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‘The golden stain of time’: Remembering the colours of Amiens cathedral

Charlotte Ribeyrol

ABSTRACT: This article explores the key role played by the faded polychromy of Notre Dame d’Amiens and notably of its liminal *Vierge Dorée* in Victorian literary constructions of Early French Gothic, from William Morris’s pre-*Guenevere* prose writings in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856) to John Ruskin’s *Bible d’Amiens* (1884), Walter Pater’s ‘Notre Dame d’Amiens’ (1894) and Arthur Symons’s ‘Our Lady of Amiens’ (1903).
Although Amiens cathedral was the preferred Gothic edifice of none of these authors, it became a place of aesthetic pilgrimage in the second half of the 19th century for many Victorian artists and writers who longed to capture a glimpse of the vanishing colours of the medieval past in a rapidly changing industrial world. The *Vierge Dorée* presiding over the South transept thus came to encode both metonymically and metaphorically the ‘golden stain of time’ which Ruskin celebrated as ‘the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture’ and which Marcel Proust later interpreted as the creative union of ‘the nuance of the hour’ and ‘the colour of the ages’ in his own reading of these Victorian literary encounters with Amiens.

KEYWORDS: Amiens cathedral, Gothic architecture, Gothic revival, colour, pigment, polychromy, reception studies, Vierge dorée, memory, restoration, impressionism, John Ruskin, William Morris, Walter Pater, Arthur Symons, Marcel Proust, A.W.N. Pugin, William Burges, Claude Monet

> Some one had had the happy idea of giving me, to distract me on evenings when I seemed abnormally wretched, a magic lantern […]: in the manner of the master-builders and glass-painters of gothic days it substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colours, in which legends were depicted, as on a shifting and transitory window.
> […] The castle and the moor were yellow, but I could tell their colour without waiting to see them, for before the slides made their appearance the old-gold sonorous name of Brabant had given me an unmistakable clue.[1]

In this passage, the Proustian narrator of *Swann's Way*, recalls how a rainbow-producing magic lantern helped alleviate his bedtime anxieties. The substitution of material, opaque walls with luminous hues opens up an ephemeral medieval dream-world, peopled by legendary figures such as the 13th century heroine, Geneviève de Brabant, – whose chromatic presence is conjured up by the 'old-gold sonorous name of Brabant'. *La Recherche du Temps Perdu* abounds in such colourful memories which trigger synaesthetic re-enactments of lost time and sensations. This importance of the chromatic in Marcel Proust's mnemonic aesthetics has recently received increasing critical attention.[2] However, this chromatic experience is rarely discussed in the light of the late 19th century nostalgia for the colours of the past, which evidently shaped Proust's personal experience of Gothic polychromy.

Ten years earlier, in 1904, Proust had published a translation of Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens*, a tribute to both his literary father and his own father who had just died. This translation, as well as Proust's long preface explaining the complex aesthetics of Ruskin, has been extensively analysed by Proust and Ruskin scholars alike,[3] especially in terms of its influence on Proust's architectural conception of *La Recherche*, partly imagined as a 'cathedral'.[4] Given the central role played by colour notations as key stimuli of the memorization process, it is

surprising that none of these perspectives envisage the literary cathedral as polychrome in keeping with Proust's reading of Ruskin's recollection of Amiens as a '*souvenir brumeux ou doré'*, a hazy or golden memory.[5] But Ruskin's Bible was not the only text that Proust engaged with in his preface. In footnote 38 he indeed draws a parallel between the topographical views of Northern France by the colourist Turner and Ruskin's and Pater's texts on Amiens and Vézelay, so as to invite us to re-consider Victorian impressions of the Gothic cathedral as a colourful palimpsest, a trope particularly dear to Proust.[6] By colourful palimpsest I mean both the multiple layers of colour which were applied to (or removed from) the surface of the walls and statues of Amiens throughout the ages, as well as the superposition of literary encounters with the polychromy of Amiens in the works of four major Victorian authors: John Ruskin, William Morris, Walter Pater and Arthur Symons. My contention is that Morris, Pater, Symons and Proust all envisaged the Cathedral through the filter of John Ruskin's writings on Gothic architecture. In these 'souvenirs dorés' of Ruskin's Amiens, the vanishing gold of the cathedral, notably that of the Vierge Dorée of the South Transept [fig.1], seems indeed to epitomize the 'golden stain of time'[7] celebrated by Ruskin in the 'Lamp of Memory', as a moment of creative tension between light and pigment, as well as between personal and historical times. My approach will be threefold:

First, I will discuss the relevance of Amiens for the Victorians within the context of the revival of Gothic polychromy in the second half of the 19th century which Ruskin's writings on architecture contributed to shaping.

The influence of Ruskin's nostalgic chromophilia will be the focus of the second section of this paper which will mainly explore Morris's formative impressions of Amiens cathedral, as exemplified in two early texts published in the 1856 *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*: 'The Story of the Unknown Church' and 'The Shadows of Amiens'.

