

The Cathedral of Soissons

Amiens, Rouen, Riems, Bourges, Chartres... the celebrated colossi of Gothic ecclesiastical architecture in France, those peaks rising from the northern plains of France that pilgrims and casual explorers from the world over come to gaze at in reverential awe. There they stand straining their necks, overwhelmed by the superhuman scale of the medieval structures, the sheer space-invested harmony of the architectural arrangements, the virtuoso performances of light and colour on stone and wood, the huge blocks of nothingness trapped in immense vaults magically distilled into spiritual meaning, into the deeper otherness that human beings seek as a foil to the constantly debilitating effects of an always overbearing reality.

But there are other cathedrals whose names are not to the fore, a kind of B-list who cluster around the legendary icons, but never, despite their own unique wonders and treasures, seem to join that list of famous names. There are reasons for this, since a number of them find themselves in towns of little interest to the traveller, provincial places which have not geared themselves to tourism or visitors en masse. With their trickle of the curious and the determined these somehow secondary cathedrals can be especially rewarding, for one can have the place almost entirely to oneself, especially on a weekday in winter when you may find yourself alone but for a reservedly watchful priest or official. Of course the learned and the scholar who seek out the lesser known sites, and the completist who must see everything, will know these cathedrals well and they are of course the subject of many studies and investigations by notables down the years. This is a process which constantly refines itself, an endless paring down of the subject to reveal the shining tool the scholar is satisfied with, which he prepares to lay in the ground wrapped in the cloth of his name, until it is snatched from its premature preservation to be vigorously reshaped by a later enthusiast. But for those of us who are not concerned with academia and rafts of details, but who wish to undergo an aesthetic experience

which moves us and makes us realise again with an unforeseen refreshing youthfulness what life can so suddenly offer when habitually things seem so predictable and moribund, then to enter one of these lesser trumpeted cathedrals without expectation, is a privilege to be savoured for a lifetime. That was my sentiment when I happened upon the cathedral of Soissons set like a rare stone in the amber and gold brocade of Picardy's arable plains.

Soissons forms one of three points in a triangle of cathedrals, its sisters being Noyon roughly to the North and Laon to the East, a convenient planting that lures the traveller into thinking he can visit them all one after another, perhaps in a day. On the map this looks a perfectly reasonable proposition, but in practice you quickly realise rich experience would be traded for mere completion, the slow savouring of atmosphere poisoned by hastiness and an ill-starred looking ahead to other potential feasts, without digesting the present delicacy. To reach the inner layers of experience in a cathedral one must resist the cursory inspection of the nave's perpendicular excess, the magnetic pull of the walk down the aisle and around the ambulatory chapels, unconsciously drawn to inscribe one's own body around the perimeters of the edifice, as if by doing so it had all been taken in, retained. No, one must stifle that over-eagerness to satisfy the camera lens, resist a scattering of rapid glances across the arches and vaults, resist gulping it down all at once and pushing on, bloated with undigested visual food. It is important to wait on entering a cathedral like Soissons, to assess the interior with all one's senses and permit each of them to sully forth independently and rhythmically so as not to upset the fragile melody of atmosphere which is still playing there and wishes to transmit itself to the right sensibility.

The approach to Soissons is disappointing and hardly fills one with anticipation. I advanced on the town from the west, coming from Senlis and Villers Cotterets. A laborious web of modern roundabouts seems like a fiendish plot to keep you from reaching the town centre. Craving a sight of the cathedral to give one some confidence of actually reaching it, your eyes seize on an imposing structure standing on a rise a little above the town, two colossal pinnacled towers looming over the mundane suburbs, like elaborate projectiles stark against the soft lines of the melancholic

grain silos and vats of the nearby cement works. At last the cathedral! But no, for as one draws nearer, it becomes clear these are once mighty ruined towers with beneath them nothing more than the crumbling outlines of a cloister and a rough lawn exhibiting a scattering of fallen masonry. The giant circular hole of the skeletal rose window filled only with sky leaves a strangely cold feeling there on the windy ridge and crows seem aware of this, as, tugged by the wind, they lift and lower onto the ledges and crevices of the stoical dejected façade. There, a few die-hard saints and a cruelly weathered virgin somehow remain against the odds, stood helplessly on their pediments and in niches waiting for the final chapter of their vanishing, the last passengers on this slowly wrecked vessel staring out questioningly into the gaseous murk hanging over the town.

