--Bony was

a) a most successful teacher, and

b) a master of the rhetoric of *ekphrasis*.

Particularly brilliant in the use of figures of speech (similes).

Of Saint-Martin des Champs he says, "It is as if the choir was bursting open in the middle under the pressure of the expanding space of the building." The radiating chapels of Chartres open from the ambulatory "as though the interior space, in an effort to expand ever outward, had managed to break through the restraining cage of buttresses at three points."

What was new about Bony was that he emphasized not only the formal elements of Gothic (pointed arches; rib vaults insistence on height etc) but also "brightness' and "spaciousness"--horizontal as well as vertical. The discovery of such spaciousness in the churches of the Loire valley like Fontgombaut.

But his representation does lead us to think in terms of the "spread" of the pointed arch and the rib vault (Bony p. 14-15). The principal problem with Bony--determinism. We describe the end product (Soissons Cathedral) and then we track the path of development that led there.

In the latest layer of the book he attempted to counter his own determinism, "This book has been written in the conviction that the true significance of Gothic architecture can be captured only if one does not lose sight of the unexpectedness of the course of history. The art we call Gothic was the assertion of a spirit of modernity which went on renewing itself for centuries, almost ceaselessly; and what matters is to perceive again the vitality of that movement and the accidental quality of its development...

The driving force of human inventiveness being critical dissatisfaction with the immediate past, each generation of Gothic builders in turn had to reassess its aims, each time redefining Gothic in its own terms and often changing dramatically the direction of the movement. There was a time when Gothic was viewed as a predetermined development....guided by inner necessity" (p. 1).

Then Bony goes ahead and does just that. The limitations of our powers of representation (verbal; graphic) make it impossible to live up to Bony's recommendation that "The past must be relived as what it was when it was happening: as a sequence of distinct and unforeseeable presents."

It is hard to escape from Bony's framework of representation that goes from "Romanesque antecedents" to the vital milieu of the Ile-de-France and contiguous areas. Saint-Etienne of Beauvais. Morienvall, Airanes, Saint Denis. Excellent chapter on "Gothic spaciousness"--leads to experiments at Fontgombault and Saint-Martin des Champs.

Bony's "accidental theory" Gothic developed on account of the tension between two conflicting systems. The attempt to place massive masonry vaults of the kind developed in Normandy and England on top of skinny structures (thin walls; slender supports) characteristic of the area around Paris.

- Paris, Montmartre, Saint-Pierre, second part of the 12th century
(thin-wall system)

Bony's concept of the dominance of France 1130-1270--because it allows us to describe the Gothic style as a neat development of form and structure into which an enormous number of buildings can be slotted. Avoids messiness.

Does it result only from the limitations inherent in our means of representation?

No.

II The "Post Modern turn"

comes with W. Sauerländer's review, "Mod Gothic," 1984. S. accused Bony of dealing with Gothic as "art for art's sake" at a time when such an approach is "regarded as not only dead but even as morally and socially reprehensible." The word "modern" or "modernist" is applied to Bony as a kind of rebuke. Bony's thought and his passion for the "avant-garde" associated with a century of French architectural rationalism starting with Viollet-le-Duc. Bony scolded for dealing exclusively with the architectural frame and ignoring liturgical furniture (choir screens) and the "decorative" details.

Much of the work of the last twenty years has been driven by

"The need to transform the Gothic church from a static embodiment of an unchanging transcendent vision into the product of unstable, frequently conflicting social, artistic and functional forces."

Diether Kimpel, *Die gotische Architektur in Frankreich 1130-1270*, 1985 admits a spectrum of variables--from the production of structural components to patronage and the political implications of style.

Trends in the study of Gothic architecture in
the past two decades

- Revivalism Krautheimer "The Iconography of Architecture" W. Clark at Saint-Denis (*ArtisticIntegration*)
- Function (liturgy and devotion) Craig Wright's work on Notre-Dame of Paris
- Symbolism, G. Bandmann, *Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning*
- Architecture and language (Crossley)
- Varieties of urban context. (Mussat)

- Expansion beyond France (Bruzelius and Trachtenburg on Italy, Crossley on Poland, Stalley on Ireland)
- Extension of our concern beyond the *litterati*. Wolfgang Kemp, *The Narratives of Gothic Stained Glass*.
- Monastic life--Peter Fergusson, *Architecture of Solitude* 1984 and his new book on Reivaulx; Bonde and Maines on Saint-Jean des Vignes at Soissons

- The cognitive mnemonic aspects of Gothic, Mary Carruthers, *Book of Memory* and *Craft of Thought*. François Bucher on "Micro-architecture." Relate this to the work on plans done by Murray, Davis and Neagley

- Recognition of the illusionism of Gothic,
G. Binding, *High Gothic Architecture*
- The continuing role of the monograph and
the measuring stick
- The application of the digital media.
Cathedrals are interactive.
- Conclusion--let's disregard the border
police.