Before he published his *Bible* in 1884, which was initially meant as part of a vast history of Christianity entitled *Our Fathers Have Told Us,* Ruskin had barely written a single line on Amiens. This late publication proved as influential as his earlier writings on architecture, especially for Pater and Symons, giving way to a more impressionistic Gothic, which powerfully articulated what Proust described as the 'nuance of the hour' and the 'colour of the ages' of Claude Monet's cathedral series.[8]

'The Parthenon of Gothic Architecture': the polychromy of Amiens

In his translation of Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens*, Proust discreetly points out in a footnote that Ruskin's calling Amiens cathedral 'The Parthenon of Gothic Architecture' was a misquotation from Eugène Viollet-le-Duc who originally applied the formula to Beauvais. [9] But as Proust explains, the image nonetheless suggests a historical and stylistic 'continuity' between the metopes of the Parthenon, the mosaics of St Mark's and the maze of Amiens.[10] This continuity was also of a chromatic nature and needs to be replaced within the debates on the reception of ancient forms of polychromy in artistic circles throughout Europe from the 1850s. Although the battle of the styles was then raging among Grecian and Gothicist architects, many chromophiles, such as Jacques Ignace Hittorff, Owen Jones, or later William Burges underlined the widespread use of polychromy in ancient architecture and sculpture, whether Greek or Gothic, and in both instances often resorted to the modern technique of chromolithography to highlight these dazzling colours of the past. This was notably the case of Hittorff's *L'architecture polychrome chez les Grecs* debated at the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1852, which influenced Jones's 1854 *Apology for the Colouring of the Greek Court* of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. The catholic architect and designer Augustus Pugin, who owned a copy of Jones's work on the Alhambra, also used chromolithographed

plates for his *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament and Costume* (1844) which offered a colourful glimpse of the rich rituals of the Pre-Reformation past.

The Ecclesiological society echoed Pugin's colourful plea in the wake of the Oxford Movement. In 1850, the society welcomed Viollet-Le-Duc and Jean-Baptiste Antoine Lassus as honorary members when they reported on their restoration of the Sainte Chapelle. Despite his rather extreme rationalistic conception of the Gothic, Viollet-le-Duc embraced the colours of the medieval past, which he compared to those of the Greeks in his *Dictionnaire raisonné*, claiming that: 'Medieval artists, like the Greeks of Antiquity, very often admitted that sculpture should be coloured'.[11]

The chomolithographs of the 'new' Sainte-Chapelle which highlighted the dazzling brightness of its original colours attracted a lot of attention on both sides of the Channel, including from Ruskin,[12] in keeping with his celebration of the Gothic as 'the school of colour' and the Middle Ages as the 'ages of gold.'[13]

While working on the Sainte Chapelle, Viollet-le-Duc embarked in 1849 on the restoration of Amiens cathedral, an edifice completed in the record time of twenty years in the mid -13th century and presenting so many architectural similarities with the Sainte Chapelle that many historians, including Meredith Cohen, now argue that it was a master mason from Amiens, possibly Robert de Luzarches himself, who designed the Sainte-Chapelle.[14]

When the restoration began, Amiens was in a derelict state. Relatively spared by the French revolution, it had been battered by numerous storms and fires which had destroyed much of its original stained glass. But the main damage made done to the cathedral was man-made, in particular in the mid-18th century when the evolution of taste and the aversion for the canons for Gothic polychromy led to a whitewashing of the walls and a replacement of the colourful stained glass by white glass under the pretext that more light was needed in the cathedral. This seems quite surprising given that Amiens is the tallest of French Gothic cathedrals with

nave vaults rising to a height of 144 feet, allowing a maximum of light to flood in through all the lancet windows, as underlined by John Murray who, in his *Handbook for travellers in France* (1847) constantly re-edited thoughout the second half of the 19th century, claimed that on entering the cathedral, 'The mind is filled and elevated by its enormous height, its lofty and many-coloured clerestory, its grand proportions, its noble simplicity.'[15]

This striking elevation, also celebrated by Pugin in his *Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture,*[16] provided 19th-century visitors with the perfect illustration of High Gothic vocabulary stressing the crucial importance of light in the construction of Early French architecture and dispelling 'the ascetic gloom'[17] pervasive in dark Gothic fiction. This emphasis on light echoed neo-Platonic discussions of divine radiance in St Augustine. An heir to these theological debates, abbot Suger, claimed that colour was akin to light, that is to say both visible and immaterial, which enabled him to use luminous materials (notably jewels and stained glass) in the construction and decoration of his new church at Saint Denis, the first Gothic church completed in 1144.[18] But at Amiens colour was not only a matter of light. The cathedral was also an archeological document in Gothic sculptural polychromy as traces of colour were, and are still, visible on both the exterior facade as well as inside the cathedral decorated with a unique collection of later polychrome statues in the choir which narrate the martyrdom of St Firmin on the one hand and that of St John Baptist on the other. These colours, which gave life to the statues, had both an aesthetic and devotional function, especially in the case of the trumeau sculptures at whose feet the crowds used to pray before entering the edifice. However these polychrome vestiges were partly destroyed by Viollet-le-Duc's invasive cleaning of the cathedral in 1856 by means of aggressive silicatisation.[19]

The High Victorian architect William Burges, a disciple of both Pugin and Ruskin who visited Amiens before it was restored by Viollet-le-Duc, singled out this particular cathedral

for his discussion of medieval architectural polychromy in his lectures on 'Art applied to Industry':

> In the Middle Ages we find positive colour and gilding applied directly to stone buildings, […] there are traces of painting on the statues and architecture of many of the French portails such as Amiens, but then they were protected by the great depth of the arch. Coats of arms were generally coloured; the tympana of dormer windows, when protected by the barge-boards, were coloured; and crockets and finials were often gilt.[20]

Among the polychrome statues decorating the porches of Gothic cathedrals, the Vierge Dorée crowning the Southern porch of Amiens certainly stands out as one of the best preserved– certainly because it was frequently repainted in keeping with the cult of the Virgin Mary.[21] This sculpture covered in azurite and gold played an important role in Burges's understanding of Gothic polychromy as well as in his own architectural practice. The Vierge Dorée thus inspired both the bronze Madonna and Child decorating the roof garden of Lord Bute's Cardiff castle against a background of Pompeian murals as well as the liminary polychrome Virgin at the entrance of Castell Coch, which were both sculpted by the Italian artist Ceccardo Fucigna [fig.2].

