Gothic architecture as an art form was perfected by Suger, who in the 12th century became abbot of St. Denis, the mother church of France. Located on the northern outskirts of Paris, this basilica was the burial place for the royalty and answered only to the crown, not to ecclesiastical authority. Suger was a statesman, an advisor to his former classmate at St. Denis, Henry VI, who appointed him abbot in 1122. In his administrative capacity, Suger ordered construction of a new abbey, which was eventually dedicated in 1144. The new edifice became the prototype for gothic cathedrals elsewhere in Europe. A pilgrimage to the shrine will reveal why Christian congregations in other cities have attempted to emulate it. I have visited the site but once. The sunlight, streaming at a downward angle through the stained glass windows, illuminated the myriad of dust motes in the air, creating a radiant multicolored phantasm. Moved beyond words, I felt I was standing in the presence of the holy.

The three characteristics which uniquely define the gothic style are these: (1) a geometrically coherent structure, featuring (2) minimal walls and (3) maximum light. The slenderest possible
columns are desired, permitting the widest possible windows. Suger's vision translated the "principle of transparency" into actual practice architecturally.¹

Previous architectural styles featured churches with massive walls and small windows. The interiors were comparatively somber and dark. Gothic was not a mere rival to the romanesque and byzantine designs that preceded it. It was an antithesis to these earlier forms, not the extension of an inherited tradition. A new artistic horizon was revealed.

Suger is given credit for bringing this new style to its purest form. But the gothic ideal as a Christian expression did not originate in the medieval era. It began with Jesus and his proclamation of the Kingdom. Gothic architecture transpired because of ideas inherent within a philosophical tradition animated by Jesus' vision of the Kingdom. Jesus is the original reason cathedrals were eventually conceived.

In the scriptures the Kingdom is set against the backdrop of the temple in Jerusalem, which Jesus approached dialectically. "I tell you," he admonished the Pharisees, "something greater than the temple is here."² The temple was massive, anchored in the earth. It did not ascend; the Lord descended. Nor was it conceived as a work of art. Its aim was to provide a common frame within which the human and the divine could interact. Its purpose was plain,
but it was never intended as an artistic triumph.

The temple was the holy of holies in which the Torah was enshrined. In Judaism, the essential feature which uniquely distinguished the chosen people was the covenant they shared with the Lord. This joinder of mutual interests was inherently legalistic. Abject obedience to the divine ordinances was required of the people. The Lord promised to reciprocate with a guaranty of abundant harvests plus immunity from foreign invasion. But statutes breed infractions, and the people continually disobeyed, usually by adopting cultic practices and worshipping the baals. The prophets arose to proclaim the wrath of the Lord, and their message was typically one of doom.

Jesus inherited this legalistic tradition but preached a very different covenant. In his view the law, originating with Moses and endorsed by the prophets, endured until John the Baptist announced that the Kingdom was at hand. Jesus, moving beyond the message of John, identified God as a loving Father. In the new covenant, rigid adherence to law was denounced as a spiritual hazard. Love repels, love attracts. Love stands in dialectical confrontation with law, and the Kingdom emerged as an antinomian synthesis.

The temple was an artifact, made with human hands. The Kingdom is not. In the Kingdom the material walls of the temple are
transcended by invisible walls, and the vault extends to Heaven. The edifice allows radial immersion in a field of maximum spiritual illumination, and is the original inspiration for the gothic ideal. The cathedrals that were later constructed aim at the sky. To become aware of the Kingdom is to be enlightened to a divine presence already fully in view. In this manner the gothic ideal originated, an ideal which led at last to the Christian yearning for an architectural form that was upward looking.

Jesus' message, as described in the gospels, anticipates gothic. The person in the Kingdom is proportionally enlightened as the walls of theocratic limitation are diminished. While discoursing in parables on the Kingdom, Jesus says: "For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light."³

This vision of the Kingdom resulted in a gothic ideal embracing aspects that are both mystical and transcendent.

(1) **The mystical.** In the centuries following the days of Jesus, the concept of the Kingdom was reworked within our religious and philosophical heritage. Beginning with Neoplatonism, a metaphysic of light evolved. Commenting on our spiritual aspiration to leave the earthly plane behind and enter the higher realm, Plotinus noted that a transfiguration takes place. "One sees oneself shining brilliantly, filled with intelligible light. Or
rather one is oneself pure light, that is, subtle and weightless." The gothic ideal of maximum light is anticipated here.

St. Augustine extended this metaphysic in Book XIII of his *Confessions*, where it is written, concerning the relation between God and the spiritual creatures He has fashioned, that the matter within us would not be deserving of God "had it not been by the same Word turned to that by Whom it was created, and by Him so enlightened become light, though not equally" with God.

The metaphysic was continued in the person of Dionysius the Areopagite who, in his remarks on the "Transcendent Archetype of Light," asserted that It "conjoineth together all spiritual and rational beings, uniting them in one."

This progression also found expression in contemporaries of Suger, notably in the flowering of mysticism among the Victorines. It can be argued that gothic became an applied demonstration of Pseudo-Dionysian theology, perhaps in part as a result of the writings of Hugh of St.Victor. Light streaming through stained glass windows expressed a mystical vision. Latent architectural possibilities were thus actualized in novel form. The windows became not merely openings in the walls, but translucent surfaces adorned with sacred paintings through which a higher light could shine.

