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Notre-Dame, Paris:
Sublimity and Aura Endangered and Engendered
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Rodin, Hugo and Abelard

[SLIDE 1]

I jumped into this topic while Notre Dame cathedral was burning. [SLIDE 1] It hit me hard. [SLIDE 2] Think: Obe Wan Kenobi on the escape in the Millenium Falcon from Tatooine when he sensed the destruction of the entire planet Alderan: "I felt a great disturbance in the Force." [SLIDE 3] My reaction, like Obe Wan's, was also in the stomach and the nerves: emotional, sentimental, personal. The trauma was both universal (planet-wide) and personal. I worked through it, gradually shook off grieving. [SLIDE 4] Especially steadying was the news that the cathedral was not destroyed. The catastrophe morphed into a provocation to critical theory or at least critical thought on a subject in which I'm deeply invested. So the question I want to ask that helped organize inner turmoil is: What is actually lost when an artwork of the immensity of Notre Dame cathedral is destroyed?

Certainly a great deal in a material sense: The roof and the spire are gone. [SLIDE 5] many old oak trees that provided the timber frame [SLIDE 6] to support the roof now lie in a chaotic pile of ashes on the floor—[SLIDE 7 and SLIDE 8]. I've seen estimates between 1300

and 5000 trees. Those trees were ancient when they were cut down eight centuries ago. They will be hard to replace. French lumber firms are offering trees. But the supply of ancient oaks in what's called "primary forests" has dwindled.

At least, the supply chain has improved from the days when Abbot Suger of St. Denis, his carpenters and foresters, rebuilding the old abbey church of St. Denis in a style which he probably invented, walked together through local forests, located trees suitable for the timbering of the roof of the abbey of St. Denis (Just north of Paris). Or the method of transport, one pretty much the privilege of France alone, known as the "cult of carts": "nobles and common folk alike would tie their arms, chests, and shoulders to the ropes [of the cart loaded with trees or stone columns] and, acting as draft animals, dragged them." (De. Cons. P. 93). This act of stepping in to replace oxen could count as a pious gesture, a form of penance. So it was in the building of Chartres cathedral a few decades later. The citizens of all classes are said to have sung hymns while straining in place of oxen at the yokes and bridles.

[SLIDE 8] I grieve for the timbers, stately ancient gentlemen burned alive. They will probably be replaced to some extent by steel and aluminum, practically speaking—though the French evidently are sentimental enough to insist on French trees.

But that's just building material, planning and engineering. It's harder to say what force it was that was diminished when Notre Dame burned. You saw those crowds of spectators shedding tears and crying out in pain when the spire collapsed. And hardly a news report failed to mention that the French regard the cathedral as a symbol of the French nation. Thankfully there was no loss of life, in contrast to the collapse of the World Trade Center, which cost the lives of nearly 3000 people. The loss of Notre Dame was different.

I want to offer some thoughts on the aesthetics of catastrophic loss. I had been thinking for some time about a final chapter of a book on the medieval Sublime. It would treat the cathedral as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk and epitome of the experience and expression of the sublime in the Middle Ages. When Notre Dame cathedral caught fire and came close to complete destruction, that chapter went to the front burner—sorry for that ill-chosen metaphor. I've put together thoughts and jottings for this chapter and I'm grateful for the opportunity to offer some of them in this forum as a commemoration of the wounded cathedral.

My comments will probably will seem like random jottings. But they reduce to a single question: what is lost beyond the material when Notre Dame cathedral is destroyed? Or, I can say now, badly damaged? The French fear the loss of a symbol of France itself; the burning building looks like a dark portent of the loss of the country itself: What does it mean for the fate of France in parlous political times? It feels like something beyond the cathedral, but comprehended by it, is destabilized. Apart from reporting on the crowds grieving during the fire; there were news stories that swept the main events in French history that took place in the cathedral; the news coverage in the US tended not to be historical or sentimental, but technical: how the fire started, the cost of reconstruction, fund-raising. Caroline Bruzelius, an art historian at Duke and expert on the construction of the cathedral, was in demand for interviews. She gave some insight into the historical meaning of the cathedral, but the reporting stressed construction (Caroline's specialty), the materials, scaffolding, measurements, stone and wood. A good article in Rolling Stone probed the history and symbolism of the cathedral, and touched on a variety of responses, turning up even some satisfaction at the destruction of a symbol of Catholic tyranny in France.

The response from medievalists seems to me muted. The Medieval Academy wrote a letter to President Macron urging patience (the promise of restoration in five years) and the use of international expertise—slightly condescending, I thought.

I hoped for more of a commemoration from the point of view of the medieval beginnings of the cathedral. And that's the impulse this talk came from.

Many thanks to the Stanford colleagues who agreed and managed to squeeze this talk into a crowded lecture calendar. And to you who put off your lunch to hear it.

