Plotting Gothic

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The author, at the end, struck by the apparent gap between the length and complexity of the gestation period and the appearance of the final product, may want to offer some kind of commentary of explanation and thanks . . .

My earlier scholarly production focused upon a series of intense case studies of Gothic cathedrals: Troyes, Beauvais, Amiens, and Notre-Dame of Paris. To these buildings I wish to express my first and most heartfelt thanks. It has been the greatest privilege to live in and with them, to carry them in my head, and to have made a small contribution to the understanding of the way that each of them was conceived and built. I continue to believe that, counter to prevailing wisdom, the archaeological/architectural monograph still has a vital place in scholarly discourse. Yet, unsatisfied with the limits of the traditional means of representation (the pages of a book), I found myself tugged away in the early 1990s by the challenges and promises of the so-called new media, particularly cinematography and three-dimensional animation, as it became clear that the digital media, combined with the Internet, had the potential to radically change the mission of the art historian.

The Amiens Project (1993) was intended to harness the digital media to make this great cathedral more accessible to the thousand or more students engaged each year in the Columbia Core Curriculum. My work was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and I was helped by Maurice Luker, Rory O'Neill, Eden Muir, and Andrew Tallon. The successful

tion came to me during the year of my fellowship at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford (2000–2001). Other than one's mother, the cathedral is, after all, the most powerful mechanism of behavior modification. And, of course, the cathedral *is* one's mother. As in a novel, my three characters have shouldered their way into this book and have shown every sign of wanting to entirely take over my project with their compulsive talking and plotting. I wish to thank Bob Scott and the staff and fellows of the Behavioral Center for the intellectually stimulating environment in which the present project was conceived. As is so often the case, however, my year at the Behavioral Center was overwhelmed by the need to complete overdue older projects, notably my *Gothic Sermon* (2004) and the institutionalization of the Media Center for Art History at Columbia University. It was thus during a second year's research leave at the National Humanities Center (2003–4) that the present project took its definitive shape: thanks to Kent Mulligen and the fellows for their help and encouragement. It was during this year that readings in Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot* provided the link between building space, human conspiracy, and story line. Brooks led to Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*, and I began to see ways to correlate my joy in *looking* with my joy in *representing* the building, matching architecture with rhetoric. My notions of space owe much to readings in Mary Carruthers, Pierre Bourdieu, and Henri Lefebvre.

These ideas lay behind the formulation of a new Internet project, Mapping Gothic France (www.mappinggothic.org). This project locates hundreds of Gothic churches, represented in tens of thousands of high-resolution images, on a Google map of France. The user is encouraged to experience the space of each building and the spaces *between* buildings. Historical maps take us back to the geopolitical space of the period of construction, and the user is led not to a single master narrative but to the multiple stories of Gothic. I would like to thank the Andrew Mellon Foundation, particularly Don Waters, as well as Andrew Tallon, my co-principal investigator, Rory O'Neill, visionary, and collaborators Nicole Griggs, the late James Conlon and Caleb Smith, Pilar Abuin Peters, Jim Hall, Cassie Juhl, Jordan Love, Zachary Stewart, Gabriel Rodriguez, Emily Shaw, and Rob Stenson. Mappinggothic.org and *Plotting Gothic* have advanced side by side, each feeding the other.

My exploration of the literary turn gained much from conversations with Robert Hanning, Richard Brilliant, Paul Strohm, and Matt Kavaler. Paul Papillo was a most helpful reader of early versions of these pages. Thanks also go to Michael Davis, Paula Gerson, and Peter Fergusson for their helpful suggestions. Readers will see how much I owe to my own teacher, Peter Kid-

son, who has provocative things to say about each of my three witnesses. I learned about the rewards to be derived from the careful study of medieval account-keeping from Eric Stone, my tutor at Keble College, Oxford.

