

A Collision of Gargoyles

S.D. Chrostowska¹

COLLISION

I don't believe that my peasant will do any harm, for example, to the Lautrec that you have, and I dare even believe that the Lautrec will, by simultaneous contrast, become even more distinguished, and mine will gain from the strange juxtaposition, because the sunlit and burnt, weather-beaten quality of the strong sun and strong air will show up more clearly beside the face powder and stylish outfit.

✧ V. van Gogh²

The grotesque figural gargoyle, a peculiarity of Gothic architecture, admits of several overlapping lines of explanation.³ One takes it to be primarily the elaboration of an architectural necessity — the rainspout — thus a genre of applied art. Another sees it as a three-dimensional apotropaic image, designed to ward off evil. Still another focuses on its edifying symbolism, its capacity for theological work in the profane realm, appealing outside of the church to the vulgar taste and superstitions of the illiterate public in their own, residually pagan visual language. A fourth interpretation — the gargoyle as spiritual distraction — is the fruit of medieval controversy, wherein the clerical criticism of “excessive” monastic art provoked a defence of it. To its detractors, such production, which went beyond gargoyles, was unjustifiable, wasteful, and shameful, a kind of folly that, while it could be aesthetically pleasing and fascinating, was inappropriate for the *ecclesia* and unacceptable for the cloister, an encroachment upon the religious aesthetics of moderation called for by reformist monasticism.⁴ To its traditionalist defenders, however, immoderate ecclesiastical art was not only harmless but glorified and rendered service to God, strengthening devotion.⁵

To these four theories one could add a fifth, archi-aesthetic one: flagrant imaginative *play*, which the Church somehow tolerated. As Huizinga reminds us:

[W]hen we contemplate certain examples from the teeming treasury of plastic form, we find it hard indeed to suppress the idea of a play of fancy, the playful creativity of mind or hand. The . . . magical mazes of ornamental motifs, the caricature-like distortions of human and animal forms — all these are bound to suggest play as the growing-point of art. But they should do no more than suggest it.⁶

Bataille's extension of Huizinga offers another way of explaining art through play: the transgressive spiritual desire of play is behind all artistic “excess” and the dimension of the sacred. Gadamer, meanwhile, sides with Schiller (and, to that extent, against Huizinga): the presence of play in artistic practice takes us beyond intention-, medium-, or convention-based aesthetic models.⁷ In its generality, however, the art-as-play thesis fails to elucidate the special case before us.

Exterior, beside, and above angels in tabernacles and massive saint-framed portals through which the incoming faithful must pass as if to undergo purification, the gargoyles hold sway, protruding from parapets and corners, referring with ludic candor and chimerical ingenuity to the world of the vulgar, the low-brow, and the ordinary, where

disparate things commingle as they please. Gargoyles may be grotesque, but we must not forget that, far from antithetical or accidental to Gothic architecture (as reaction, parody, provocation, perversion, or aberration), they are its integral element. Neither a standalone, autonomous motif, on the one hand, nor a mere effect or symptom of their situation, on the other, they exist in an aesthetic (not to mention functional) relationship with the design of the structure to whose façade they adhere, out of which they seem to grow and past which they seem to reach. It seems obvious that to make sense of these — these warts on a grand corpus, excrescences on a carcass of stone — we need to look beyond the grotesque. Cathedrals do not become “grotesque bodies” as a result of this association, but neither can we treat them as mere supports, extraneous to the gargoyles’ meaning and effect. The reverse also applies: the gargoyle is not rendered holy by its attachment, nor can we discount the creature as a mere appendage to the cathedral; its anti-erosive function of channeling rainwater clear of the masonry walls has little or nothing to do with its artistic values or *Kunstwollen* (artistic will). We should remember that not all carved grotesques featured on church buildings had this function even as they might otherwise appear indistinguishable in size, shape, or expression from gargoyles.⁸ Thus, while occasioning the gargoyle as architectural element, functionality contributes hardly, if at all, to aesthetics or to the just-noted contrast; it underpins these facets without determining them.