Up close the supreme desolation of this ruin stencilled against the sky is entirely at odds with the redoubtable almost alluring impression it exudes from a distance. Romantic potential turns slowly for the onlooker to despondency and a resigned retreat through the litter of others earlier expectations. The traveller has been deceived and must look elsewhere for the cathedral. Entering Soissons proper it is immediately clear that the location of the cathedral is not impressive, not in the manner of Chartres of course, but even Amiens or Rouen seem majestically sited and regally dominant in comparison. Here in Soissons, the cathedral seems left behind, a hindrance to modernity, hidden between streets as if forgotten, a folly amidst the dull material concerns of the surrounding modern town. Given its tremendous size, this statement might seem odd, but there it squats in the centre of the town, its great bulk like an invalided vessel permanently in dry dock, or a stricken animal around which the determined insect life of the populace continues. But on approach there is no clear sign of the entrance or the main portal and one is obliged to walk around the dark hulk waiting for the front to show itself with all the evident splendour and drama that customarily awaits. But here only a narrow unremarkable side road leads unconvincingly to a nondescript parking area beside the symmetry of the three porches. Before this once imposing entrance, lies a modest functional grey bricked space, lacking trees, benches or any real civic pride, nothing to delay people here, to celebrate the building close to

them. In order to take a wider image of the façade, I found myself backing into a builders yard and almost tripped over a bag of cement. The difference with Noyon, for example, with its impressive crescent of old merchant houses or Laon, dramatically positioned atop its fortress hill is striking. No, here at Soissons the cathedral seems to have lost the confidence of its immediate streets, who seem to shy away from it, as if preoccupied or even ashamed of the behemoth looming over them. The modern town seems to begrudge this edifice at its heart and the din of life on the main thoroughfares has issued a declaration of illegitimate supremacy over that vast empty turbine hall of the spirit anchored there in its midst.

If there is nothing to signal one has arrived at a great cathedral in terms of its situation, then there is even less so in terms of its appearance from the outside, which is decidedly underwhelming. The cathedral seems to be gesturing that it is worn out. One tower is missing, suggesting an animal whose ear has been torn off in a fight. Having suffered a rain of shrapnel and bullets in two world wars last century this is hardly surprising. The whole exterior is pockmarked and gouged by bombardment and the cathedral was, at least on the surface, rendered a cripple, a monumental invalid. It recalls the cathedral and cloth hall in Ypres, Flanders, and as there, in Soissons an ingenious rebuilding programme ensured the cathedral was reconstructed almost to its original state. But this reconstruction could not hide the scars of conflict and yet because of its war-ravaged fate, and despite its moribund appearance Soissons exudes a certain character and contrary perhaps to first impressions, feels more and more like a living and evolving edifice not a mausoleum. Its walls, roof architecture and titanic pillars have a unified voice, which when sanctified by the light cast from the clerestory windows makes its interior impossible to forget. But I was still outside the cathedral when I first witnessed this extraordinary light. For some reason on this particular weekday morning when visitors were so few, they had decided to suddenly open all the main doors. This is rare in my experience. Usually visitors must make do with the side door, but here the main doors were flung wide and therefore still out on the 'square' some fifty metres away, I was granted the most moving sight, as the impossibly glowing and radiant interior appeared darkly

framed by the outer casing of the building. This was like looking through a window into a lit house, at night in winter, where everything beyond the framed image remained dark, cold and indifferent. The eyes were drawn irresistibly through that aperture to the hearth-like warmth and what beckoned beyond. The contrast with the onerous dishevelled exterior, the dented armour and this fountain of light and vitality gushing forth was profound, almost supernatural. To see the inside of a Gothic cathedral or abbey but to still be on the outside is an unforgettable thing. The sheer power over the medieval populace as they approached the entrance in this manner must have been overwhelming. There could be no doubt then of the power and authority which awaited their necessary fidelity. What made this spectacle all the more moving was that I appeared to be the only person present, apart from whoever had mysteriously opened the doors.