A great help to me in finding and conveying the sense of what is lost in the destruction of such a work of art is a book by the sculptor Auguste Rodin on French cathedrals, written in the anxiety and passion of the war against Germany just starting in 1914 when the book appeared. It was the second war with Germany that he had to live through. Rodin wrote: "The cathedral is a synthesis of our country. The rocks, forests, gardens, northern sun, all these are condensed in this gigantic body. All of our France is in our cathedrals, just as all of Greece is summarized in the Parthenon. Alas, we are at the evening of their great day. These ancient ancestors are dying, martyred. We have no new poet to pray over our cathedrals, those dolorous virgins, all stricken, yet all still sublime… Why, when France will have gone into eclipse, her reign ended, may she not look forward to being judged by future generations according to her works and her merits. It would have been so fine to die as Greece died, to set like the sun inundating the world with light!" (14). A *cri de coeur* that at least makes palpable the way an object of art can define a person or a people: as if to say, "You want to know who I am? what my character and aspirations are or were?: here, look at this building. Its beauty, its grandeur, ambitions, its greatness of soul say everything." That's a serious message to lose.

So Rodin wrote his book in order at least to have contributed to conveying that message when it faced deletion by war and just as much by the insensitivity of contemporary life which seemed to Rodin content with the small, ordinary and mediocre. His purpose was to recall the immense energy and vitality of the cathedral: "Before I myself disappear, I who owe them so much happiness, Iwish to honor these stones, so lovingly transformed into masterpieces by humble and wise artisans; these moldings admirably modeled like the lips of a young woman; these beautiful lingering shadows where softness sleeps at the heart of power; these delicate and vigorous ribs springing up toward the vault and bending down upon the intersection of a flower; these rose windows whose magnificence was inspired by the setting sun or by the dawn. To understand these lines, tenderly modeled and caresssed, one should have the good luck of being in love. When the death agony of our cathedrals has been accomplished, our country will be transformed dishonored—at least until that far-off time when human intelligence reascends to the eternal Beatrice." (17)

Victor Hugo also had composed a paen to Notre Dame, a passage in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame, which I'll quote later. It is soaked in nostalgia and sadness at loss, at the destruction caused by revolutions, the distortion of style of ill-guided restorers, refashioning, neglect, the stupidity of burocrats. He ends it with the memorable phrase, "An ass can kick a dying lion."

I want to illuminate what is lost in the destruction of Notre Dame guided by two concepts: sublimity and aura.

Rodin used the term "sublime" repeatedly to describe the cathedral (So did Hugo and many others). I want to use it in a more technical and theoretical sense. I don't have time here to fuss much over definitions, something that has not produced consensus in the critical discussion of the Sublime from Longinus to the present. A comment of Slavoj Zizek has proven durable: the

Sublime results when "a positive, material object is elevated to the status of an impossible Thing." [1] For my own purpose in talking about the medieval sublime a variant of Zizek has served by crediting the element of transcendence, inseparable from Judeo-Christian sublime and, to my own surprise, consistent with modernist readings by Adorno and Lyotard: "the sublime is a manifestation of something undefinable, ineffable, and undiscoverable that violates the laws of nature and the limits of the human." [IDENTIFY THIS QUOTE]

For the quality and character of sublimity look to the concepts of infinity, eternity, limitlessness, height (hypsos), depth, mystery, but most of all, size: immensity. Longinus, Burke, Kant and Herder agree: the sublime is constituted first by immensity. It is the source of first reaction to the sublime: astonishment followed by fear, even terror. Kant moved the discussion of the sublime outside of art and rhetoric by locating it in nature: The ocean, Alpine mountains, and volcanoes are sublime.

But sublime is also a concept of representation and a problem of representation. In the gothic cathedral the appearance meets the reality of immensity. Sublimity as an aesthetic category forms an opposing pair with mimesis. The imagination reaching for sublime effects wants minimal admixture of the real, the mimetic. It presses on beyond the hyperreal. "Infinity and Beyond": the final section title of Kubrick's *2001 a Space Odyssey*. Beyond? Beyond infinity? Wait a minute! Infinity doesn't end. There's nothing beyond. That's impossible!

Thus do I affirm Zizek.

Immensity and beyond, not a bad formula for Gothic building. Immensity threatens to overwhelm the individual. To create sublime effects by human ingenuity requires big-scale illusion. Illusion helps expand the height even of something already amazingly high in reality. [SLIDE 9: Cologne cathedral towers] The appearance of bending backwards as the towers of

Cologne cathedral narrow at the top project what is already dizzingly high and beyond ordinary human limits to height beyond imagination. Imagine the sense of a narrowing perspective in a horizontal field viewed at unlimited distance, where the objects viewed narrow to pinpoints, then disappear at the horizon. Now imagine that same field of vision set on end, so to speak, viewed in the vertical, not the horizontal field. That is the illusion of unimaginable height cast by the towers of Cologne.

