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Creativity Paper

A Scholastic Comparison of Gothic Architecture and Dante's *Divine Comedy*

Question: Which is more creative, Gothic architecture or Dante's *Divine Comedy*?

In order to discuss this question fully, all four aspects of creativity must be applied to these two subjects. Thus, the five articles of this inquiry will be outlined under the following points:

1. Uniqueness or Novelty;
2. Value;
3. Intent;
4. Implementation Excellence and Continuance;
5. Comparative import of the above four points.

Article 1. What is unique or novel about each which sets it above the other?

THE FIRST POINT: 1. First regarding Gothic architecture (GA), it displays marvelous ingenuity regarding its implementation and design. It took ideas from previous architectural styles (particularly the arch and groin vault) and morphed them into something new and altogether superior. The architects employing this method were able to take the same materials and create a structure which was impossible to construct using previous methods.

2. The *Divine Comedy* also displays novelty in how Dante chose to not only portray the afterlife and its many levels, but also in *how* Dante teaches the reader about it all. In allowing himself to be guided through hell, purgatory, and finally heaven, he provides a clear, easily understood description of what we should expect the afterlife to be like. He could have chosen to simply elaborate on Biblical teachings, but he would not have been able to convey with the same power the message he wished for all who would read the *Divine Comedy* to come away understanding.

ON THE OTHER HAND while it can be seen that GA is not the same as Roman or Romanesque architectural styles, it did have its roots there and did borrow ideas and concepts from them (such as an understanding of the distribution of weight and how to support large loads). Thus, it cannot be regarded as totally unique. Likewise, the DC takes principles and ideas taught by the church, redresses them, and repeats them basically as they existed in the doctrines held by the church. Also, Dante was certainly not the first to portray a character descending through hell. Dante's own guide in *Divine Comedy*, Virgil, wrote the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas journeys to the Underworld. His ideas are clearly not unique in this respect.

REPLY: It is agreed that neither of these are totally unique in their origins. However, they both exhibit novelty and uniqueness in how they go about accomplishing their goals. This will be further discussed below under Point Four, but suffice it to say that they were creative in this aspect. As to which is more creative regarding uniqueness, it seems clear that Dante's *Divine*

Comedy will receive this point. GA is, again, more or less a linear outgrowth or development of previous architectural styles. *Divine Comedy*, on the other hand, is more lateral in its culmination and integration of ideas from various sources and in its general artistic style and presentation.

Article 2. Which is more valued?

THE SECOND POINT: 1. The towns where famous and beautiful cathedrals found their homes soon became patrons to traveling fairs. In the late medieval period, fairs became increasingly popular and profitable. Thus, if a town had a large cathedral, it could not only draw pilgrims, but could also draw highly profitable ventures to the town. For this purpose, these cathedrals were highly valued by even the less-pious. Regarding the pilgrims and pious believers, the advent of GA allowed for an altogether better experience at church. Compared to their predecessors, gothic cathedrals were lighter inside (due to larger windows), taller (due to advances in architectural design), and generally more ornate (also due to large windows, allowing interior details to be appreciated as well as those on the exterior). Thus, the faithful appreciated and valued the new GA.

2. At the time of its publication and for a great deal of time thereafter, *Divine Comedy* was a well and widely read work. Many of the educated held (and even now, hold) it in the highest regard as an artistic work. The fact that it has survived to our day is also a testament as to its value; paper copies of a text are harder to preserve than works of stone (i.e. cathedrals), so to have copies of *Divine Comedy* survive in its entirety nearly 700 years attests to its value.

ON THE OTHER HAND while large fairs tended to congregate in cities with large gothic cathedrals, we must ask the question, were they there because of the cathedral itself, or were they there because the cathedrals denoted a location of stability? Clearly it must be the latter, as the life of a merchant it built around turning a profit and it is much easier to establish a successful fair in a place which is stable (i.e. safe from marauding barons or knights) and to which people will freely gather. A town with a large cathedral is hence an ideal place because in order to build one in the first place, one needs a safe, stable environment and, above all, money. In other words, they could have built a giant horse out of stone and it would have denoted stability in the same fashion.