I want to close with thanks to all the students with whom I have worked and the intellectual stimulation they have provided. My Columbia University Department of Art History and Archaeology, especially under the enlightened leadership of Chairman Robert Harrist and Holger Klein, provided a wonderful environment in which to work; Lisa and Bernard Selz, generous friends of Columbia University, endowed the chair in which I now happily sit. I would not have brought my project to a close without the encouragement of Susan Bielstein of the University of Chicago Press; thanks, also, to Anthony Burton and Ruth Goring at Chicago. The two readers engaged by Chicago made invaluable suggestions and contributions. Emily Shaw and Nicole Griggs helped with the images.

My wife Grainne, finally, has seen to it that the distractions of country living, university teaching, and the hundred miles of driving that lie between have not entirely pulled me away from writing, and has given me the reason to go forward.

completion of the Amiens Project led to the foundation of the Media Center for Art History at Columbia University, supported by a challenge grant from NEH and subventions from the Andrew Mellon and the Samuel Kress Foundations as well as other sources.

New combinations of three-dimensional modeling, digital imaging, and Internet databasing allowed us to work toward liberation from the tyranny of the interlocutor's diachronic narrative, with new interactions between databasing (now digital) and storytelling. Our project, *Romanesque Architecture of the Bourbonnais* (2002–7, www.learn.columbia.edu/bourb/php), brought together a hundred churches on the map and provided an intense initiation to the study of medieval architecture for dozens of students. My thanks go to Prince Charles-Henri de Lobkowicz, gracious host of our summer program in his Château de Bostz, and to Andrew Tallon, inspired and endlessly resourceful colleague.

Yet at the same time, the brave new world of the digital media brings its own tribulations. The means of delivery may become obsolete in a twinkling—thus, our interactive disk *The Amiens Project*, part 3, created to run on Macintosh OS9, is now unusable. Worse, a team of collaborators may quickly disperse, causing a loss of vital expertise and momentum. We have yet to test the long-term viability of ambitious Internet-based databasing projects. It is clear, finally, that we must learn from our experiences in the media both to continue to push ahead to the new and to bring new ways of thinking to the old.

The digital revolution was the *second* challenge to the way that we do business. The first profound change had come with the infusion of new ways of thinking derived from literary criticism, linguistic theory, anthropology, and Marxist thought in the decades between 1960 and 1990. The exciting potential of the "literary turn" and the "spatial turn" was to take us beyond the old rhetoric of "style," "development," and "influences" to a story of architectural production based more fully upon models in the study of linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. How to combine such a broad range of approaches with the specificity of the archaeological case study? Without the focus of the building itself or the primary written source, broad surveys of the sociological context of cathedral building may quickly become vapid and boring.

The idea of summoning a succession of witnesses of Gothic (Villard de Honnecourt, Gervase of Canterbury, and Suger, abbot of S-Denis) to help us escape the linearity of the Vasarian narrative and to focus and organize our encounter with the human dimensions of medieval architectural produc-

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Introduction

Gothic may be said to live "out there" in the forms of thousands of churches, cathedrals, and other buildings and artifacts—including extraordinary edifices that appear to speak directly to the visitor, moving him or her to the core. Today our great cathedrals—Chartres, Notre-Dame of Paris, Florence—are overwhelmed by a continuing flood of tourists and pilgrims. No mode of artistic production—other than, perhaps, music and modern media, especially film—has anything like this kind of direct impact on so wide an audience.

Yet the phenomenon was not created through the media of masonry, wood, and glass alone: "Gothic" is also a rhetorical construct. Far from being content to allow the great church to communicate directly through architectural form, space, light, and liturgical performance, visitors continue both to demand and to provide rhetorical responses: verbal explanations delivered by an *interlocutor* who interposes self between building and audience, pointing and speaking for the building. We are all familiar with the sight of the group of weary tourists struggling through the crowded cathedral, led by one who pauses periodically to point and talk as they dutifully look and listen.[1] By extension, interlocutors can also provide mediation in the pages of books, classroom lectures, or media productions.