The interior of the cathedral similarly aimed at illusions leading the mind of the observer beyond the human capacity to grasp. One enters the central nave of the cathedral and is struck at once [SLIDE 10] by a whole range of effects, the height most of all. It inspired awe and terror in medieval observers. Some formulations gleaned from the four pages of De Bruyne's Studies of Medieval Aesthetic: "An immense work, of a beauty and subtlety that would be worthy of angels and the king of men"; Chartres: "of amazing size and beauty"; "of marvelous size and height"; "Pulchritudo et magnitudo" repeated; "horrenda magnitudo." The soaring stone walls of Notre Dame, rising ten-stories high, and its massive, crushingly heavy ceiling, seem incomprehensibly held in place by slim, fluty columns. Such a structure seems beyond human capacities to create. Taken in its surface appearance, one can only think and hope that the laws of gravity have been miraculously suspended to hold the immense structure in place. One experiences the illusion that laws higher than those of nature are at work. The terror comes from the fear of being overwhelmed and crushed one way or another, the sense that some miracle must be at work to permit masses of masonry to float in the air. There is also the fear that the laws of gravity might kick in again at any moment, sending tons of stones down on the worshipers. (It happened, Beauvais; Ely and Lincoln). These impressions remain even after the working of flying buttresses is explained to the beholder.

The beholder is reduced to a sense of vulnerable smallness, but also, by some psychological paradox, reduction leads to exaltation, transformation and self-transcendence. Riding on awe, the mind of the observer/worshiper is elevated to a size commensurate with the building. Coleridge gave a good expression of this strange dynamic of sublimity, first reducing, then exalting the observer: "Gothic art is sublime. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and with awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible expression left is, 'that I am nothing!'" So which is it? I am nothing? Or I am all of nature and the infinite? This dialectic of smallness and grandeur is part and parcel of a medieval aesthetic of the sublime. Richard of St. Victor says that observing and contemplating sublime things elevates the beholder (*sublevatio mentis*), renders the mind sublime. Experience sublime things and you become like them: "ad sublimia sublimior invenitur." The mind expands to the size of that sublime thing it contemplates, especially if that thing is immeasurably greater than itself. This topic is at home in medieval description of experience of the sublime. It occurs in Longinus, in St. Paul, in Augustine, in Bernard of Clairvaux. The cathedral is one of those sublime objects. Gottfried von Strassburg created a cathedral-like structure to accommodate the lovers, Tristan and Isold, in their idyllic exile in the forest. The height of the ceiling had this elevating effect on the creature below. The weak spirit, flags and flutters on the ground, but gazing at the height of the keystone, gains strength, the wings of the mind grow, and the spirit rises up to adore what Gottfried calls the crown of virtues. The experience is not exclusive to medieval observers. Its heyday was the 18th and 19th century. Coleridge grew from "nothing" to the infinite. Byron describes the effect of St. Peter's in Rome: "This outshining and oer-whelming edifice…defies at first our nature's littleness, till, growing with its growth, we thus

dilate our spirits to the size of that they contemplate." The mind "grows colossal" at the sight of that "vast and wondrous dome." [2]

An artifact gets its vitality from illusion, the illusion of life, the illusion of the weightlessness of gargantuan heapings of masonry; the illusion of walls that are both transparent and luminous. Otto von Simson saw the single aesthetic impulse from which the other architectural features of Gothic derive as the urge to replace stone walls with glass. Flying buttresses are the miracle workers that make it possible to fill large expanses with stained glass and make them speak, telling the observer intricate stories. And less observed but also an effective illusion of sublimity: the opposing surfaces which catch up the colored lights from the windows seem luminous and transparent, the effect heightened because the colored lights are in constant motion: slowly through the movement of the sun; faster through the intermission of clouds and wind.. Also, the sense that the divine is present. The church building as the center of Christian worship is the focal point this effect, the sensed presence of the supernatural, is followed by exaltation. Sublimity creates emotional symmetry with the sublime. Much of the myth-making of the cathedral turns on creating the sense of the presence of God: Domus Dei, an image of heaven etc. The mythology of the liturgy has angels preceding the procession of singing clerics and conducting the performance. Angels serve as conductors of the music. The ancient myths of singers as architects and builders was still current in the Middle Ages: the stones rose up and set themselves in place, guided by the musical proportions. The trope of Goethe: Gothic architecture is "music frozen solid."

Metaphysics, whatever it is ontologically, is one source of the sublime for the artist.

That brings us from visual to aural effects. The church also has a voice. The organ, the choir and the bells. The effect of church bells is hard to grasp in the twenty-first century. Victor

Hugo has a virtuoso description of the effect of church bells of Paris starting up at sunrise on Easter morning stretching across all of the city.[3] It's from *The Hunchback,* too long to quote, but I'm handing out a copy. It's a tour de force. Do treat yourself to a careful reading.