We are, in fact, confronted here with two (rival? complementary?) aesthetics. The first, “God is light,” is the aesthetic of the inner sanctum, the illumination of soaring, vaulted vertical space through colored glass, with painting and sculpture subordinated to reflective-spiritual uplift. The second aesthetic is of course the *grotesque*, confined largely to exteriors — the outer walls of the cathedral, the cloister of the monastery. The most striking shapes owe much to unstylized figurative naturalism and expressive realism. It would, however, be wrong to assume that gargoyles — in themselves, individually, or relationally, in combination with the rest — fall neatly into this grotesque *disorder*, whether *noble* or *ignoble*, *terrible* (fearful) or *sportive* (ludicrous), to invoke Ruskin’s evaluative typology.⁹ They do not. An answer to the gargoyle question is then to be found neither in the one nor in the other aesthetic creed but in bringing them together — in what I will term an *aesthetics of contrast*. Rather than the mixture or interpenetration of the high and the low that moves us from laughter to tears and back again (on the model of tragicomedy as in the grotesque-theory of Olga Freidenberg); rather than the reversal or collapse of the morally-coded high into the low, making fear “droll and monstrous” (as in Bakhtin’s better-known version which cut high seriousness down to size, on the model of that “other face” of the church, the carnival), the Gothic aesthetics of contrast pairs the grotesque with a contrasting stylistic register, the two being made to coexist in visible proximity and mutual irreducibility.¹⁰ More obviously contrived contrasts of this sort are often associated with the Baroque: the elevated beside the degraded, the refined with the primitive, the cultivated next to the wild, smooth nearly touching coarse ...

The aesthetic of contrast is indeed most potent in clear-cut contrastive pairings, framing, or spatially isolating each aspect to bring out its distinctiveness. In the case of Gothic cathedrals, it is enabled by a simple structural dichotomy (inside/outside), with

symbolic value as an interface between the *sacrum* and the *profanum*, spirit and matter/body. It is likewise facilitated by formal separations of “high” and “low” executed on the façade. (Here, too, demarcations and contrasts abound: the saints are arranged in sculptural groups around portals and do not keep grotesque company. The two “realms” are still kept apart.)

Given these boundaries, achieved also through spatial distance and demarcations, we cannot speak of the interpenetration or dialectical reconciliation, any more than the cancellation, of the two aesthetic orders.

One might object that — grotesque impressions on casual passersby aside — the experience of the interior primes the soul emerging from it to embrace the gargoyle, and from there the deformed, the sick, and the insane. Or else one might counter that the canvas is sacred but the paints profane; that while profane or pagan imagery lifted from bestiaries appears only, as it were, on the reverse, un-primed side, it competes there for space with sacred iconography and outperforms it in ingenuity, participating with the outside world in an overall subversion and profanation. This would be strictly untrue; monstrous, irreverent, and vulgar details did appear inside the church, if rarely conspicuously or profusely. The sanctum allowed the “touch of evil.” The chisel, “let loose” within, could be quite versatile.¹¹


One might also recall the onomatopoeic derivation of *gargoyle* from throat, the passage of water, which later links it to *gargling* and *gurgling* — physiological sounds that, save for their guttural location, have little audibly in common with plainchant, the heavenward sounds of the immaterial. Etymology thus leads us back to the *comœdia corporis*, with its embarrassing noises and physiological reactions.¹² Have we here parody so lofty that it no longer lightens the atmosphere — even quite the contrary? The lightness is to be found where gravity is less palpable, *inside* — as is the sensuousness: embarrassment of riches, dazzling spectacle of divine presence, awe-inspired spiritual ascent, desire for the Great Architect ... The sublimation of ugliness and sublimization of beauty? One thing is certain: this is no simple hierarchic reversal.

