“Possible, it is beyond human art to convey the sense of something lost, but eternally present, that such places inspire. In every light, and in every season, it possesses a transcendent beauty; but in summer it is very paradise”[1]

10. Transports of Delight

10.1. Further, Ever Further

It is here in my penultimate chapter, that I now need to go beyond all individual stories and beyond the simple links founded upon physical comparisons or even the intriguing spatial and temporal conjunctions. And with this step, these final two chapters are each directly concerned with the purpose of all transports. I want to start by making what, at first, may seem to be a rather strange assertion. I want to claim that the fundamental purpose of each and all these diverse forms of ‘transport’ is exactly the same. Since this proposition is probably most difficult to support with respect to the gothic cathedrals, it is with them that I start.

When I was disoriented in time during that very early morning visit to Rheims Cathedral, now so long ago, it was as the pipe-organ began to sound that I knew that what I was looking at was the height of technology. I understood that it was only my own transience that rendered such a vision displaced in time. Rheims was of course the height of technology when first built. But there again so are all technologies when they are first created. My misperception here was due to the fact that this gothic technology had been just too good. It has lasted so long that, as a fleeting being, limited to my own narrow pocket of time, I could not “see”
Rheims as it truly was. I was as constrained in my own way as my daughter had been in trying to “see” the Spruce Goose. It is as if one of our own contemporary supercomputers had somehow managed to last a thousand years and was still functioning, at least to some degree. It would seem to my millennial cousin just as anachronistic then as the cathedral now appeared to me. Indeed, with the rate of accelerating technology it would probably appear to be much more so [2], it being rather unlikely that almost anything we build today will last a thousand years. An empathic understanding of this proposition only serves to show how sadly limited is the window of time through which any one of us can ever look [3].

I know now that the builders of Rheims and its various gothic peers were not simply reaching toward God. Their fundamental purpose was to carry all of us up with them. For both the ‘crew’ and the ‘passengers’ engaged upon this voyage, transportation to another realm was, and remains, the primary goal. The destination is always a desired but chimerical ‘promised land.’ Even as the congregation and clerics raise their eyes to heaven, they can never avoid the metaphor of transport. For the internal construction of all gothic cathedrals resembles nothing so much as the inside of an up-turned liner. Cathedrals and ocean liners are womb-like in their configuration and airships even more so since you are privileged to actually ‘ride’ inside them. You can yourself experience this transition simply by looking up at the inside any of the great gothic cathedrals of northern Europe [4]. Not merely transports then, each of these conveyances actually recapitulate your own mother! They are warm and nurturing inside; they move you and you need only exert little effort to achieve such passage; they sustain you materially and spiritually. No wonder