For Rodin the cathedral has voice in a silent but visible form: the decoration of the church was a language, inaudible but with its own grammar and syntax of curves, ogies, lacework, scrollwork, eloquent, but silent, meant to be read.

Rodin set the cathedral parallel to the Greek temple. The contrast is more striking than the parallel. The classical temple has style and aura [SLIDE 11], but not life. Its columns [SLIDE 12] are repetitious but not musical. [SLIDE13, SLIDE 14] If the classical temple has height, it is because it is built on a high place. [SLIDE 15] The cathedral's height is an inborn part of its structure. [SLIDE 16]

Another aspect is the dynamism of the cathedral. The cathedral walls with their buttresses are held in place by an agon of forces thrusting against each other. The building is in constant struggle to keep from collapsing. Force has to be exerteted on keystones [SLIDE 17] to keep the massive walls from collapsing inward; and by buttresses [SLIDE 18] to keep them from toppling outwards. The struggle of buttresses against walls is the condition of life of the cathedral. A constant force must be exerted in both directions. They strain against each other [SLIDE 19] like wrestlers grappling, but not waiting for the throw: trapped through eight centuries in the position of utmost strain. That language comes not from me but from Villard de Honnecourt, 1230. [SLIDE 20]. Unknown. Probably an architect and builder. Made a now famous and precious sketchbook. He saw Gothic form as a constant locus of contest and struggle.[4] The appearance of harmony derives from the opposition of dynamic forces; it is the result of a standstill, not of the whole organism coming to rest. Classical form is at rest; Gothic form is restlessness.

[SLIDE 21: Chartres flying buttresses] The massive buttresses of Chartres get to stand upright. These sturdy sentinels leaning their massive bodies against the nave of Chartres cathedral. They are grim soldiers [SLIDE 22]. The slender buttresses of Notre Dame's apse {SLIDE 23] are sinuous and sensuous curves, graceful as ballet dancers. [SLIDE 24]

Finally, the cathedral has soul, and speaking the language of Rodin, greatness of soul. That quality is located in its geometry. Harmony and proportion are both the spirit and the visible reality of the building's soul. (Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*). The soul of the classical temple is static. [SLIDE 25] That of the cathedral is in constant motion and change, *varietas.* [SLIDE 26]

It lives as an organism, more of a life-form than anything in your science lesson. (I'm paraphrasing Rodin now.) An organism, only not to the modern viewer: "The twentieth century is blind to its splendors, deaf to its music. It considers it a dead thing. The conditions in which people live and think now blinds and deafens us. We live in boxes tailored to our own size and think in categories likewise reduced to fit our minds. Experience the life of the cathedral, and thought and feeling expand to its size and make every circumstance of normal life confining, until we shrink back to the size we are accustomed to."

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Now to that other aspect that defines what is perishable in the cathedral. Aura. To form an idea of what aura means as a critical concept, a concept of aesthetics, imagine things, objects, events, works of art, having the capacity to receive and store the experiences to which they are witness or in which they participate. Aura is the collection of associations that accrete around objects. That collection exists only in the mind and memory of the one who perceives it. All relics are auratic, ancient or modern. St Thomas's finger is priceless and sacred because it once

was inserted in the wound in Christ's side. The t-shirt that Marlon Brando wore in "A Streetcar Named Desire" sells at auction prices far beyond its material value. The t-shirt and the disciple's finger get their aura from their nearness to culticly revered bodies. But only if the beholder has stored up the memory of the resurrected Christ appearing to the disciples, or of Stanley Kowalski. For someone who does not know their story, a torn t-shirt and an old severed finger are worthless or less.

Their aura is their power to evoke. It operates in a reciprocal relationship between the materiality of the object and the imagination and memory of the beholder. You can buy a package of soft cookies called Madeleines now in any Starbucks. They will probably not evoke and inspire anything, certainly not your youth and long novels. For you they are just baked flour and milk; for Marcel Proust they had his earlier life with many of its characters, events and emotions, baked in. Again, it's in the mind of the beholder—a madeleine is just a madeleine—but for the one who experiences the aura of a thing, as for Proust, it feels as if the object itself contains the past.

Walter Benjamin called the quality that operates in that mysterious way on the mind, "aura" or "authenticity": that is, "the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it (the auratic object) from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it." And again (the Baudelaire essay), Aura is constituted by "the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception…"[1] Sets of associations crystallized in a moment of recognition or memory, usually with intense emotion, around an object create aura.

[1] Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings Volume 4*, 337.

Aura presents itself as emotion that wants, as if by an implanted craving, translation into narrative; otherwise it is simply ripples of reminiscence that evaporate quickly. The aura of a thing enters the mind as inchoate emotion until it is narrated. It has this in common with emotions as Martha Nussbaum interprets them in her book *Upheavals of Thought.* Powerful emotion stimulated by an object, translates into narrative—in fact only exists in its full (moral) value when it becomes narrative. That is an account of the mechanism driving Proust's great novel: reconstructing the past from an overwhelming feeling generated by aura. A complex narrative history is embedded in every sensation of aura, which only makes its effect when its indwelling narrative is opened and unfolded.