But the rediscovery of Gothic polychromy was not confined to a circle of French architects and archeologists. Victorian writers also engaged with the colours of the past, and notably with Early French Gothic which progressively replaced Italian Gothic as the model style in the mid-1850s. Burges experienced his first major artistic revelation when he visited Beauvais, Amiens, and Noyon in 1853. Morris also toured the cathedrals of Northern France first in the company of his sister in 1854, before returning there with his Oxford friends Edward Burne-Jones and William Fulford the following summer. Although Beauvais seems

to have been both Burges's and Morris's favourite, it was Amiens which exerted the greatest influence on their artistic and literary imagination. Ruskin, who had travelled there as early as 1844, returned to Picardy in 1849, 1854, 1856, 1868 and in 1880 when he started working on his *Bible of Amiens*.[22]

But why Amiens? Amiens was certainly not the most colourful of Gothic buildings in comparison with the Sainte Chapelle, Saint Denis, Notre-Dame de Paris, or even Chartres. These Victorian writers may have been drawn to the Romantic cachet of Picardy – which Turner and others had celebrated in their topographical watercolours or by the fact that the cathedral was an important monument in medieval and modern Anglo-French history from the Mise of Amiens of 1264, which was a settlement given by Louis IX in the conflict between Henry III of England and his rebellious barons, to the 1802 short-lived peace treaty called 'La Paix d'Amiens' signed between the British and the French. The literary 'virginity' of the cathedral itself, as opposed to Notre Dame de Paris already 'read' by Victor Hugo may also explain this interest in Amiens.

Light and Shadows: Morris's Impressions of Amiens

John Ruskin had indeed encouraged his disciples to read Gothic edifices 'as we would read Milton or Dante' in his celebrated text on 'The Nature of Gothic'.[23] Although Morris singled out this chapter as one of Ruskin's most influential texts, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), also shaped Morris's relationship to the medieval past. In 'The Lamp of Memory' Ruskin asserts that it is both architecture and poetry which keep the memory of ages alive:

> Therefore, when we build, let us think that we build for ever. […] For, indeed, the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, or in its gold.
>
> Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in

> walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity. […] It is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture.[24]

In his description of the glory of architecture, which precedes his condemnation of restoration, Ruskin is careful to distinguish between the material 'gold' decorating the buildings of the past and the metaphorical 'golden stain of time' that constitutes 'the real light, and colour and preciousness of architecture'. In other words, it is the passing of time – however destructive – which endows an edifice with its 'glory', which, in turn, the poet may recall and celebrate.

Memory plays a crucial role in two of Morris's contributions to the short-lived *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856). Morris's contributions to the magazine were numerous and of various forms: poem, romance and essay all of which reflect 'Mr. Ruskin's teaching'[25] and address in some form or other the complex relationship of the narrating I to the past – whether historical or personal. In 'The Story of the Unknown Church' and 'Shadows of Amiens', Morris draws on his personal experience of Amiens, which he had visited in 1855. His friend Fulford also wrote an essay inspired by this shared experience entitled 'A Night in a Cathedral' but contrary to Morris's two texts on Amiens, he draws on the romantic topos of Gothic terror to construe the medieval edifice as both a dark and awful setting and a contaminating force exerting its powers on weakened, impressionable minds. Morris's experience of Amiens is very different from Fulford's fictional account although in 'The Shadows of Amiens' the term 'shadow' is used no fewer than twelve times, as if to recall the fact that it was literally written in the dead of night.[26] In this sense, the essay may be read as a darker, modern counterpart to the prose 'Story of the Unknown Church' set in the Middle Ages, which emphasizes colour in all its material forms (dyes, gems, metals, petals, plumage,

pigment), as well as a variety of light effects from the 'flash of helmets' to the 'glimmer of arms'.[27] However the use of colour notations in 'The Story of the Unknown Church' and 'The Shadows of Amiens' cannot be reduced to a simplistic dichotomy colourful past versus colourless present as the two texts clearly function as companion pieces. Although 'the unknown church' paradoxically conflates anonymity and precision, the time notation ('six hundred years ago')[28] identifies it as possibly Gothic, like 'the cathedral of that great, far-off city, whose name I forget now'.[29] For May Morris her father may have been thinking of Chartres, but Amiens seems a much more plausible hypothesis as Morris weaves a series of echoes between the texts: from the 'spire of the Cathedral…gilt all over with gold'[30] (echoing 'the graceful spire…Once it was gilt all over')[31] to the carving of the Last Judgement referred to in the two pieces. The figure of the carver – like the narrator-craftsman of 'The Story of the Unknown Church' – appears in the opening paragraphs of 'Shadows of Amiens' which equally play on a *mise en abyme* effect of the carved stories within the story. As noted by Florence Boos, the strange time-shift suggested by the sentence 'Ah! do I not love (those builders) with just cause, who certainly loved me, thinking of me sometimes between the strokes of their chisels'[32] signals an 'empathetic leap of Morrissian faith' which underlines 'the continuity of human emotion' in spite the inexorable passage of time.[33] This 'empathetic' sense of anachronism sheds light on the paradoxical narrating posture of the I in 'The Story of the Unknown Church' who tells his story from beyond the grave.