Regarding *Divine Comedy*, while Dante's contemporaries may have valued it, today it has become one of those "required texts" that many have to read. It is not valued for its content, rather for its ability to earn point in a scholastic setting.

REPLY: Beyond the mere face value of each and its availability to the general public (virtually anyone could own a copy of *Divine Comedy*, while even the most wealthy would have a hard time purchasing a gothic cathedral), each is valuable in its own right. *Divine Comedy* is valued by some due to its artistic beauty and by others for its insight. It is rather unfair to judge its value based on fads or social trends and acceptance, though in this particular setting, the variance in relative value provides a baseline for judging GA as well. While one could hypothesize that modern architecture is more valuable than GA due to our greater understanding and ability to build structures to even higher heights which allow even more light in to them, the fact remains that GA is still highly valued. The general public today values the beauty of these buildings and the skill required to build them. Unlike *Divine Comedy*, the value of GA has not varied

appreciably, consequently, we can see, in conjunction with their multifaceted purposes (spiritual, economic, and social), GA is more highly valued than the *Divine Comedy*.

Article 3. Which is more creative regarding intent?

THE THIRD POINT: 1. It is obvious that the architects intended to create these cathedrals. There was planning involved beforehand as well as ongoing problem-solving work done throughout the construction process to resolve problems. Also, they showed directed advancement in architectural design and theory in order to achieve their ends.

2. Creative intent virtually oozes from *Divine Comedy*. He wrote it with several purposes, including political and spiritual commentaries. Dante did not accidentally write a multi-layered mini-epic. He set out to write a great work and was creative enough to interweave criticism of current Florentine leaders as well as church leaders, while at the same time promoting the Church and discussing how one should live his life. Not only that, but Dante used an elaborate symbol structure revolving around key numbers (e.g. 10, 100, etc.). He built his story up to make a point and was able to do it in a clear and easily perceivable manner.

ON THE OTHER HAND, even though advances were made in the field of architecture, they were, for the most part, only partially understood. The architects of the time did not fully understand why the use of pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses allowed for radical changes in the wall thickness and use of windows. They more or less stumbled upon it and employed it without fully comprehending the principles governing the design (e.g. the Beauvais cathedral was built too high and collapsed shortly after its completion).

REPLY: Even in our modern age we do not fully understand the physics behind the structures we build and what their limitations might be (e.g. Tacoma Narrows Bridge). However, in light of our current discussion, it is clear that the award for intent falls to Dante. He meant to write everything he did and even encouraged readers to delve deep into hidden meanings he placed in the *Divine Comedy*. His was an intentional creation, while the development of GA was less so.

Article 4. How do implementation excellence and continuance stack up?

THE FOURTH POINT: 1. The architects were driven to create the best they knew how by several factors. First, they had to provide an acceptable work that would last for a long time, or else they would be poorly paid and may have found it difficult to find more work. Second, there was a healthy competition between the cities, and consequently, between designers, to build bigger, taller, lighter, more beautiful cathedrals. To accomplish these goals, they worked harder and smarter and as a result became better and better at their craft. The continuance and excellence of their work is still evident. The cathedrals still stand. The Cathedral of Notre Dame was begun in 1163 and still stands today. All of the surviving cathedrals (which is most of them) are hard evidence of the quality of the architects' skill and work. The mere fact that they can be admired today attests to how well the architects worked their craft. Also, the prevalence of apprenticeships helped to preserve and foster the art of architecture. A young apprentice would

study under a master, then move on to build his own cathedral on the principles he learned from his master as well as implementing his own ideas to make his cathedral better.

2. Similarly, *Divine Comedy*'s existence today is not only evidence of its value, but of its continuance and implementation excellence. We would not still be reading it today if it was poorly worded or irrelevant or boring. His ability to work his own craft – with the pen rather than the drafting board – demonstrates how well he wrote. His continuance lies in the fact that we are still analyzing, evaluating, and discussing the *Divine Comedy* to this day. He wrote on a subject that is of importance to man in all ages and in such a way that many still want to read it.