Aura gathers on things and places not just individually but also collectively. Graveyards and battle fields are auratic. So is Paris. Here is how Victor Hugo describes the gathering and collecting of: "Paris is a reservoir, into which flow all the geographical, political, moral, and intellectual tributaries of the country, and all the natural inclinations of its population. They are wells of civilization, so to speak, and drains as well, where commerce, industry, intelligence, population, that is, all that consitutes the sap, the life, the soul of a nation, is incessantly collecting and filtering, drop by drop, century by century." Paul Claudel, as if sharpening the focus of Hugo's comment: "Paris is a grand street that descends to Notre-Dame." [5]

The medieval accretion on Notre-Dame surrounds it and is suffused in it. Recall Walter Benjamin: "the quintessence of all that is transmissible in the auratic object from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it." The cathedral may be a relic of sorts, more accurately and literally, a large relic shrine, but it is also a gigantic work of art, an especially attractive gathering place for impressions, available to be transformed into narrative. Its burning is a spectacular reminder of the fragility of aura. When the cathedral

threatened to go up in smoke, it threatened to take all the historical "testimony," all the sets of associations that it has gathered, with it. It threatened to disappear as a relic shrine and a catalyst of memory, sending its contents, material, psychological and spiritual, up in smoke. That crisis stoked a desire, created a craving for the narrative that it has to transmit.

My exhibit A in arguing that claim is the current best seller list in France. Number one at the moment is Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame.* What logic is at work here? The cathedral almost burns, and so French people rush to the bookstore for Hugo's novel? Clearly a "great disturbance" in the aura is threatened, and the grieving French reach for a surrogate. The fear of loss of that talismanic narrative shrine is as intense as is the fear of the loss of human life. Maybe not the same kind of intensity, but sharp and painful also.

So it may be that the best form of commemoration is story-telling. My purpose here is to add a few stories and project them onto the wounded building, to create or revive aura; call it, narrative healing.

If I had time I'd talk about the history of the schools, the settlement of the west bank by students, and the origin of the university. The mythology of the centers of learning, the culture of wandering students, their extraordinary poetry . But I don't. I'll go straight to the first and most prominent source of the fame of its schools and of Notre-Dame, the personality of Peter Abelard.

Abelard was born in 1079. In the forty some years from 1100 to his silencing at a church council in 1140 or 41 (d. 11142) he was the dominant intellectual force in Paris and, increasingly, in Europe. He won the position of *scolasticus* at the cathedral school of Notre Dame by intellectual combat. He held the position sporadically between 1108 and about 1117 or 1118. His teaching was enormously successful. We know this from his friends and students, his enemies, and from himself. He wrote in his autobiography, the *Historia calamitatum,* referring to

his teaching at Notre Dame, "The numbers in the school increased enormously as the students gathered there eager for instruction in both subjects, and the wealth and fame this brought me must be well known to you." (14, p. 23).

He made his start as a peripatetic preacher moving along various points on the Seine. He described this progress as a military campaign, aimed at taking Paris by siege. His weapons were intellect and learning. His rise to the head of Notre Dame school resulted from disputes with the former head, William of Champeaux, himself a famous and revered teacher. Abelard went straight at him, challenged him in disputation especially on the much debated question of Universals, and ultimately he forced William to revise his own teaching on the subject. That evidently spelled William's doom at Notre Dame. He lost his students and eventually retired to the outskirts of Paris, to a wretched abandoned hermitage dedicated to St. Victor, where he founded one of the most famous of the Paris schools, indeed, French, indeed European schools, the school of St. Victor.

Abelard replaced first William, then another master put in place by William, who also stepped down in favor of Abelard. So he got the job by combat. What an arrangement: if you contradict your teacher successfully, he has to step aside and you get his position. Abelard was the kind of student you hope won't turn up in your classes: arrogant, a massive ego, totally self-confident and willing to contradict, immensely learned, and, worst of all, brilliant. Prior to his victorious taking of Notre Dame, he had joined the school of another famous teacher, Anselm of Laon, to study theology. Hardly admitted to that elite school, he got bored and stopped coming to class. He wrote in the *Historia,* "Anselm could win the admiration of an audience but he was useless when put to the question. He had a remarkable command of words but their meaning was worthless and lacked reason. The fire he kindled filled his house with smoke but not with light."