While popular consumption of cathedral architecture has boomed, scholarly publication of the Big Story of Gothic has faltered: the last attempts

to achieve a "master narrative" belong to the decades from the 1940s to the 1980s, including Erwin Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* and his *Abbot Suger,* Otto von Simson's *The Gothic Cathedral* (1956), Paul Frankl's *The Gothic* and *Gothic Architecture,* and Henri Focillon's *Art of the West,* volume 2, *Gothic,* edited and introduced by Jean Bony (1963). Jean Bony's *French Gothic Architecture,* although it appeared in 1983, resulted from the Columbia University Mathews Lecture, delivered in 1961, and his teaching at Berkeley. These synthesizing works mostly met with intense disapproval on the part of members of the scholarly community. Dieter Kimpel and Robert Suckale's *Die gotische Architektur in Frankreich* (1985), while it offers exciting new insights and approaches, deliberately setting out to counter the older tradition of the narrative of style, remains untranslated into English and has had less impact than it deserves.[2] In the meantime, scholars have continued to debate whether the Gothic cathedral was a portrait of the heavenly city or a cynical means of terrestrial domination; whether it projects a modernistic attitude or a backward-looking one; whether we should be continuing to apply intense archaeological analysis to individual buildings or focus on the reception, function, and context of those buildings. Historians of Gothic architecture have embarked upon the pursuit of the most seductive yet elusive concept of "integration" (*Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings*) and an emphasis on liturgical and devotional practice (Willibald Sauerländer, "Gothic, the Dream of the Un-classical Style") and "holism" (Paul Crossley, "The Integrated Cathedral: Thoughts on 'Holism' and Gothic Architecture"). We have learned much recently about how the spaces (sacred topography) of a great church, lined with shrines, tombs, and images, might be animated by the passage of the devout visitor or procession.[3] However, such devotional passage might equally well take place in a wide range of different kinds of architectural space and does not necessarily provide information or enlightenment about "Gothic."

While an older generation of scholars devoted much effort to establishing the formal patterns in Gothic buildings and artifacts that we categorize as "style," to locating architectural production in the context of medieval society, and to providing explanations of how the forms of the edifice were actually produced and what they meant to builders and users, little attention has been paid to mapping the rhetorical commonplaces—the *topoi*—that result from the interlocutor's mission to translate the forms, spaces, functions, and meanings of Gothic architecture into words. And still less thought has been given to the question of how words, conversations, rhetorical constructs, and stories shared by the builders were instrumental in the very creation of Gothic. Do the characteristics of *post festum* rhetorical accounts

woven around the completed edifice have anything at all to do with the intentions of the builders and the responses of early users?

We might hope to find out about those intentions from written sources left by builders and witnesses. Yet the construction of the great Gothic cathedrals took place without the rhetorical intervention of a Giorgio Vasari, who in *Lives of the Artists* told the Big Story of the Renaissance.[4]

The rhetoric of Gothic that developed in the postmedieval period may be understood in terms of three interwoven strands. First, the application of the word *Gothic* originally involved animus and name-calling: for a fifteenth-century Italian, *Gothic* might have conveyed the meaning of something that just looked wrong or inappropriate, something that lacked proper *maniera* or style. *Goofy* has been proposed as equivalent.[5] Reference to the despised and hated Northerners, the Goths, held responsible for the destruction of Rome and still all-too-present on Italian soil, brought additional layers of cultural disapproval. However, as with other such epithets applied to a despised "other," the term was quickly turned to positive use by those to whom it had been applied and has enjoyed a fabulous afterlife, built particularly upon romantic notions that flowered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and later.[6]