ON THE OTHER HAND while GA was good for its time, we've done much better since. Its continuance is limited to that time period since architecture has progressed and we have moved on from the usage of stone in large buildings. Flying buttresses have found little use since the time of the gothic cathedrals. GA was a suitable design for the time, but lacked abiding relevance and use.

As to the *Divine Comedy*, who reads it? For the most part, it is a required text in schools. It is something we are told by our teachers as being a text of significance and beauty. For most people, however, it has lost the importance it once held on the hearts of people. Many of the people he wrote about have long since died and faded into obscurity, especially those political leaders he belittled and whose regime he hoped to foil. *Divine Comedy* enjoys a sort of forced continuance and leads one to wonder if it would survive longer than a generation or two if it were not forced upon us in school.

REPLY: Simply because a particular style of architecture is not in use today does not mean that it was not a good one or does not deserve admiration for its quality. For the time, the ability to stack rock 140 feet into the air was an amazing accomplishment. We can only do better today because of a better knowledge of the mechanics behind such a structure and due to improved structural materials (e.g. steel reinforced concrete). Again, the fact that the cathedrals still stand is ample proof of their implementation excellence and continuance. As for the *Divine Comedy*, while it may not be on the New York Times Bestseller List, it remains an important and skillful work. The fact that it is admired today, nearly 700 years after its publication, demonstrates how well Dante wrote and its continued importance in literature studies. In this case, though, it would seem that GA has the advantage. Dante's *Divine Comedy* was a work of one man and his creative genius. Gothic cathedrals, however, demonstrate man's creative ability to shape materials and in directing the efforts of others working in concert to create a lasting work of art. The architects needed more skills than just those evident in the design of the buildings, but they acted as foremen on the job site, directing workers, inspecting construction, and solving problems. That they displayed implementation excellence is evident in the beauty of the cathedrals, which can be appreciated by even the simplest passerby. Continuance is manifest in how they have remained standing through the Hundred Years War, two World Wars, and numerous other conflicts, not to mention the corrosive and degrading effects of the environment. Gothic architecture clearly demonstrates superiority in implementation excellence and continuance.

Article 5. How do these four areas compare in importance in determining creative superiority?

THE FIFTH POINT: 1. All four of the above points must be present in determining if a work is truly creative or not. However, different factors weight in differently in importance. Intent is clearly high in importance since accidental discoveries are not nearly as impressive as planned, expected creative actions. There also must be skill displayed in the resulting work, or its value is depreciated. If some work is not valued, then certainly it is not judged creative, as evidenced in a discussion of random number generation. Who cares if someone thinks of a number that no one has thought of before if that number does not answer some question or affect science or politics or economics? Regarding uniqueness and novelty, without it, the work is not new, special, or different from currently existing ideas.

ON THE OTHER HAND while uniqueness is important, it should be considered the lowest of the four. Simply being a novel idea will not make it creative unless the idea is useful or elegant in its presentation. As the old axiom states: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." This applies to the value of an idea or work. Value is such a transitory descriptor, as evidenced in the discussion of *Divine Comedy* above. Thus, it too is a poor indicator of creativity. The directed behavior toward a definite accomplishment, intent, acts as the fulcrum for determining creativity. Without it, a work is not creative; while even if an idea/work has this quality, it may not be creative.

REPLY: The rank of importance regarding these four points is as follows:

1. Intent – accidental greatness in an idea/work is not creative
2. Implementation excellence and continuance – poorly done work is not easily repeatable and is of little use to others
3. Value – based on the above two and popular opinion (variable)
4. Uniqueness and novelty – requires the above three to define something creative

CONCLUSION: Simply put, the results of this investigation yield rather ambiguous results. Dante's *Divine comedy* demonstrates intent (number 1 in creative importance) as well as uniqueness (number 4 in importance). Gothic architecture, on the other hand, ranks higher in the middle areas, value and implementation excellence/continuance. The discussion, therefore, is a question of opinion regarding which of the four is truly most important. The opinions herein are my own and are by no means definitive. Art appreciation and beauty is certainly "in the eye of the beholder."