Anselm's students were offended at Abelard's absence and confronted him. He doesn't mince words: Anselm says nothing but conventional drivel about the holy texts. "Can you do better?" they ask. "Almost certainly," he answers. "Name any text and I'll be glad to comment on it." They asked for a lecture on Ezekiel. It was cunning, they thought, since Ezekiel is one of the most obscure of the prophets. "Ezekiel it is," says Abelard, "I'll give my first lecture tomorrow." This takes even those gunning for him aback. "Take your time, study, prepare," they say. "It's a hard text." Abelard: "I don't teach from practice but from my own genius (*ingenium*)." Otto of Freising, a German bishop, brother of emperor Frederick Barbarossa, studied in Paris in the 20s and 30s and knew what he was talking about when he characterized Abelard: "This Peter from an early age had been devoted to literary studies and other trifles, but was so conceited and had such confidence in his own intellectual power that he would scarcely so demean himself as to descend from the heights of his own mind to listen to his teachers."

Wherever he went he drew crowds. Heloise wrote to him: "What king or philosopher could match your fame? What district, town or village did not long to see you? When you appeared in public, who did not hurry to catch a glimpse of you, or crane his neck and strain his eyes to follow your departure?"

At the height of his fame he accepted a young woman as a private student. Her uncle was a canon of Notre Dame and had sought him out and because he wanted the best teacher in Paris for his beloved niece. A remarkable ambition for a young woman, and in fact to my knowledge completely unique in this all male world of the cathedral school. Abelard moved into his quarters in the cathedral close, became her private tutor and eventually, lover. Being under the same roof, it was easy to carry on their affair in the guise of instruction. His regular teaching became a bore; he spent his genius on love poems and songs. The couple also exchanged letters fast and furious,

as both of them confirm in later writings. Interestingly a set of 113 love letters written probably in the early twelfth century, entitled "Epistolae duorum amantium," in the fifteenth century manuscript that transmits them, was published in 1977. These letters bear strongly the stamp of Abelard and Heloise. They are written with emotional intensity and stylistic finesse. It was several decades after publication until they stirred up any interest, but then a controversy over their authorship burned bright until recently. The upshot: these probably, but not certainly, are the love letters of Abelard and Heloise from the period of their love affair –a sensational find. (If you're skeptical, talk to me).

Being in love and neglecting everything else under the very nose of an uncle jealously concerned for the wellbeing of his niece, leads to no good. A series of calamities followed. She got pregnant. Fulbert found out and was so outraged at the deception that he hired thugs, who broke into Abelard's room at night and castrated him. The fact that Abelard married her did not assuage him. She had the child and entered a monastery, forced, she claimed, by Abelard. He entered the religious life also, at the abbey of St. Denis. It was at that time a corrupt and undisciplined house, not yet under the distinguished and powerful Abbot Suger. Corrupt or not, the monks were eager for Abelard to teach them.

But he stirred up trouble complaining about the foul practices of the monks and the abbot, and was forced out. He had to move to a small priory in the county of Champagne. There, again, students thronged to him and he taught them. This was around 1118. In 1121 he was called before a church council and his book on the Trinity was condemned. He was forced to feed it into the fire by his own hand.

Then he lived for a while in a kind of monastic arrest, winding up, again, at St. Denis. Again he taught; again students flocked to him; again he got himself in trouble. This time

Abelard outsmarted himself with his deep learning. He effectively deconstructed the myth of the identity of St. Denis, the patron of the abbey and of France. The monks reviled him as a traitor to the monastery and to all of France trying to destroy the glory of the Areopagite.

He moved to an idyllic spot in the county of Champagne on the river Ardusonne, placed at his disposal by the count. Students gathered, and he continued to teach. He gave the settlement to Heloise when he left after a few years. She moved there with a group of nuns. By that route Abelard became the founder of a monastic order, the order of the Paraclete. Heloise was its first abbess. He had accepted the abbacy of a monastery in Brittany where the monks were barbaric and violent. When they tried to poison him, he fled. At this point the Historia calamitatum ends, probably around 1134 or 35, with Abelard in deepest despair.

In 1136 he returns to Paris and is received like a hero. He resumes his teaching at the Mont Ste. Genevieve, again with great success and to hordes of students.

A chronicler, author of popular sermons, and bishop, Jacques de Vitry, sums up his success with students in this anecdote about Abelard, early thirteenth century: Peter Abelard drew such crowds of students that the king of France forbade him to teach on French soil. So Abelard climbed into a tree and taught from there. The king then forbade him to teach in the air above France. And so he climbed into a boat on the river Seine and taught to students on the bank. Then the king gave in and allowed him to teach. That ending is more optimistic than the actual events which followed his triumphant return to the schools.