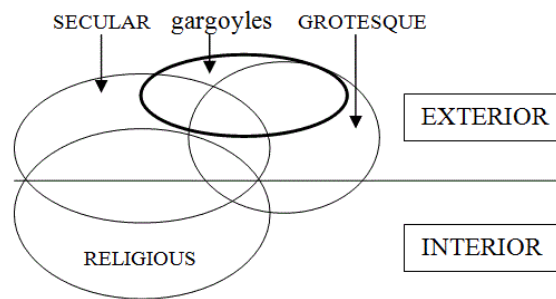
The aesthetics of contrast does not rely on comparison; it does not arise from noting and examining both similarities and differences between two sides of one object or between two objects against a common ground. The effect is more immediate. It rests on asymmetrical juxtaposition with each term of the contrast appearing for that more resolved, vibrant, vivid, more unlike the other as we are used to recognizing in post-impressionist painting. It thrives wherever a mutual heightening of intensity, a deepening of effect on either side of the disjunction takes precedence over blending for the sake of chromatic statements or gradations (as in impressionism).

The Medieval aesthetics of contrast, while not totally un-theorized, remains under- and mis-theorized. Three approaches are representative. The most important is Victor Hugo’s consideration of the aesthetic-contrastive value of the grotesque. The sublime (“high”) and the grotesque (“low”) do not dissolve into each other, do not exist in as stable synthesis, but co-exist in close proximity and dramatic harmony.¹³ Next comes Bakhtin’s recognition of the contiguity, in the consciousness of medieval man, of “two lives” reflecting the “two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing,” the pious and

the grotesque, when speaking of visual sculptural representation that manages to hold them together without fusing them.¹⁴ Lastly, we have Yuri Lotman’s distinction between the *aesthetics of identity* and the *aesthetics of contrast*, except that for Lotman, guided perhaps by the unifying ideology of Christendom, medieval art belonged in the first of these categories.¹⁵ Yet, as I have struggled to show, Gothic cathedral art appears, upon reflection, to be a modality of cultural duality, without which we could not grasp the medieval picture or even the part that gargoyles and suchlike played in it.

Why, then, an aesthetic of *contrast*, rather than something more positive, like *correlation, correspondence, balance, contradiction, or complementarity*? While all suppose a relation, only *contrast* does not require aesthetic *oppositions* while at the same time preserving aesthetic *distinctness*— for instance the distinctness between grotesque art and art in service of theology. The original, forgotten meaning of *contrast* is *to withstand*— here, to withstand any totalizing, theological unity and harmony-based aesthetics, that timeless free play of the faculties laying the artwork like an egg. Rather than harmonizing competing aesthetics, the aesthetic of contrast names their tension.

This, finally, gives rise to at least three broader issues. First: Should we apply Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetic standards to pre-Kantian art practices? (N.B. the problem of attributing a conscious *aesthetic* to medieval artisanship and the attendant danger of historicism.)¹⁶ Second: Are we not similarly in danger of anachronism by imposing a different and, in some sense, more totalizing aesthetic standard on Gothic ecclesiastical architecture’s disaggregated parts, variegated aspects of a culture we cannot re-enter by entering its extant edifices? Third: To save these buildings and “image-complexes” from anachronistic aestheticization, are they not better regarded as proto-galleries, art institutions *avant la lettre*, displaying contemporary as well as older cultural symbols? But are we not then modernizing the cathedral in another way? And would avoiding this not put us right back where we started? 



Thematic Overlap in Gothic Monumental Sculpture

Notes

1 The inauguration of a scholarly form which the Editors name “collision” offers one of very few opportunities to throw together — as like with like — a new genre, a rule-bound practice that, far from established, is yet hardly more than a theoretical project, with an old genre that still may strike us as modern because of its fundamental ambiguity, its un-whole incorporation into a weighty artistic tradition. As one tries to establish the new genre with one’s practice — out of belief in the proliferation of forms as valuable in itself—one will try to renew the old one by theoretical means, believing that certain historical genres need to be disturbed from theoretical slumber.

I wish to thank Brian Stock for reading this piece with appropriate seriousness.

2 Van Gogh likened this portrait to the *Potato Eaters* (Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Saturday, 18 August 1888, Br. 1990: 663/CL: 520, accessed May 19, 2013, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let663/letter.html>).