Second, of course, the notion of "Gothic" involves periodization and categorization: the definition of a common set of characteristics found in a group of artifacts from a given period of time and located in a given geographical area.[7] Still quite sketchy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Raphael and Vasari), that understanding was later systematized, gaining quasi-scientific status in the encyclopedic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The desire at that time to collect, control, and *classify* artifacts ran parallel to and interacted with the classification of natural phenomena, fossils, flora, and fauna, and the rhetoric of "progress" or "evolution." The encyclopedic spirit led scholars to search for the "essential" features of different kinds of artifact or building and to associate them with a unity of time and place: the term *Gothic*, although obviously anachronistic (with a seven-century gap between the historical Goths and the buildings that bear their name), was then widely accepted as a conventional and "value-free" label to designate buildings with pointed arches, ribbed vaults, flying buttresses, and a lightweight skeletal system constructed in northwestern Europe and beyond between the 1130s and circa 1500. In a Hegelian spirit, the common language (*koine*) of architecture was understood in symbolic or synecdochal relationship to the wider culture: the "Gothic World."

I want in the following pages to focus on what I consider the third strand in verbal representations: the notion of "Gothic" depends upon *narration*,

or storytelling.[8] Interlocutors may begin with the essential question "What does it—the great church or the phenomenon in a wider sense—*look like*?" We may then propose explanations of the "essential" visual characteristics of this mode of architecture in cause-and-effect relationships, constructing what we might call *etiological myths*. Thus the earliest written accounts of "Gothic" sought to explain the pointed arches and the essential *fibrousness* of that Gothic "look" with stories of primitive Germans creating their sacred spaces in the forest by tying the tops of trees together to form the characteristic lacy, pointed shape of the Gothic interior. Despite deep-seated Italian prejudice against Northern cultural phenomena, such natural origins could not be entirely despised: Vitruvius, like so many other tellers of the Big Story of Architecture, invoked Nature as the ultimate source for architectural form. The Genesis story of Creation provides the great prototype for all architectural stories: just as God created the world with material elements, eliciting form from substance through the power of his word, so humans imitate natural forms (rocks, caves, trees, forests) in the creation of artifacts and buildings.

Linkage with the great Creation story reinforces the appearance of *inevitability* in the story of art: such is the power of the finished cathedral that the casual visitor may find it hard to imagine that the edifice did not *have* to look the way it does. It was in this spirit that Giorgio Vasari created the story of the Renaissance as an inevitable unfolding of human creativity in the image of divine creativity. The artists of the Renaissance, in a triumphal procession culminating with Michelangelo, rediscovered what had already existed: the perfect relation between art and nature already known by the ancient Greeks. The builders of the great Gothic cathedrals of the twelfth to early thirteenth centuries, on the other hand, struggled to create what had *not* existed. How they did this is explored in the second kind of story, as sketched below.

The second, and the most common rhetorical mechanism for stories of Gothic—popular down to the present day—is that of a continuous problem-solving process driven by critical dissatisfaction with the immediate past.[9] If the Creation story can be understood in terms of manifest destiny or entelechy, the problem-solving approach is based upon dialectic.[10] The notion of the dynamic interaction of thesis and antithesis was applied by Jean Bony to the desire of builders in mid-twelfth-century Île-de-France to combine skinny, thin-walled structures with the newly fashionable masonry ribbed vault that exerted outward thrust.[11] The rational underpinnings of the story are simple—even simplistic: necessity is the mother of invention. Thus the

desire to avoid structural failure resulting from the combination of two antithetical architectural systems, one muscular, the other fragile, stimulated the creativity necessary for the invention of the flying buttress and the lightweight superstructure. Such architectural invention in multiple well-funded building sites in close proximity in northern France produced an architectural revolution in the half-century between the 1130s and 1190s. Here the story of Gothic may be told as a triumphal procession of buildings that become progressively taller, lighter, brighter, and more beautiful. Thus, for example, the nave of Amiens Cathedral (1220–30s, fig. 1) could be seen as an updated and improved version of Soissons Cathedral (chevet begun ca. 1190, fig. 2).