There were many teachers in Paris in Abelard's time and the following decades, but there can be no doubt that it was Abelard's magnetism that was a major factor in the growth of the city. And that means also, the creation of new and much bigger churches. Suger gives a vivid picture of intolerable crowding to justify the building of a larger basilica at St. Denis. On feast

days, he says, the church was so filled that no one could get in or out, or even move inside: : “At times you could see, a marvel to behold, that the crowded multitude offered so much resistance to those who strove to flock in to worship and kiss the holy reliccs, that no one among the countless thousands of people because of their very density, could do anything but stand like a marble statue, stay benumbed or, as a last resort, scream. The distress of the women, however, was so great and so intolerable that you could see with horror, … several of them, miserably trodden underfoot, but then lifted by the pious assistance of men above the crowd, marched on the heads of the men as though on a pavement.” The anger and rioting threatened even the relics, and the clerics displaying them had to escape through the windows.

The crowds will not have diminished twenty years later when Bishop Maurice de Sully began the building of a new cathedral in 1163, Notre Dame as we now know it. Abelard never set foot in the new building, but his influence was partly responsible for the need that produced it—at least one of the most pressing. During the years of the building of Notre Dame, Maurice de Sully also installed eleven new parish churches along the south bank of the Ile.

[LEAVE THIS OUT IF YOU’RE OUT OF TIME]

But now back to his last five years. I’m almost finished, just one more narrative. Successful or not, he was subject to attack from many sides. When the formidable Bernard of Clairvaux begins questioning his orthodoxy and preaching against him, even in Paris, Abelard is fed up, seizes the offensive and asks that Bernard’s accusations be the subject of a church council. He wants a forum to clear his name.

A church council had been set for June 2 at the cathedral of Sens, 1140 or 1141. Only two items were on the agenda: a celebration and consecration of relics, a minor issue, and the orthodoxy of the writings of Peter Abelard, a very big deal. What Abelard sought as a forum for

vindication turned into a trial of his own orthodoxy. He remained the agressor, however. He wrote an open letter announcing that Bernard of Clairvaux would confront him at Sens. This was dynamite. Bernard hadn't yet agreed to the meeting, but Abelard's letter forced him into the fray. Abelard and Bernard were one of those oppositions of titans in which medieval intellectual, political, ecclesiastical history, crystallized: Henry IV of Germany and Pope Gregory VII; Thomas Becket and Henry II of England; Abelard and Bernard. Their clash would be a main event of the twelfth century. Imagine if, say, Jean Paul Sartre had debated Billy Graham in the cathedral of Notre Dame, or in Madison Square Garden. It drew crowds. The king of France would attend along with many high nobles and clerics. Abelard's students and followers came in large numbers. Bernard pointed later to those crowds as a sign of Abelard's particular wickedness. Bernard didn't want to meet this *vir bellator*, a warrior in disputation. Bernard prayed for the wings of the dove so that he could be transported away from this confrontation. To assure himself he called a meeting of the presiding bishops on the evening before the trial to discuss the proceedings. Bernard, a master of the art of bullying, got them to agree to what was in effect a verdict in advance. So this machination gave Bernard some buffer from the awesome flow of words that—as he supposed—his opponent commanded. Abelard was walking into a trap. The proceedings began with Bernard reading a list on nineteen supposedly heretical passages from works by Abelard. Then he invited Abelard to respond. Abelard maintained a stubborn silence, then announced that he was appealing to Rome—and left, no doubt a great disappointment to the audience, adherents and spectators alike. The condemnation stood, and Abelard retired to the monastery of Cluny in the benevolent care of its Abbot Peter the Venerable, where he died two years later.]

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John of Salisbury spoke with great admiration of Abelard in his reminiscences of his Paris school days in the *Metalogicon* (1159). Otherwise surprisingly little attention was paid to Abelard as an intellectual or spiritual force in the new cathedral or in the clerical community of Paris. The tragic love affair got attention from contemporaries. Abelard was reviled as the seducer of Heloise, and his philosophy and theology were no remedy for that reputation. She herself stood in high regard, and still does. Henry Adams wrote of Heloise, "She was a Frenchwoman to the last millimeter of her shadow, worth at least a dozen Abelards." Putting aside the "Frenchwoman" comment, various twelfth-century writers expressed similar sentiments. The personal letters of the two were unknown until Jean de Meun translated them into French in the later thirteenth century. [SLIDE: A & H, Palais de Justice]. A charming and eccentric sculpture on a capital in the Palais de Justice, at the west end of the Ile de la cité, gives an interpretation of the two lovers' relationship: Abelard holds a scroll in his right hand, Heloise holds in her left the severed genitals of her lover. I'm not sure if there is more pathos or burlesque in the image. Maybe some of both. It may indicate knowledge of Heloise's second letter to Abelard, her heart-rending lament that she cannot forget the pleasures of the flesh they shared together.

Notre Dame can take its place alongside other great cultural amd architectural catastrophes: The great library of Alexandria has disappeared, faded rather. The belief that a single catastrophic fire in the 2nd century BC destroyed it, is evidently a myth. The anti-intellectual politics of late Ptolemeys were a major cause of decline. Political allies got the good positions. That assured the ruin of the institution.