3 The elaborate stone gargoyle is indissociable from Gothic architecture, where its design is conventionally dated back to c. 1220 (reconstruction of the Laon Cathedral), peaking between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (Jean-Marie Guilloët, “Gargouille,” in *Dictionnaire d’histoire de l’art du Moyen Âge occidental*, ed. Pascale Charron and Jean-Marie Guilloët [Paris: Robert-Laffont, 2009]). Grotesque gargoyles can also be found in French Romanesque architecture of the thirteenth century.

4 St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem* (1124–1125), central to this controversy and widely considered an important source for understanding medieval art, opens the topic using a set of rhetorical questions, suggesting genuine confusion about this kind of ornamentation, and concludes with condemnation: “But apart from this, in the cloisters, before the eyes of brothers while they read — what is that ridiculous monstrosity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity [*deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas*]? What are the filthy apes doing there? The fierce lions? The monstrous centaurs? . . . [E]verywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than [meditate on the law of God — S.C.] in books . . . If one is not ashamed of the absurdity, why is one not at least troubled by the expense?” (“Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem,” trans. Conrad Rudolph, in C. Rudolph, *The “things of greater importance”: Bernard of Clairvaux’s Apologia and the Medieval Attitude toward Art* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990], 282 [106]; mod. trans.). Though in recognizing the simultaneous ugliness and beauty of the hybrid figures Bernard is clearly referring to the seamless mingling and mixing of disparate elements that do not belong together in nature, he dwells less on the effects we credit the grotesque with eliciting (laughter, fear, revulsion) and more on the curiosity and distraction caused by such unnatural, fanciful inventions, not all of them individually grotesque (take the simian motifs or the worldly pursuits of men, for example). Rather than giving the sense of an outrageous hodgepodge, his analytical remarks underscore the contrastive relationship of elements within or between these figures. It should be noted that Bernard does not denounce all church art but only its excesses, in particular the embellishment of claustral buildings which, once seen with a sober eye to one’s spiritual duties, does not aid instruction or devotion but violates it (Bernard of Clairvaux, *Treatises I*, ed. M. Basil Pennington [Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1970], 66, translator’s note 169; this is also Conrad’s view, 124 et passim). Taking a skeptical view on the didactic purpose of such unruly art, we may wonder how much of it was due to license or anarchy of the creative imagination and how much to moralizing intent on the part of the sculptor or the patron. Did the distress, hypertrophies, or zoomorphism affecting such grotesque figures invariably signify degradation? Were their various forms of sinful behaviour punished, in laymen’s eyes, by being cast outside the holy sphere or by their obscure or peripheral placement in the church (which may have “saved” them from control by ill-disposed authorities)? In light of the collective and popular nature of cathedral construction we

cannot, moreover, assume a monolithic unity of vision for all the parts, some of them created off site, others decades or even centuries earlier.