We will encounter in the following pages a multitude of other stories: that Gothic was the expression of the emergent kingdom of France; that it resulted from the industry and vision of a new kind of urban artisan; that it resulted from the application to architectural form, space, and light of some great philosophical system: Neoplatonism, Aristotelian rationalism, or the theology of light developed by the mystical writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius.

How can we escape from the diachronic and deterministic tyranny of the creation story translated in art history as the Vasarian narrative and begin to reconcile the multiple stories I have sketched above?[12]

Inspired by the synchronic and interactive potential of the space of the computer desktop, I propose in the following pages to lay out a *spatial* mechanism capable of reconciling the various kinds of story. I will seek to establish an interactive space in order to facilitate the correlation and coordination of four notions: (1) the self-conscious recognition of the role of the interlocutor who *represents* the building and who seeks to shape our perceptions, our responses, and our thoughts; (2) the continuing presence and overwhelming power of the monument itself, inscribed in time, extending from the construction period down to the present, and still able to communicate directly with the visitor; (3) the material and social contexts of the original production of that monument; and finally, (4) the production of meaning understood as an agenda programmed into the edifice by the initial builders and modified by subsequent users, down to the present, who have generated their own levels of meaning based upon their own responses.

Let me emphasize that I have not sought here to write a unified "Story of Gothic." Nor does my book set out to provide a survey of architectural production over a given period of time and geographical space.[13] I wish, rather, to find a way to correlate and to recognize the patterns in multiple verbal