And yet the two texts are about loss, destruction and failing memory. Just as 'no fragment of (the church) was left'[34] in Morris's tale, the essay seems to reduce Amiens to a shadowy presence – that of the thin, unsubstantial 'shadows' of the black and white photographs which he used to recall the details of the sculptures of the cathedral – anticipating Ruskin's own use of Kaltenbacher's photographic aids for his *Bible of Amiens* thirty years later. Morris was particularly aware of the limitations of the medium, which he believed increased the shadows

of his recollection: 'they tell me […] nothing of the colour of the building. […] For facts of colour I have to try and remember the day or two I spent at Amiens, and the reference to the former has considerably dulled my memory of the latter'.[35]

And yet this did not prevent Morris from re-imagining the colours of the Gothic edifice, an emotional reminiscence compensating for the oblivion of architectural detail: 'And I thought that even if I could say nothing else about these grand churches, I could at least tell men how much I loved them'.[36] Although Morris clearly mastered the architect's technolect – he was then apprenticed to G.E. Street -, precedence is here given to feeling over rational analysis. This is further emphasized by the conversational tone pervading the piece as Morris resorts to the Ruskinian device of guiding his reader into the monument, addressing him or her as 'you' and sometimes including them as 'we', so as to recreate the feeling of sympathy for the Gothic which the essay calls for. A 'remembrance of Ruskin'[37] is even conjured up at the end of the essay so as to underline the direct aesthetic filiation.

The reader is also directly addressed in 'The Story of the Unknown Church' which reads as an implicit dialogue with Ruskin, almost a direct illustration of 'The Lamp of Memory' with the metaphor of the wave highlighting the immutable cycles of nature in the opening paragraph describing 'the earth-covered ruins heaving the yellow corn into glorious waves' as well as in the reference to the 'autumn-tide',[38] the transitional melancholy season which provides the tale with its temporal setting. Contrary to the August light that illuminates Amiens in the later essay, 'The Story of the Unknown Church' literally captures the 'golden stain of time' – as the 'golden haze'[39] cast by the rich autumn light falls on the once gilt spire of the cathedral, compensating, as it were, for its material destruction. 'Gold' was evidently a charged colour for Morris who used it both in its material and metaphorical sense. It was the colour best suited to operate anagogical displacements from the material to the immaterial, such as those celebrated by Abbot Suger at Saint Denis.

Such chromatic notations, as described in his 1855 letters to Cormell Price, filled with the same 'blue corn-flowers' and 'scarlet poppies',[40] highlight the essential continuity between the building and its natural setting, culminating with the depiction of the hollyhocks in the church garden 'great *spires* of pink, and orange, and red, and white, with their soft, downy leaves'.[41] Here colour is used once more in both a metaphorical and metonymical sense (pink for the colour of the petals, spires for the Gothic edifice) so as to bring about an organic transmutation of the church, echoing the Romantic narrative of the organicity of Gothic architecture. A natural theologian, Ruskin had indeed explained in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* that 'our building, if it is well composed, is one thing, and is to be coloured as Nature would colour one thing-a shell, a flower, or an animal'.[42] Proust would later define Ruskin's 'religion' of natural beauty in chromatic terms, quoting the following passage from *Modern Painters*:

> …take a wider view of nature, and compare generally rainbows, sunrises, roses, violets, butterflies, birds, goldfish, rubies, opals, and corals, with alligators, hippopotami, lions, wolves, bears, swine, sharks, slugs, bones, fungi, fogs, and corrupting, stinging, destroying things in general, and you will feel then how the question stands between the colourists and chiaroscurists,—which of them have nature and life on their side, and which have sin and death.[43]

In 'The Story of the Unknown Church' Morris sides with Ruskin's colourist. Although the tale has at first a 'quality of static pictorialism',[44] as the story unfolds, the narrator moves away from a heraldic understanding of colour, which excludes chromatic nuance, to embrace both the changing hues of dream-like precious stones 'oh, such birds! Gold and ruby and emerald'[45] as well as colours stained with other traces of colour – like the 'golden and blood-

red wall-flowers'[46] which announce the imminent death of the knight Amyot. Throughout the tale the deictic colour red plays a central role, and by the end of the story explictly turns into a sign which the narrator sadly tries to decipher:

> I remember dwelling on the strange lines the autumn had made in red on one of the gold-green vine leaves, […] and then came bitter, bitter dreams […] they would not go away, they put out the steady glow of the golden haze, the sweet light of the sun through the vine leaves, the soft leaning of the full blown roses.[47]

Just as Ruskin had compared his difficulty in defining 'the Nature of Gothic' with that of linguistically translating 'the Nature of Redness', here the narrator reads between the strange red lines of his own tragic tale anticipating the ultimate discolouration: death.

The chiaruscuro essay 'Shadows of Amiens' differs quite notably from the tale of the unknown church. Here loss immediately translates as greyness ('the grey of Amiens')[48] – a discolouration which is not only the effect of time, distance and of a failing personal memory, but also due to human intervention as the 1771 'whitewashing' is mentioned twice in this short essay. And yet, despite the 'gold' now 'gone',[49] Morris's emphasis on such shadows and blanching, is counterbalanced by a quest for chromatic traces which he invites his reader to imaginatively restore to their original brightness. From the revelation of Pharaoh's dream carved in the 'rich' canopied stalls, under the equally 'rich [...] sweet mellowed stained glass',[50] Morris moves to the polychrome sculptures in the choir-aisles which clearly exerted a fascination over him: 'one cannot help looking at them',[51] he explains before focusing his description on the patron saint of Picardy, St Firmin. If Morris no longer recalls the chronological order of the sculptures, their colours are still vividly impressed on his mind:

> I remember, too, […] the many bishops, […] with their long vestments girded at the waist and falling over their feet, painted too, in light colours, with golden

> flowers on them. I wish I remembered these carvings better, I liked them so much.[52]

However imprecise, Morris's 'dim'[53] memories make the colours of the polychrome 'lifelike' sculptures stand out – and it is through hue rather than through religious iconography that Morris establishes an emphatic bond with the art works. Morris concludes this description by climactically imagining what a full chromatic experience of the cathedral would have been:

> …before that time, some book says, the church was painted from end to end with patterns of flowers and stars, and histories: think—I might have been able to say something about it then, with that solemn glow of colour all about me, as I walked there from sunrise to sunset; and yet, perhaps, it would have filled my heart too full for speaking, all that beauty; I know not.[54]

Here again colour is presented as central to the aesthetic experience of the Gothic building, an experience which articulates the materiality of pigments applied to sculptures or to the walls and the coloured light filtering through the stained glass, 'from sunrise to sunset'.
But Morris also finds traces of polychromy on the porch sculptures as he exits the cathedral through the south transept door. He is indeed arrested by the sculpture of the Virgin about whom he notes 'there is still some gold and vermilion left'.[55] Such fading 'traces' illustrate Ruskin's 'golden stains of time', highlighted by the changing light of the sun which is evoked at the end of the essay:

> Farewell to the cavernous porches of the west front, so grey under the fading August sun, grey with the wind-storms, grey with the rain-storms, grey with the beat of many days' sun, from sunrise to sunset; […]

> Farewell to the spire, gilt all over with gold once, and shining out there, very gloriously; dull and grey now, alas; but still it catches, through its interlacement of arches, the intensest blue of the blue summer sky; and, sometimes at night you may see the stars shining through it.
>
> It is fair still, though the gold is gone.[56]

The poetic rhythm of these two final paragraphs, emphasized by Morris's anaphoras and alliterations, reveals his desire to translate the multiple shades of grey of the Western porch into a harmony in greys, blues and golds, strikingly anticipating James McNeill Whistler's and Monet's impressionistic chromatic arrangements.

'The nuance of the hour united to the colour of the ages': The Impressionistic Gothic of Pater, Symons and Proust

It is this Impressionistic Gothic which will be the focus of this final section. According to Joelle Prungnaud, the new *fin de siècle* cathedral which fascinated both French and English Decadents was heralded as a temple of the modern age and as a 'creative matrix', its fading colours now blending with the hues of modernity.[57] Monet embraced this nostalgic chromophilia for the Gothic in a series of views of Rouen cathedral [fig.3]. These paintings, started in 1892, were conceived as chromatic harmonies, capturing the texture of the stone under different lighting conditions. The French painter may have had Ruskin's prose in mind (he owned a copy of the *Rest of St Mark's*) when he embarked on this ambitious pictorial project, although, as Ségolène Le Men notes, Turner's romantic landscapes, which Monet saw in London in 1892 could have been a more direct influence.[58] Nonetheless, Proust perceives a striking similarity between Ruskin's prose and Monet's series. Uniting the nuance of the hour and the colour of the ages, Proust's impressionistic perceptual mimesis turns material colours

into prismatic hues, thus conjuring up 'the sublime paintings of Monet' as '…when you see for the first time the Western façade of Amiens, blue in the fog, dazzling in the morning having absorbed the sunlight, and then handsomely golden in the afternoon, pink and already freshly nocturnal as the sun sets'.[59]

Ruskin's *Bible of Amiens* was a belated text which shaped the *fin de siècle* Gothic revival. The paradigmatic shift is obvious in Ruskin's description of a coquettish Vierge Dorée as 'a madonna in decadence':

> And, coming quite up to the porch, everybody must like the pretty French Madonna in the middle of it, with her head a little aside, and her nimbus switched a little aside too, like a becoming bonnet. A Madonna in decadence she is, though, for all, or rather by reason of all, her prettiness, and her gay soubrette's smile.[60]

Following in the footsteps of Ruskin's *Bible*, itself conceived as a sacred guidebook, Proust seized upon this description of the smiling Virgin whose gold Ruskin ignored, possibly as too evident a sign of decadent Catholic mariolatry. For Proust, the Virgin was 'tanned by the cold wind of the Venice of the North',[61] a reference to Venice which enabled the French writer to inscribe or rather *incrust* memories of *Stones of Venice* into his translation of the *Bible*, a process emulating Ruskin's own practice of inserting Biblical quotations into his literary monuments 'like the Venetians intercalating in their monuments the sacred sculptures and precious jewels they had brought back from the East'.[62] Amiens, like the Venice of the Renaissance was indeed a colourful town of dyers – the chapel of St Nicolas was thus financed by the wealth of the guilds of woad merchants. The image of the Picard Venice sheds light on Ruskin's nostalgic chromophilia in the *Bible of Amiens*: 'Why should this fountain of rainbows leap up suddenly here by Somme; and a little Frankish maid write herself the sister of Venice, and the servant of Carthage and of Tyre?'[63]

In Ruskin's text, the colours of the Golden Virgin are therefore strikingly displaced onto the landscape and the fabric of the cathedral. Proust on the contrary restores the lost gold of the decadent Madonna to its original brilliance by describing the rays of the sun as erotically caressing the smiling face – a '*caresse momentanée'*.[64] The fugitive union of light and pigment is central to the impressionistic aesthetics which colour Proust's reading of Ruskin, a reading which he hoped would 'impress' the reader, thanks to the 'correct perception of the right nuance'.[65]