- 5 The figure most associated with this opposing policy was the Abbot Suger. In *De Administratione* (1144–1147), he justifies the use of costly material and craftsmanship in liturgical art as spiritual aids (see discussion in Rudolph, 30–35, 59–63, 108–111). But he should not be grouped with defenders of ornate extremity. The scarcity of grotesque or monstrous marginal imagery at Saint-Denis and the lack of reference to it in Suger’s writings should give pause. Given his patronage of complex artistic innovation, “it could be said that Suger had essentially rejected this type of imagery. Although I suspect he might personally have liked it, it was no longer intellectually/spiritually acceptable” (Rudolph, correspondence with the author, March 20, 2013). See Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change at St Denis: Abbot Suger’s Program and the Early Twelfth Century Controversy over Art* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990] and “Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window: Suger, Hugh, and a New Elite Art,” *Art Bulletin* 93 (2011): 399–422.
- 6 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 168–169. To ascribe cave paintings (or gargoyles?) wholly to a play-drive, Huizinga maintains, would be to reduce them to “mere doodling” (168); even if “culture is played from the very beginning” (46), art is more than aesthetic play, as architecture makes plain. Huizinga’s great history of late-medieval cultural forms, incidentally, passed over this flourishing of marginal sculpture.
- 7 See Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, especially “The Ontology of the Work of Art and Its Hermeneutic Significance”; Georges Bataille, *Lascaux: Or, the Birth of Art: Prehistoric Painting*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Lausanne: Skira, 1955), especially 34–36.
- 8 Similarly crouched or asquat, menacing and glaring — not to say gratuitous given their in-obvious architectural function — such prominent exterior grotesques (as, for example, the hunky punks of the Somerset towers or those on Siena’s Torre del Mangia) might be seen upon gables in high relief, extending from spires, perched upon ledges, overhanging porches, climbing walls, etc. But the architectural use, both ornamental and functional, of grotesques is much greater: they range from detail over archways and doorways, to parts of sculptural groups on scriptural, hagiographic or legendary subjects involving demons or devils, to roof bosses, head stops, and column capitals in cloisters; they lurk, hunched over, on corbels, beneath eaves and cornices, and work their way up in size to full-scale figures.
- 9 The *ignoble* grotesque stems from “delight in the contemplation of bestial vice, and the expression of low sarcasm” which, according to Ruskin, is “the most hopeless state *into which the human mind can fall*”; rather than horror, it provokes our disgust (John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 3: The Fall [London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1873], 121, 143). Keeping to Ruskin’s distinctions (and putting to one side the anachronism of applying theories of the grotesque, Renaissance or otherwise, to the Gothic), the gargoyle’s often frightful appearance would qualify it for grotesque *nobility*. Then again, its unnatural monstrousness would debase it; only by being grounded in natural phenomena could a monstrous grotesque be ennobled, actually appear terrible, and approach the sublime (169). See Mark Dorrian, “The Breath on the Mirror: Notes on Ruskin’s Theory of the Grotesque,” in *Chora Four: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, ed. Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 25–48. Ruskin’s volume on the Gothic, however, offers almost no perspective on its architectural grotesques: the medieval builder he so admires “endeavoured to make his work beautiful, but never expected it to be strange. And we incapacitate ourselves altogether from fair judgment of his intention, if we forget that, when it was built, it rose in the midst of other work fanciful and beautiful as itself; that every dwelling-house in the middle ages was rich with the same ornaments and quaint with the same grotesques which fretted the porches and animated the gargoyles of the cathedral; that what we now regard with doubt and wonder, as well as with delight, was then the natural continuation, into the principal edifice of the

city, of the style which was familiar to every eye throughout all its lanes and streets ...” (John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2: *The Sea Stories* [New York: Cosimo, 2007], 97–98). The grotesque is thus glossed over and deliberately “deferred” to volume three (the discussion of its “morbid influence” on the Renaissance), given Ruskin’s confidence that an educated reader will know of the “universal instinct of the Gothic imagination” “to delight in fantastic and ludicrous, as well as in sublime, images” (203).