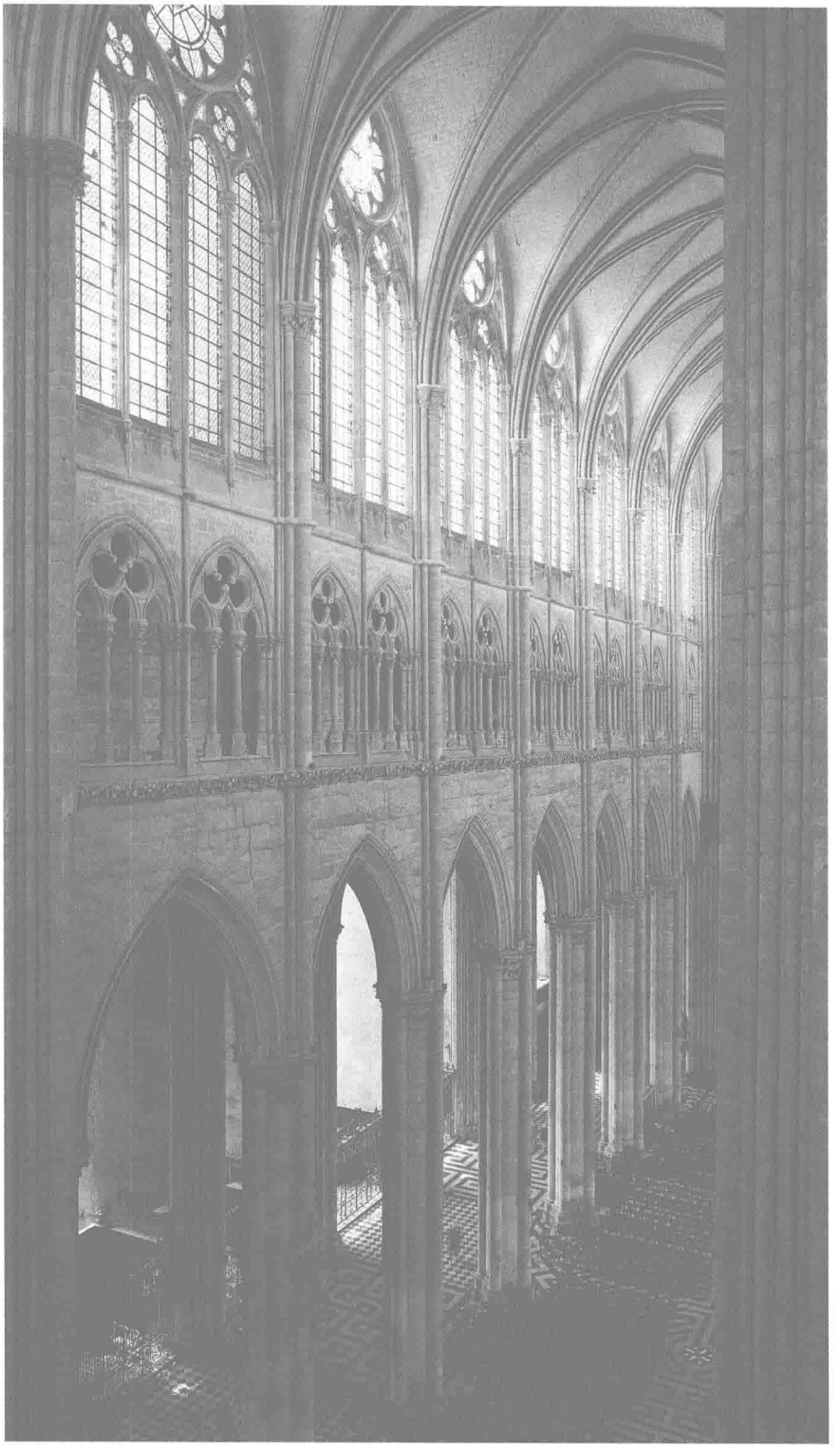

Figure 1. Amiens Cathedral, south side of the nave, looking west. Photograph by permission of Andrew J. Tallon.

