

Notre Dame de Paris.

Roger Scruton.

Sometimes I stay on the Isle de la cité, in an apartment borrowed from a friend. From the kitchen window I look out across rooftops to the solemn towers of Notre Dame, and for long moments in the evening I am transfixed by the great shoulders that blacken the sky. The cathedral stands on the island like a captain on a ship. It is solid and muscular without being heavy, and the flying buttresses push the apse forward as though rowing the whole cathedral down the river. Most beautiful of all is the graceful spire, adapted from the smaller original by Viollet-le-Duc in his work of restoration. There is a lightness and modesty to this spire that never cease to captivate me, and to study it from the café across the river, as I do on every visit, is to know what Paris means.

I cannot bear to write that sentence in the past tense. Notre-Dame is, and is eternally. It is a link between the town of Paris and the idea of Paris. Its vigilant presence is celebrated in the greatest body of prose that Europe has produced. Loveliest of Gothic churches, bearing on its face the narrative of all our lives, it is also the guardian of this special place, on which the many dramas of our continent have been written. Thanks to Victor Hugo Notre Dame has an imagined story of its own – a weird concoction of pity and passion that has endowed the building with a mysterious spiritual darkness. Notre Dame has secrets that it hides from us. The light from those sublime rose windows is not a light from outside, but a light inside the one who looks at it, a light summoned from your own innermost soul.

Paris is the crucible of revolution and the capital of a modern state. It is also an altar to the God of Christendom, with churches and chapels squeezed into every corner, and streets bearing the divine titles and the names of saints. (My own favourite is L'Impasse de l'Enfant Jésus, which conjures so many false moves and dead-ends in my own life of searching.) Perhaps nothing is more remarkable about the city than the way in which, after driving out the old religion, it stood without moving until the divine light returned. Nobody at the time could bring himself to lay desecrating hands on the cathedral, apart from a few ruffians who beheaded a saint or two, thinking them to be kings.

For many English people Notre Dame is a place as sacred as it is for the French. We stand before this façade feeding ourselves on the spiritual sustenance that our own puritans removed from us. Here is stone, local stone, the Lutetian limestone dug from beneath the city, shaped as images and irradiated by an other-worldly light. Standing in that lovely civic square, we recognize that your nonchalant agnostics did better than our

fervent believers. They did not destroy these sacred things, but merely left them for the day, not too distant, when their faith would return. The Angel of the Resurrection, who stands as though shivering above the roof, speaks of this. Here is the after-life portrayed and believed in. And we look up to it, and to the insolent gargoyles that joke at its message, wondering at a culture that so effectively outlasted the assault on its God.

We have a national cathedral – Westminster Abbey – where our poets and monarchs are buried. But it is not national as Notre Dame is national. Our heroes are stacked away there, revered for things that are vaguely remembered. In the mysterious interior of Notre-Dame, however, something is celebrated that is far more durable than the deeds of heroes: what is revered is an *idea*. The Englishman, looking up at those gargoyles from the square below, is made aware of the God-given idea that can reveal itself, now in a King, now in an artist or playwright, now in the peasant girl whom we, the English, martyred in our greatest crime.

We are awe-struck by the presence of this idea, fixed forever in stone, because it is not unique to the cathedral but is embodied in the city all around. We in Britain have destroyed our cities, shovelling away the stone and replacing it with steel and glass. We have done to London what Le Corbusier wished to do to Paris, and what one of our architects, invited by President Pompidou, did to the Marais. We have replaced built form by childish bubbles of steel and glass. Our churches stand in concrete deserts, and it is hardly surprising if nobody visits them or enters them for a time of prayer.

As the angel on the roof has promised, Notre Dame will be resurrected. It will be resurrected because its city, unique among modern capitals, has remained continually itself, from the time when it was the spiritual heart of Europe, through the time when it turned the world upside down, to our present time, when it reminds our troubled continent of the spiritual inheritance that it must not deny.