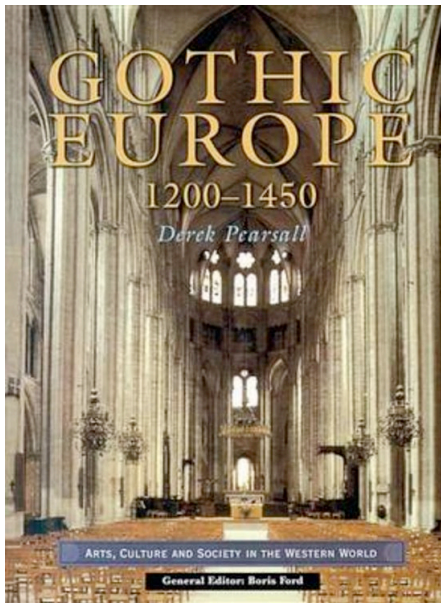


THE *GOTHIC* AS A PERIOD STYLE

Abbot Suger, from *Three Treatises on St-Denis* (c. 1140-44):

[To look upon the walls is to behold] a multifarious wealth of precious gems, hyacinths, rubies, sapphires, emeralds and topazes; [it is to be transported to] some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven (*Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, section 17-1a, "Abbot Suger and the Rebuilding of Saint-Denis").



Derek Pearsall, *Gothic Europe* (Longman, 2001), pp. 197-93:

Gothic is an equilibrium of contrary stresses, a moment of rest at the intersection of restlessly competing forms. This is the aesthetic impression it conveys, in architecture, sculpture, painting and literature. In a great Gothic cathedral, it seems hardly possible that this vast space has been humanly engineered; soaring arches and piers are visibly at the limit of their constraining power; collapse is imminent. There is what [John] Ruskin calls, in 'The Nature of Gothic', an 'energy of fixedness', 'an elastic tension, and communication of force from part to part'. In a large multiple-storeyed stained-glass window, or a complex *Beatus* page, there is such a reaching for

pictorially communicated meaning that the different elements seem to be barely able to be contained within the overall design. In the interlaced or polyphonic narrative of a high Arthurian romance, reading is like walking a high-wire or taking part in a trapeze act: everything is always just out of reach, not quite holding together, in imminent danger of falling apart into meaninglessness but never falling. When one or other element in the choreography of forms seeks dominance, the balance of forces - which is always potentially a stressful and restless condition, and not at all necessarily a harmony - shifts and fragments, or assumes a new configuration.

'Equilibrium of contrary stresses' is also a way of talking about the blending in the Gothic of the spiritual and the human. If one were to talk about Romanesque art, with its aggressively unearthly, rigidly dehumanised, syntactically repetitive forms, as the spiritualisation of the spiritual, it would make the way clear to talk of Gothic as the spiritualisation of the human... A version of this form of Gothic would be the humanisation of the spiritual, whether in the robust plasticity of Giotto's holy figures or in the emotional figuring of the person of Christ or the tender emotions of the Virgin in Gothic devotional painting. Always, though, there is some agitation, some release, at the heart of the Gothic, in the contrary pull of the human and the divine. When that tension is released, when the human becomes capable of being represented as the human unmediated by the experience of the divine, or when the divine soars off into the transhuman, Gothic loses whatever it has of an essential nature.