The Twin towers of the world trade center are gone from the face of New York City. A monumental building and grounds to commemorate them have gotten little enthusiasm. The stories of the victims in the Visitors' Center are where the aura is stored.

Ruined great buildings, like ruined civilizations, have their own aura. Hildebert of Lavardin was impressed by the ruins of the ancient city of Rome and wrote, around 1100, one of the finest Latin poems of the Middle Ages commemorating them: "Even now, Peerless Rome, nearly all in ruins, Your fragments teach us how great you were intact. … So much remains: it can never be leveled;/ So much has vanished: it can never be restored." The aura of lost grandeur has its own attraction. Ruined abbeys and monasteries were culticly admired in the romantic period; fragments of greatness : Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey"; Caspar David Friedrich's paintings of ghostly gothic remains.

The Germans decided not to rebuild the main cathedral of Berlin after WW II.Now called the Gedächtniskirche. it was partially restored, and the ruins left ruined as a reminder of the cost of war.

None of the above will be the fate of Notre Dame of Paris. It will be rebuilt. An article of French law was put in place last Thursday governing the reconstruction of the cathedral. It sets up commissions and agencies. Zoning and other building restrictions are lifted to facilitate the work. Tax rebates for donations approved. The"Fondation de Patrimoine" announced 22 million Euros in contribution already received. The precipitous call of Pres. Macron for reconstruction in five years generated a lot of anxiety. "Take your time," is the advice he is receiving. Public and academic attention is closely focused on the project. No French politician or member of the planning commission wants to be the ass that kicks the wounded lion, though Macron's call for "a contemporary art gesture" may yet make him a candidate for that honor.

[1] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* (London and New York 1989), p. 71.

[2] Childe Harold, Canto 4, St. 158.

[3] **The Bells of Paris**

Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* Bk. 3. Ch. 2

And if you would receive from the ancient city an impression that the modern cannot provide, go up on the morning of some high holiday (at sunrise on Easter or Pentecost) to some elevated point from which you may overlook the whole capital, and listen to the awakening of the bells. Behold at a sign from heaven, because it comes from the Sun itself, those thousand churches trembling all at once. At first a faint tinkling passes from church to church, as when musicians give notice that they are going to begin. Then see, for at certain times the ear too seems to be endowed with sight—see how, all of a sudden, at the same moment, there rises from each steeple as it were a column of sound, a cloud of harmony. At first the vibration of each bell rises straight, pure, and in a manner swelling by degrees, they blend, melt, intermingle, and amalgamate into a magnificent concert. It is now but one mass of sonorous vibrations, coming out of the innumerable steeples incessantly; and it floats, undulates, leaps, and swirls over the city, and expands far beyond the horizon the deafening circle of its oscillations. That sea of harmony, however, is not a chaos. Vast and deep as it is, it has not lost its transparency: you see in it each group of notes that has wound its way up from the belfries. You can follow the dialogue, by turns deep and high. You can see the octaves leaping from steeple to steeple: you can watch them springing light, winged, sonorous, from the silverbell, dropping dull, faint, and limping from the wooden. You can admire the rich gamut ascending and descending without end the seven bells of St.-Eustache. You can see clear and rapid notes dart around in all directions, making three or four luminous zigzags, and vanishing like lightning. There the abbey of St.-Martin sends forth its harsh, sharp tones; here the Bastille raises its sinister and husky voice. At the other end of the city it is the great tower of the Louvre, with its countertenor. The royal chimes of the palace launch tirelessly on all sides their resplendent trills, on which falls at measured intervals, the heavy tolling from the belfry of Notre-Dame, which makes them sparkle like an anvil under the hammer. From time to time you see tones of all shapes, proceeding from the triple peal of St.-Germain-des Prés, passing before you. Then again, at intervals this mass of sublime sounds opens and makes way for the finale of the Ave Maria,

which glistens like a plume of stars. Beneath, in the deepest part of the concert, you can distinguish with some confusion the singing inside the churches, which rises through the vibrating pores of their vaults.. This is truly an opera that is well worth listening to. Normally the noises that Paris makes in the dayttime represent the city talking; at night the city breathes. In this case the city sings. Lend your ear then to this *tutti* of steeples; listen to the buzzing of half a million human beings, the eternal murmur of the river, the infinite breathing of the wind, the grave and distant quartet of the four forests placed like immense organs on the four hills of the horizon. Soften, as with a demi-tint, all that is too shrill and too harsh in the central mass of sound—and say if you know anything in the world more rich, more joyful, more golden, more overwhelming than that tumult of bells, than that furnace of music, than those ten thousand voices of bronze singing all at once from flutes of stone three hundred feet high, than that city which has become an orchestra, than that symphony which roars like a storm.

[4] Paul Binski, *Wonder: Art, Artifice and the Decorated Style, 1290-1350,* ((New Haven, 2014), p. 32-33/

[5] Quoted in Pierre-Marie Auzas, *Notre-Dame de Paris,* (1956).