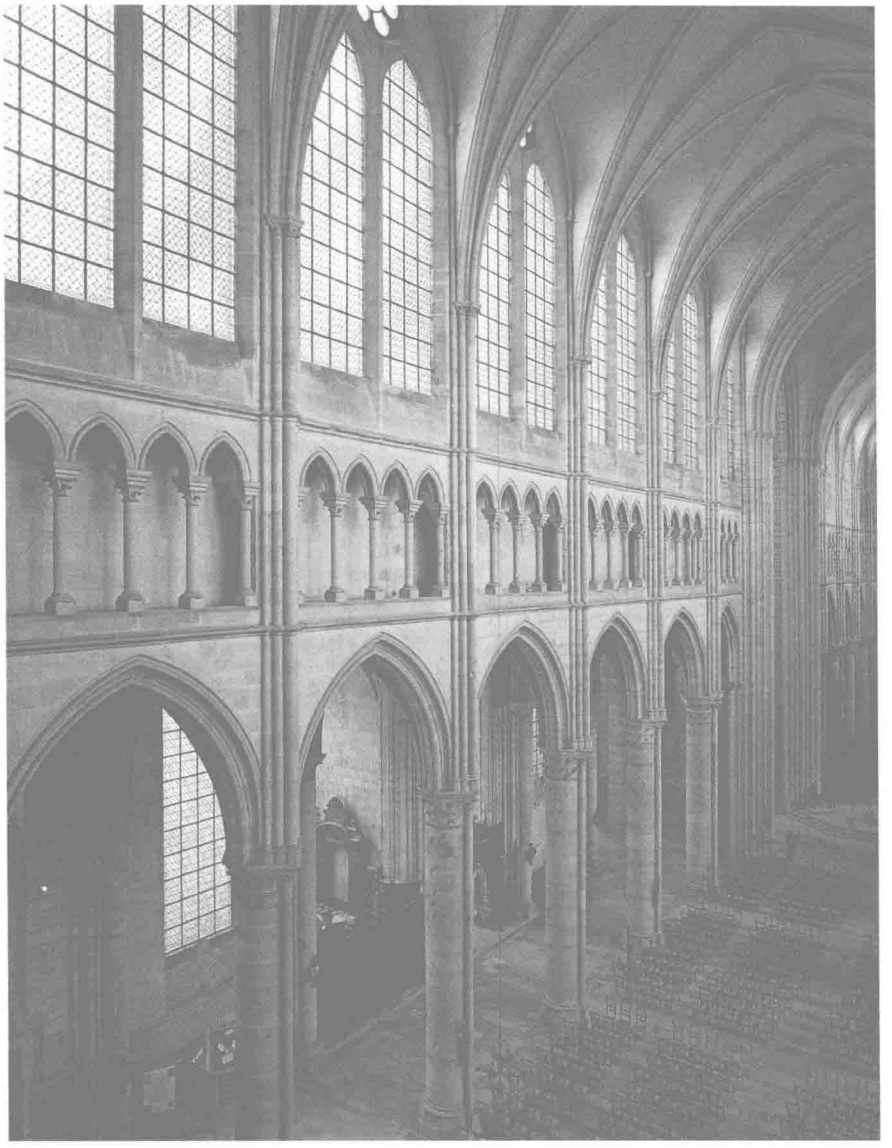

Figure 2. Soissons Cathedral, north side of the nave, looking east. Photograph by permission of Andrew J. Tallon.

representations, each of which may provide vital elements of understanding, yet none of which presumes to offer us the "holistic cathedral." This can never be entirely recaptured.

In the absence of the Gothic master narrative corresponding to Vasari's story of the Renaissance, modern art historians have tended to curse the darkness, lamenting the laconic character of the written accounts left by the medieval witnesses of Gothic and scolding the authors of such narratives

for their inadequate powers of observation, crass errors, lack of comprehension, and for not providing the information that the modern student might consider important. Yet the stories left by eyewitness accounts provide us exactly what we need to escape from the tyranny of the master narrative based on the Vasarian model. The written accounts left by our medieval eyewitnesses invite us to locate *multiple* stories in a spatial and synchronic, rather than linear, environment.

Let us begin, then, in part I, "Three Eyewitnesses of Gothic," by concentrating on what our witnesses did say about the relationship between words and architecture—about talking, writing, and building. Our three witnesses are the most obvious and prolific ones: Suger, abbot of S-Denis; Gervase, monk, sacristan, and chronicler of Canterbury Cathedral; and Villard de Honnecourt, image-maker or *ymagier*. Despite their prominence, little effort has been made in existing scholarship in the English-speaking world to correlate their rhetorical strategies and their stories. For reasons that will, I hope, become clear in the following pages, I will bring them on in reverse chronological order. Let us first entertain Villard de Honnecourt and his collaborators, Picards, who in the 1220s and 1230s created new combinations of images and words, leaving for us a unique little book now preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (see figs. 6–17 in chap. 1). In some ways the modern student may find Villard most "like us." His interests are wide ranging; he wants to point and to inform; he will therefore serve as our principal interlocutor. Then comes Gervase, an Englishman, probably born in Kent, choir monk of Canterbury Cathedral (ca. 1141–ca. 1210), who brought the concerns of an administrator to his account of the construction of the Gothic chevet of Canterbury Cathedral (see figs. 18–20, chap. 2); who provides invaluable information on the process of architectural *production*, and whose seductively polished narrative has been considered a massive cover-up of covert political machinations. Finally, I will bring on the famous Suger, abbot of the Benedictine monastery of S-Denis, indefatigable storyteller, wordsmith, and mystic (see figs. 21–23, chap. 3). Despite Suger's considerable output as "author," he remains in some ways the most enigmatic of our three witnesses.

My principal interest is to correlate the characteristic patterns or tropes that emerge as each author sets out to create a verbal skein intended to capture Gothic architecture—the process as well as the thing—and represent it on the written page. I will suggest that the best mechanism to facilitate the correlation of storytelling and the actual business of building can be found in the concept of *plot*.

Having interviewed our three witnesses, in part II, "Staking Out the Plot,"