But Proust's Bible was an echo chamber (a '*caisse de résonance*')[66] not only coloured by memories of Ruskin's texts and Monet's series: alongside Emile Mâle, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Gustave Moreau and Victor Hugo, Proust discreetly conjures up Walter Pater's essays on Amiens and Vezelay which were already fraught with intertextual references to Ruskin and, possibly, Morris. Pater published 'Notre Dame d'Amiens' in the *Nineteenth Century* in March 1894, the year of his death.[67] Pater drew on Viollet-Le-Duc and Ruskin for his celebration of the purity of Amiens as the 'queen' of Gothic character, '*l'église ogivale par excellence*'[68] as well as an 'open Bible'.[69] Like Pugin, he emphasizes the elevation of the edifice and the flood of light entering this building entirely 'composed of its windows'.[70] However he does not interpret this in theological terms, reading instead Amiens as a monument 'of the artistic genius of laymen'[71] like Robert de Luzarche – in contrast to the 'monastic Vezelay'.[72] By situating Amiens, a 'pre-eminently "secular church"'[73] - in its historical rather than religious context, Pater cancels the mystic sense of 'mystery' and replaces it with a more alluring and sensual form of 'excitement'.[74] This secularization of Amiens enables Pater to describe the genius of the first Gothic builder as that of an 'unconscious Greek',[75] drawing on the example of the 'classically proportioned'[76] *Beau Dieu*, another polychrome sculpture to which Pater nonetheless prefers the 'gilded' Virgin of the South Transept.[77]

The Gothic style is thus read by Pater as a 'novel aesthetic effect'.[78] Pater's secular conception of Amiens as flooded with light leads him to discuss the remaining stained glass windows of the cathedral as faded reminiscences of the colours of the past.[79] Pater then moves on from this contextualisation of the Gothic to a reflexion on the impressionistic experience of the modern viewer confronted with that 'very ancient light' and the vanishing polychrome traces reduced as mere 'substance of thought'.[80] As in Proust's text, the fleeting sunlight substitutes for these lost colours. Pater turns loss and effacement into aesthetic gain as he reflects on what this fading meant, not to the history of the edifice, but to him, the modern 'reader' of Amiens. This discussion of 'Gothic polychrome'[81] leads him to repeat the aesthetic credo which he had formulated twenty years earlier in the preface to the Renaissance:

> We are reminded that after all we must of necessity look on the great churches of the Middle Age with other eyes than those who built or first worshipped in them; that there is something verily worth having, and a just equivalent for something else lost, in the mere effect of time, and that the salt of all aesthetic study is in the question,–What, precisely what, is this to me? You and I, perhaps, should not care much for the mural colouring of a medieval church, could we see it as it was; might think it crude, and in the way. What little remains of it at Amiens has parted, indeed, in the course of ages, with its shrillness and its coarse grain.[82]

In keeping with his ambivalent response to the polychromy of Greek statues, which he shunned as much as embraced, Pater here ambiguously describes the beauty of 'medieval colour' as 'decayed' to the point of being 'no question of colour at all'.[83] 'Gothic polychome' he notes has become a poetic trace which cannot (and should not) be restored to its original brighteness – as this would 'frustrate' the proper 'ripening' of the work[84] – which almost

seems to echo Ruskin's denunciation of the heresy of colour restoration in his 1854 'Addresses on Decorative Colour'.[85]

Ten years after Pater, Symons added his own contribution to this literary lineage. His 'Lady of Amiens' was first published in August 1903, in the *Weekly Critical Review*. The essay was then republished in 1906 in his *Studies in the Seven Arts* under the title 'Cathedrals' alongside two short pieces on Canterbury and Cologne and St Etienne de Bourges. Just as the *Studies* were placed under the aegis of Pater's 'School of Giorgione', Symons's 'Cathedral' series and 'our Lady of Amiens' in particular, appears as a strikingly Paterian text. For instance, Symons notes his 'excitement' about Amiens's Pointed Style, a sensual excitement which needs to be contrasted with his coldness towards Cologne, described as having 'the chilliness of Protestantism, all the colour scraped off the visible world'.[86] Explicit echoes of Viollet-le-Duc and of Ruskin as read by Pater also pervade the essay which Symons inscribes over these preceding tributes to the 'immense stone page' of Amiens.[87] A Decadent attracted to the rich ornamentation of Catholic worship, Symons grounds his description of the Picard cathedral in the materiality of its remaining colours. Amiens is thus depicted as a 'priceless jewel'[88] reminiscent of the gem-like walls of the New Jerusalem, a key theological source for Gothic architects in the 12th and 13th centuries.[89] In this essay, it seems indeed as if Symons tried to blend the prismatic hues of contemporary experimentations on the additive (or optical) mixture of pigments with liturgical discussions of colour as light. This attention to the effects of light falling on the cathedral reveals Symons's Impressionism which he believed to be 'the pictorial art of the century', with the aim of capturing 'the exquisite record of an instant'[90] – a very Paterian formula indeed: 'There is an immense cheerfulness in this daylight church, itself so warm with light, the white stone as if just a little browned by the sun. [...] Here it is not abstract reason to which a chilly light bears witness, but rather the whole temple, alive with natural life.'[91]

This ‘life’ and warmth is best perceptible in the ‘painted stone carvings’ of the choir, ‘mostly in golds and reds and blues, now dulled to a finer than their original colour’[92] which Symons celebrates as living sculptures, brought back to life by colour. The Vierge dorée is therefore surprisingly displaced and replaced by another blue and gold female figure, Salomé [fig.4], who is also represented in the stained-glass windows of the cathedral and whose narrative Symons ‘reads’ with excitement and in the present tense:

> Salome has just ended her dance; Herod and Herodias sit at the table behind her, and she stands, fingering a long curl, smiling and as yet un- conscious, indifferent; a dainty, naive little person, like the Salome of Lucas Cranach, cruel through indifference; and she catches sight of a man bringing a dish to the table; he has something on a platter, and she says, ‘Give me presently the head of John the Baptist, on a platter’; […] She wears a girdle from which a heavy chain falls down the front of her gold-flowered dress ; the blue lining is seen as she lifts it coquettishly.[93]

‘Coquettishly’ partly resonates with Ruskin’s description of the Golden Virgin as a ‘bright-glancing soubrette’[94] but Salomé offers a cruel contrast to the figure of the Raphaelesque *Madonne nourrice*, the dainty patterns of her ‘gold-flowered’ dress jarring with the ‘red veins’ of St John the Baptist’s severed head. The colourful figure of Salomé is evidently a culturally charged image, not only recalling Symons’s own poems on the Biblical femme fatale, but also bringing together the Symbolist paintings of Gustave Moreau, the illustrations of Wilde’s Salome by Symons’s friend Aubrey Beardsley, as well as the chromatic choreographies of Loie Fuller whom Symons, who was also a dance critic,[95] particularly admired – possibly another faint echo of the ‘rhythms of architecture’ described by Ruskin in the ‘Nature of Gothic’.

Confronted with the burden of this immense stone page and father text, Morris, Pater, Symons and Proust strove to superimpose their own impressions of Amiens over Ruskin's. This palimpsest was a colourful one as the vanishing pigments of the porch and choir sculptures offered an evanescent trace on which these writers could weave their own narrative of Amiens. But Ruskin's golden stain of time nonetheless left its mark on these belated readings of Amiens. And today he is still quoted in the commentary accompanying the virtual reconstitution of the polychromy of the Gothic façade every summer evening – a dazzlingly colourful show based on the pigment analyses carried out since the 1990s [fig.5]. A pendant to the recent projections of Monet's paintings on the façade of Rouen cathedral, this pixel animation anachronistically captures both the Gothic and impressionistic effort to transcend coloured materials into prismatic-hues – a belated magic lantern reviving the rainbow colours of the past.

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[1] Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Dover Publication, 2002), 6.

[2] See for instance Davide Vago, *Proust en couleur,* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012).

[3] See in particular Emily Eells 'Nos pères nous ont dit: Proust et *La Bible d'Amiens* de Ruskin', *Bulletin Marcel Proust*, LIV (2004): 51-63; 'The Victorians at Amiens: Translation and Transposition' in *A Palavra e a Imagem,* ed. Alcinda Pinheiro de Sousa, Alda Correia and Teresa de Ataíde Malafaia (Lisbon: University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, 2007): 83-98; '*La Bible d'Amiens*: translation and transformation' in *Translating practices: through language to culture* (New York / Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009), 131-144; as well as Cynthia Gamble, 'Proust-Ruskin perspectives on La Vierge Dorée at Amiens', *Word & image*, n°3, vol.9 (July-Sept 1993): 270-286; 'Insights in Ruskin's Northern French Gothic: Abbeville, Amiens & Rouen' (The Ruskin Programme, Lancaster University, 2002) ; *Ruskin, Turner: dessins et voyages en Picardie romantique* (Amiens: Musée de Picardie, 2003) ; and more recently Jérôme Bastianelli, *Proust et Ruskin: La Bible d'Amiens, Sésame et les Lys et autres textes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2015).

[4] Marcel Proust, *Le Temps Retrouvé,* 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), 2:241: 'je bâtirai mon livre, je n'ose pas dire ambitieusement comme une cathédrale, mais tout simplement comme une robe'.

[5] Marcel Proust, *La Bible d'Amiens, traduction, notes et preface* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1910), 69. My translation.

[6] On Proust's palimpsests, see Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degree* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982).

[7] John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture, The Complete Works of John Ruskin (CW),* ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols., (London: George Allen, 1903-1912), 8:234.

[8] Proust, *La Bible d'Amiens*, 67. On Monet and Gothic architecture, see also the catalogue of the recent exhibition at the National Gallery: Richard Thomson, *Monet and architecture* (London: National Gallery Company Ltd, 2018).

[9] Ibid., 250.

[10] Ibid., 338.

[11] Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, 'Peinture', *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle,* vol.7 (Édition BANCE — MOREL de 1854 à 1868): 56-109, at 106. My translation.

[12] Jean-Michel Leniaud and Françoise Perrot, *La Sainte Chapelle* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, 2007), 41.

[13] Ruskin, *Modern Painters, CW,* 5:321.

[14] Meredith Cohen, *The Sainte-Chapelle and the Construction of Sacral Monarchy: Royal Architecture in Thirteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 110.

[15] John Murray, *A Handbook for travellers in France* (London: John Murray, 1854), 17.

[16] Eells 'The Victorians at Amiens: Translation and Transposition', 87.

[17] Charles L. Eastlake, *A History of the Gothic Revival* (London: Longmans Green, 1872), 113.

[18] This sensitivity to light (rather than hue) in the Middle Ages has been well analysed by Michel Pastoureau who retraces these 12th century debates about the earthly or spiritual nature of colour in 'L'Eglise et la couleur des origines à la Réforme', *Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes* t.147 (1989): 203-230.

[19] Vincent Brunelle, 'Bilan du chantier de restauration des portails de la façade occidentale de la cathédrale d'Amiens', in *La couleur et la pierre, Polychromie des portails gothiques*, ed. Delphine Steyaert and Denis Verret (Paris: Editions A. et J. Picard, 2002), 223-232, at 226.

