

## Foreword

by Éric Fottorino

Jointly written in French and in the language of Shakespeare, the English title chosen for this work of art, *Romanesque Reflections*, opens various doors of my consciousness, each revealing a different facet of reality. In French, I cannot articulate the expression, “*art roman*”, without contemplating also “*art du roman*”. *Roman*, in this instance, signifies a novel, which describes a fictional story - alluding to the mysterious world of romance and imagination, culminating in a marriage between reality and dreams. Like all stories, it takes its time and leaves its mark. Each Romanesque church can be likened to a bookmark in the great book of life, built by men with their eyes on heaven but conscious of belonging to earth. They lived with an awareness of the prospect of death, transferring the expression of their devotion to their work. The builder and the novelist join together in this quest: one takes the form of a silhouette against the skyline and the other as lines across paper. *Roman*: it was a belief, once upon a time... Instinctively also, I cannot separate Romanesque art from a pool of light. I am forced to think of Jean Cocteau and his words to the wise: « *Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir avant de renvoyer les images.* » (Mirrors should reflect - think about it - before they return images.) According to our friends across the Channel, this light is a reflection. I thus entertain thoughts of glimmers of light piercing the daylight and the darkness of the night. It is impossible for me to envision this play of chiaroscuro as a divine reflection or even a supernatural one. Hence my confusion, as the French title, *Lumières romanes*, seems to be turned inside out when sat alongside its English title, *Romanesque Reflections*.

I think the English words say it all, namely the essence of life is a never-ending question: why are we here, what is the meaning of our existence and to what end? For those, like me, caught up in the dizzying fear of nothingness, the continuing existence of these churches provides an initial answer, if not the beginnings of proof. Romanesque art, created by men, yet greater than men, is an emblem of hope, haloed in silence, magnified by a bright light, and how I don't know, but manifesting the Hand of God without fuss and bother. Before turning the pages to

discover these treasures captured by Philippe Julien-Labruyère, in association with the detailed descriptions written by Isabelle Oberson and Maggie Cole, the mind wanders. The monuments in question are neither tall nor imposing, yet they raise the eyes and lighten the soul. They fill our hearts with joy because they also reveal human passion, fervour, style and talent, which have been disseminated across the landscape to create these peaceful havens. Stocky or gracefully slender, humble or majestic, they are monuments which have given the Charentes its soul, enhancing its welcoming and rural spirit, without putting on airs. They have belonged to my mental landscape since my childhood when I connected with them whilst on my cycle rides through the quiet Saintonge villages, which were defended by these stone sentinels that have sometimes offered me protection from the sun and wind. These churches form a line of stone, rather like Alexander Calder's three-dimensional wire sculptures. These sacred monuments, resplendent in daylight, so beautiful to behold, bring good fortune. We have protected them, but it is they who protect us, while we watch them. They inspire confidence and simultaneously stimulate our muse, these concepts born from a novel. They are our roots in full view. The changing reflections play upon them, shaping and transforming them, so no facet remains the same.

Once upon a time I remember taking a walk in the countryside, long ago in the 20<sup>th</sup> century! Suddenly the rain came, taking me once again by surprise. Quickly it became an intense lightning storm, accompanied by thunder, bringing a cloudburst of torrential rain. The almost continuous thunder and lightning forced me to seek shelter - anywhere in safety would do. Dripping, but relieved, I came across the door of one of these churches, which offered me its gift by simply being open. The harshness of the outside elements stood in stark contrast to the brilliance of the interior. The windows sparkled, refracting each particle of daylight to enlarge and transcend it, transforming the light from without. I recall the quality of the silence, its very depth. My footsteps resonated and extended the hollowness all around. This was the moment when the "*roman*", (church or novel) closes upon itself - all the better to listen and to drive you inward. But which "*roman*" am I now describing? It matters but little. If the novel is a beautiful story, of what importance is it whether or not it is based upon truth. Take note of that fact, all you who accept this invitation to travel far on this intimate journey full of

aspirations and dreams. These illuminated churches, sometimes indeed, illuminating, offer each of us a chance to take an adventure upon which we must carry our own sensibilities, our beliefs and our hopes. What of God in all this? It is the reader who must finish this novel. God has no reason to appear, in order to be. Is that not strange? All that is needed to give the appearance of flesh from the stone on either the chevet of St Eutrope or at Fontdouce, is the reddish glow from the setting sun, for God, like the light, will be. Thus the art of the novel is joined with that of Romanesque art. "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend", said the newspaper man at the end of John Ford's film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, - "when heroes don't exist it is necessary to invent them." The legend is beautiful. Take that into account with this book, here in print!

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