

A Sermon in Stone

Poems from the Cathedrals of France

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- EXCERPT -

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To Jeannette

One of the gentlest and humblest souls I have ever met.

Introduction

In March 1996, my sister and I traveled to France. We stayed in Paris, and from there explored many of the centuries-old cathedrals and basilicas that grace the French countryside. From the great eastern rose in Laon to the shadowed blues of Chartres, from the simplicity of Germigny-des-Près to the intricacy of Beauvais, theology came alive. Spirituality became incarnate in stone and glass.

These poems flow from those days, to capture the wonder, the insight, and the challenge I received as I walked the vaulted ambulatories. Read the stories that glowed in ancient stained glass. Kneled in silence before altars that been the place of worship for untold thousands.

Without audible voice, the cathedrals speak. They proclaim the glory of God and the mystery of his sacrifice. They reveal the fallen nature of man and the manifold grace of his redemption. They chronicle the history of the world, from the dawn of creation to the blast of the last trumpet.

They are forever ...

A Sermon in Stone.

Table of Contents

St-Denis	1
St-Denis Roses	2
Chartres	4
St-Etienne	5
Rheims	6
Beauvais	8
Dead Folk	9
An Architecture Lesson	11
Faces	13
Etienne Weathering	15
Agnus Dei	16
Lectio	18
Meditatio	19
Oratio	20
Contemplatio	21
A Tautology	22
A Heretic's Defense	24
Windows	25
Let There Be	26
Adam: The Abbaye aux Hommes, Caen	27
Eve: The Abbaye aux Dames, Caen	28
Germigny-des-Pres	29
St-Benoit-sur-Loire	30
A Short Note from Rudolf Bultmann	31
A Short Response to the Note from Rudolf Bultmann	32
The Queen	33
Thoroughfare	34
St-Benoit Crypt	36
Scholastic Architects	37
St-Remi	38

St-Denis

when God said
Let There Be Light!
it was not a shaft of white
that split
the murky blackness
but a gloriana rainbow
spilling out
cascading down
splashing the blackness
transforming void and
formlessness to
butterfly wings
rainforest orchids
peacock feathers
and he sang for joy
with his creation
in that first flush
of brilliant
tangible
prismatic
Light.

St-Denis Roses

Let it encompass

everything

but let it begin
with the Father
standing Alpha and Omega
ever the beginning
ever the end
in himself it had its beginning
with us it shall never end

and it shall encompass

everything

let the Son spin out
in laughing ecstasy
from the bosom of the Father
from the eternal embrace
from the closest gracious steps
divine music could lend to song
let him inscribe a perfect circle
at each point pause
let his feet spread life
his hands mold form
his breath breathe spirit
six times let him pause
and on the seventh with laughter
to rest

for it shall encompass

everything

and the Spirit still moves
over void no longer
but over times and seasons
hung in the heavens
as a reminder to men
of he who bears Living Water
of God-become-Man
of the Virgin Bride
of the end of times
as of the beginning
twelve signs to mark the times
the magnificent movement
of celestial arts

and so it shall encompass

everything

every labor of man
every swing of the scythe
every clip of the pruning shear
every shepherd's crook
every chisel on the wood
every strike on the anvil
from the small to the great
peasant priest and king
every man
every woman
every child and babe
none shall be forfeit
from the joy of perfect harmony
from the rhythm that moves the stars
from the intricacy of every step
from the dance
from the Great Dance
for it shall encompass

everything

Etienne Weathering

Once, and only once, I saw a carving on the outside of a church. Not as a part of the statuary, or of the small scenes often carved near the tympanum or on the doorposts. It was simply on the great expanse of otherwise unadorned wall: a niche carved hardly an inch deep originally; a simple presentation of the crucifixion. And I knew that I was standing on holy ground.

It was carved with care
and weathered by time.
Once a crucifixion
now only the Cross.

The faces are gone
the bodies remain only
roughened shapes
vague shadows
recollections of Golgotha.

What were you?
An altar? A shrine?
Bas-relief carved because
a mason's chisel slipped
cleft the stone
in the suggestion
of a Cross?

No liturgy here
no candles
no incense
the paten and chalice remain
within.
Here the soil is the Body
the Blood is the dew
and the season's zephyrs
bring the Spirit
of an ever-new Pentecost.

Contemplatio

From the music
enter the rest.
Like a formata hold
the silence lengthens
not in apathy
but in expectancy.
Count the beats
like the pulse of the heart
a rhythm in time
to the Conductor's baton.
It is the moment to breathe deeply
the philharmonia still ringing
through the blood.
It is the moment to hold from breathing
attuned to every soundless movement
waiting for the first note and chord
to break forth anew.

Eve: The Abbaye aux Dames, Caen

Time was new
and meant for marking joys.
I walked in the Garden
where leaves stroked my skin
in trusting, sensual pleasure.
Flowers yielded fragrance
every one meant to be caressed
each petal its own glory.
The delicacy of being
was delight.

Then, of a sudden,
time became old.
The body needed protection
and when garments were invaded
a shell grew about the spirit.
Innocence had been locked
in the Garden
guarded by an angel
with a flaming sword.

For three days, could they be marked,
time stopped.
Once the divine hand had clothed me
in animal skins
to hide my shame.
A second time his hand reached out
clothing me anew
in the holiness of his rising.
Damask swirled like snowflakes
and laughter fell
like a girl's first realization
that she is a woman.

Germigny-des-Pres

*"Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool –
where then is the house you could build for me?"*

If I have but one talent
I will not bury it.
If I have but one stone
I will make of it an altar
to my God.

If I have but two lines
I will shape them into a cross.
If I have but two steps
I will raise them as a dais
for the paten and chalice.

If I have but three windows
I will center them in the apse.
If I have but three alcoves
I will place them as chapels
for the hungry of heart.

If I have but four columns
I will set them round the altar.
If I have but four sides
I will raise them as a lantern
above his body and blood.

If I have all these
I shall ask but one thing more:
Let me have countless arches
like the endless ripples
of eternity.