- 10 Freidenberg’s and Bakhtin’s views are compared in Aron J. Guriewicz (Aaron Gurevich), “Z historii groteski: ‘góra’ i ‘dół’ w średniowiecznej literaturze łacińskiej,” Polish trans. Wiktoria Krzemień, in *Groteska*, ed. Michał Glowinski (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2003), 103–124. See also source texts: Olga Freidenberg, *Poetika syuzheta i zhanra* [Poetics of Subject and Genre] (Moskva: Labirint, 1997); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968) (the quoted phrase is from p. 91).
- 11 Indeed, until the late thirteenth century, graven grotesques appeared in mostly hidden spots inside ecclesiastical buildings; only later did they migrate outside and on to public structures like town halls, fountains (e.g., the gargoyles of Nuremberg’s *Schöner Brunnen*), or choir stalls. See Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1995), 134, and Dorothy and Henry Kraus, *The Hidden World of Misericords* (New York: Braziller, 1975).
- 12 The gush of water from gutters resembled digestive noises and, visually, the act of vomiting or evacuation, all sourced in the body (the anthropomorphic variety of gargoyle made use of orifices at either end to discharge water). The “body” of the Church was on constant guard against bodily noises and functions: “[F]or the monks . . . every belch and rumble in the stomach signalled an invasion of their bodies. Just as the mouth and other orifices, such as the eyes, had to be kept guarded against the onslaught of evil, the entrances, doorways and windows at Aulnay [a Romanesque church] are those most entrusted with the protective gaze of deformed forms” (Michael Camille, *The Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992], 75).
- 13 The high/low distinction is for Hugo not without a hitch: identifying the grotesque with the low demeans it. Here is what he has to say: “Christianity has led poetry to the truth. Like it, the modern Muse must look at things more loftily, and more broadly. She must feel that not everything in creation is ‘beautiful’ in human terms, that there is ugliness alongside beauty, deformity next door to gracefulness, grotesquerie just on the other side of sublimity, evil with goodness, darkness with light”; “Poetry must resolve to do what Nature does: to mingle (though not to confound) darkness with light, the sublime with the ridiculous — in other words, body with soul, animal with spirit, since poetry and religion always have the same point of departure. Everything hangs together”; “[B]oth as a means of contrast and as a goal alongside the sublime, I find the grotesque as rewarding as any source of artistic inspiration that Nature could possibly supply . . . The universal beauty that ancient artists solemnly spread over everything did have its monotonous side; a single tone, endlessly reiterated, can become tiring after a while. It’s hard to produce much variety when one sublimity follows another — and we do need an occasional rest from everything, even from beauty. Now, the grotesque may act as a pause, a contrast, a point of departure from which we can approach what is beautiful with fresher and keener powers of perception. A salamander can set off a water-sprite; a gnome can embellish a sylph” (Victor Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* [1827], in *The Essential Victor Hugo*, trans. and ed. E.H. and M.A. Blackmore [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 23, 24, 27).
- 14 The relevant passage is: “[W]e find on the same page strictly pious illustrations of the hagiographical text as well as free designs not connected with the story [which] represent chimeras . . . comic devils, jugglers performing acrobatic tricks, masquerade figures, and parodical scenes — that is, purely grotesque, carnivalesque themes . . . Not only miniatures but the decorations of medieval churches, as well as religious sculpture, present a similar co-existence of the pious and the

grotesque. . . . However, in medieval art a strict dividing line is drawn between the pious and the grotesque; they exist side by side but never merge” (Bakhtin, 96).

- 15 As Stephen Aylward explains, Lotman saw art as establishing similarity and difference, the former giving rise to the value-laden distinction between the aesthetics of identity (*estetika tozhdestva*), the latter to the aesthetics of opposition (*estetika protivopostavleniia*), which Aylward chose to render as “aesthetics of contrast” (*contrast* being weaker and more open than *opposition*). “[T]he aesthetics of identity describes works that tend towards either generalization or fulfilling strict genre conventions. The aesthetics of contrast applies to those works that tend towards greater complexity or defying existing genre conventions (*Lektsii 173–74*)” (Stephen Aylward, “*Poshlost’* in Nabokov’s *Dar* through the Prism of Lotman’s Literary Semiotics” [M.A. thesis, University of Waterloo, 2011], 64; his source is Iu.M. Lotman, *Lektsii po struktural’noi poetike: vvedenie, teoriia stikha* [Lessons from Structural Poetics: Introduction, Theory of Verse] [Providence: Brown University Press, 1968], 170–76). Lotman’s “aesthetics of contrast” has thus mainly to do with a diachronic relationship between rules and practices, and little to do with spatial and temporal juxtapositions in and of artworks, where, to be sure, rules are necessary to note the contrast.
- 16 The question might be sharpened if we entertain Hugo’s thought (if only to turn around and take issue with it) that it was with the decline of the “total” and “sovereign” cathedral art, with the waning of Gothic architecture, that the other arts began to emancipate themselves and acquire the grandeur needed to inspire their serious study as a *system* in which architecture would become “an art like any other,” if not lesser for the loss of its “subjects” (Hugo, “*Ceci tuera cela*,” *Notre-Dame de Paris* [1831], accessed October 19, 2012, http://www.hylandmadrid.com/libros/fr/notre_dame/23.html). That said, the Gothic cathedral “belonged to the people” and was the *jeu d’esprit* of popular artists who unabashedly, “under the pretext of service to God,” developed art “to magnificent proportions” (ibid.).

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