[20] William Burges, *Lectures on Art Applied to Industry* (Oxford and London: John Henry and James Parker, 1865), 100.

[21] Stephen Murray, 'Pourquoi la polychromie? Réflexions sur le rôle de la sculpture polychromée de la cathédrale d'Amiens', in *La couleur et la pierre, Polychromie des portails gothiques*: 207-212, at 210.

[22] Gamble, *Ruskin, Turner: dessins et voyages en Picardie romantique*, 9.

[23] Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, *CW*, 10:206.

[24] Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture, CW,* 8:233-4.

[25] Richard Watson Dixon qtd in Florence S. Boos, 'A Holy Warfare against the Age': Essays and Tales of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol.47, n°3, (Fall 2014): 344-368, at 344.

[26] J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris,* 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1901), 1:96.

[27] William Morris, 'The Story of the Unknown Church' (1856), in *The Collected Works of William Morris,* ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans Green and Company, 1910), 1: 150 and 156.

[28] Ibid., 149.

[29] Ibid., 156.

[30] Ibid., 150.

[31] William Morris, 'The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens', in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 1: 350.

[32] Ibid., 349.

[33] Florence S. Boos, 'The Structure of Morris's Tales for the "Oxford and "Cambridge Magazine"', *Victorian Periodicals Review,* vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 2-12, at 3.

[34] Morris, 'The Story of the Unknown Church', 149.

[35] Morris, 'Shadows of Amiens', 354-5.

[36] Ibid., 349.

[37] Ibid., 362.

[38] Morris, 'The Story of the Unknown Church', 149.

[39] Ibid., 156 and 157.

[40] Morris quoted in John Purkis, *Morris, Burne-Jones and French Gothic, being an account of a walking tour in France July to August 1855,* (William Morris Society, 1991), 17.

[41] Morris, 'The Story of the Unknown Church', 151 (my emphasis).

[42] Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture, CW,* 8:177.

[43] Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, *CW,* 6:69 (also qtd in Proust, *La Bible d'Amiens*, 53).

[44] Hartley S. Spatt, 'William Morris and the Uses of the Past', *Victorian Poetry*, vol.13, N°3/4 (Fall-Winter 1975): 1-9 at 2.

[45] Morris, 'The Story of the Unknown Church', 155.

[46] Ibid., 154.

[47] Ibid., 157.

[48] Morris, 'Shadows of Amiens', 355.

[49] Ibid., 366.

[50] Ibid., 352.

[51] Ibid., 353.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 353-4.

[55] Ibid., 355.

[56] Ibid., 366.

[57] Joëlle Prungnaud, *Figures littéraires de la cathédrale, 1880-1918* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2008), 247.

[58] Ségolène Le Men, 'Grand cathédraliste: La cathédrale de Monet en regards', in *Cathédrales, 1789-1914, Un mythe moderne,* ed. Sylvain Amic and Ségolène Le Men (Paris: Somology, 2014): 48-59, at 50.

[59] Proust, La *Bible d'Amiens*, 32.

[60] Ruskin, *The Bible of Amiens*, *CW,* 33: 128.

[61] Proust, *La Bible d'Amiens*, 28.

[62] Ibid., 12.

[63] Ruskin, *The Bible of Amiens*, 33: 26-7.

[64] Proust, *La Bible d'Amiens*, 24.

[65] Ibid., 11.

[66] Ibid., 10.

[67] Pater had visited France, and possibly Amiens, in the summer of 1893. I would like to thank Lene Østermark-Johansen for this information.

[68] Walter Pater, 'Notre Dame d'Amiens' (1894), in *The Works of Walter Pater,* 8 vols (London: Macmillan, 1901), 8: 109-125, at 112.

[69] Ibid., 119.

[70] Ibid., 113.

[71] Ibid., 110.

[72] Ibid., 119.

[73] Ibid., 115.

[74] Ibid., 113.

[75] Ibid., 120.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 114.

[79] Ibid., 115-6.

[80] Ibid., 117.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 118.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ruskin, 'Addresses on Decorative Colour', *CW,* 12:503.

[86] Arthur Symons, 'Canterbury and Cologne' (1903), in *Studies in the Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable, 1906): 151-158, at 151.

[87] Arthur Symons, 'Our Lady of Amiens' (1903), *Studies in the Seven Arts*: 158-165, at 158.

[88] Ibid.

[89] In his analysis of Gothic architecture Otto von Simson explains that 'the Christian sanctuary is, liturgically and mystically, an image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the eschatological vision described in the book of Revelation. The medieval dedication rite establishes this relationship in explicit terms and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries appear singularly preoccupied with this symbolic significance of sacred architecture' Otto von Simson quoted in Laurene Hull Stookey, 'The Gothic Cathedral as the Heavenly Jerusalem: Liturgical and theological Sources', *Gesta*, vol.8, N°1 (1969): 35-41, at 35.

[90] Arthur Symons, 'The Painting of the Nineteenth Century' (1903), *Studies in the Seven Arts*: 31-68, at 43.

[91] Symons 'Our Lady of Amiens', 159.

[92] Ibid., 161.

[93] Ibid., 161-2.

[94] Ruskin, *The Bible of Amiens*, 33:128.

[95] On Symons and dance, see Lene Østermark-Johansen's 'The Rhythms of Life and Art: Symons and the Interrelationship between Sculpture and Dance at the Fin de Siècle' in *Arthur Symons, Poet, Critic, Vagabond*, ed. Stefano Evangelista and Elisa Bizzotto (Cambridge : Legenda, 2018), 12-29.