I had read that Soisson's trump card in the Gothic cathedral pack was that it mirrored the harmony of the early and late Gothic periods found at Chartres, but on a much smaller scale, making it a more intimate cathedral to experience. On entering this seemed not to be untrue. The first feeling from a novice such as myself was of a perfect harmony of scale, light and material substance. All the contrasts of stone, light and colour felt ideally balanced, as if choreographed, a palpable sense of architectural fulfilment existed, in contrast say to the unsettling feeling engendered by the vertiginous arches of Beauvais. In the upper spaces, the light pouring in from the clerestory windows seemed to ferment in the vault and around the massive pillars, (some still bearing their shrapnel wounds) cloaking the lower spaces in an irresistibly warm gold that seemed somehow to nourish the filigree of stone jointing, the ribs and arcades, enabling the whole to reassert itself over and over again, to refill its self endlessly, so the effect on the viewer was to hold them spellbound at each new glance and from every angle simultaneously. The atmosphere was further heightened by the sense of being alone, though not in any sense isolated, no quite the opposite, the sense that I was a crucial contributor to this overall ambience by my presence. The relatively narrow nave encouraged the impression of height, but a height always in harmony with the other dimensions, so that each perfectly judged the other's individual commitment to the whole. This was

a conversation which when overheard one instinctively wanted to join.

But this structural harmony of nave and choir is only surpassed by the exquisite south transept, which is rightly vaunted as one of the cathedral's principal treasures. On a day of sun, this sanctuary which dates from the twelfth century must rate as one of the most moving and enchanting theatres of light on stone in existence. With a half moon of successive arched galleries stacked one atop another and graceful pillars in rows leading the pilgrim through to a honeycomb of chapels, with bays and triforiums held together by slender columns, and not forgetting the beautiful foliage carved string course, all flows upwards in eloquently diminishing dimensions towards the vault. To sit awhile enclosed by this ancient honeyed stone with the light dappling the medieval stalls and stone slabs is that rare experience of hearing the mysterious interweaving in the notes of related nuances. To remain in this extravagantly spiritual yet modest space one feels suddenly protected, perhaps simply by beauty itself and the loyal honour guard of older deep-rooted truths and although this may be a deception, it feels right that the deception in this place is so persuasive. Following the south transept the ambulatory has a hard act to follow and in some ways can only be an afterword to what has gone before, a gentle knowing hand to lift you down from the lofty heights of light and arch, from the dizzying walkways of inward travelling energy. There is a calmness in walking here with each new side chapel looming with its own distinctive brand of accoutrements and religious trinkets, paintings and goblets, tapestries or a dust-caked sarcophagus of a saint whose once splendid shroud has long since been ground to a fine grey powder by time.

Exiting the cathedral into the mean-spirited square, I looked back automatically to check if what I had just experienced was not a hallucination and with more intensity did I note the curious imbalance of the surroundings. However, perhaps inadvertently these dull provincial streets have insulated this landscape of enchantment and art awaiting the explorer, once those daunting crimson doors are breached or flung wide. Yes this immovable bulk which the town is forced to circumvent, this stubborn bulwark against which the slow wrecking ball of civic development harmlessly

glances, will remain, cannot be removed and is resolutely tied to us. So when we enter that space it is not to enter a former world preserved and to gaze at it as detached visitors, to pick over history, or to sate an idle curiosity, but rather to marvel at that overarching will to exist for perpetuity concealed within the human workmanship, artistic vision, and the wilfully collaborating natural elements which have visibly assembled themselves into the most harmonious entente. Whether eight hundred years ago or now on an easily spent winter's day in February 2016, that mysterious alchemy practiced in the understated architectural miracle of Soissons cathedral reasserts itself as a process rightfully beyond the bounds of the human imagination, beyond any epoch, in defiance of linear time itself.