The influence of Platonic philosophy, evident throughout this
metaphysic, is nowhere more apparent than in Augustine's view that "earthly things harmonize with celestial, as being subject to the things that are pre-eminent." The beauty, proportion and order found in the world reflect their perfect counterparts in the intelligible domain. Lower structures participate in a higher reality that transcends them, and the contemplation of earthly harmonies leads the soul to the mystical contemplation of God.

(2) The transcendent. Transcendence is experienced whenever individuals or groups succeed in discrediting their finest achievements. In Nietzsche's terms, their highest values have become devalued. Such moments share in common the feature that previous boundary conditions are surpassed. In athletic competition, for instance, it is a commonplace to see athletes win their events with faster times than they have ever before attained. Generalizing, we may say that any new level of personal excellence, or of societal advance, presupposes that some existing barrier has given way to superior performance. The athlete in training is striving to exceed his or her own best previous standard, not the worst, and at a moment of triumph the new personal record that is established becomes, in its own turn, the next challenge to be surmounted.

At St. Denis the bounds of previous architectural vision were exceeded. This occurred in a religious setting, but the gothic
ideal also lends itself to secular transcendence. At the 1934 Party Rally in Nuremburg, gothic architecture was transcended by the cathedral of light created by Albert Speer. The parade ground at Zeppelin Field was ringed at night with 130 powerful searchlights spaced forty feet apart, the columns of light pointing straight up at the sky. Each sent a beam of light stabbing four miles or more into the nordic darkness. His creation, featuring walls of light and a vault of cloud, was Wagnerian in its effect. The tens of thousands of people standing within had the experience of being in a gigantic edifice, though the walls, and indeed the vault above, consisting of rays diffusing in the nebulous mists, were nothing more than ethereal luminescence. However, unlike the edifice at St.Denis, the cathedral of light was not statically geometrical. Its fluid proportionality was set in motion. In this radiant pulsing illusion of architectural substance, St.Denis was surpassed.

St.Denis, as an artifact, strives to approximate the Kingdom. Like the temple, however, St.Denis is a massive material structure, grounded in the earth. The situation is not the same at Nuremburg. Reaching up from its earthly base, massive and material, the cathedral of light radiates into the sky, remaining an artifact all the while. But in the alchemy of Speer's creation, base matter is transformed to ether. The insubstantial walls are a secular extension of the supernal Kingdom, but St.Denis is transcended.
It is difficult to imagine a direction in which the gothic ideal as an architectural expression might evolve materially beyond this point. The ideal began as a religious sentiment, but is now becoming a secular aspect of the information age, and its current progression is not material but virtual. Today we find ourselves seated at the center of an enormous gothic structure of unwalled illumination. The monitor has become a secular altar at which the gods of information are worshipped.

Virtual reality can mean different things to different people. The expression can, for instance, imply that one can "be" in a fantasy, as in the flight simulator, in which the pilot is immersed in a field which provides the empirical experience of actually flying the airplane. By extension, this concept of virtual reality can include any artificial computer image, as in an arcade game, where one can "be" a warrior within the credible facsimile of an artificial battlefield. A related, though different, meaning of virtual is that someone can "be" someplace where one is not, yet make changes in that separate environment, as in the case of the surgeon who, seated at a monitor and issuing electronic commands to microscopic devices, performs an operation without making empirical contact with the patient, who could be in a facility thousands of miles away.

The philosophical problem of appearance versus reality
originated in the Milesian school with Thales. How can the real be distinguished from the merely apparent? In virtual experience this question is resolved in favor of appearance. Virtual reality settles for prima facie awareness, seeking no fundamental ground in an objective reality which compels a consensus among all right minded observers. Subjectivity and time are valued more highly. Our existential challenge is to become fixed experiential centers in a sea of information which lacks an intrinsic point of reference.

An examination of virtual reality as an extension of the gothic ideal includes the following considerations.

First, virtual thinking is conceptual rather than material, electronic as opposed to tactile. It is a late 20th century mentality which came into existence with the advent of electronic media, a post-Gutenberg mentality first brought to widespread public attention in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan. The computer extends the Gutenberg press, but Gutenberg linearity has been transcended by a Boolean binary search permitting a jump, analogous to a quantum leap, into hypertext, that is to say, the text in which the radial node is at the center, rather than the next linear step. All aspects are associated all at once, thanks to the speed with which the jump can be made. The speed of the search transcends linear perception. All components are interrelated. We are increasingly able to look to the future, then to the past, then all around,
collapsing the tenses into a single mystical vision of all-at-oneness. Perpetually more rapid transcendence becomes a lifestyle as well as a means of livelihood. In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce provided the first literary anticipation of hypertext.

Second, the printing press led first to the book and then to the library. But now we experience radial immersion in a field, a Leibnizian community in which any arbitrarily selected place, taken as a nodal center, offers a perspective on the totality of other potential centers, mirroring the universe from its point of view.

Among the philosophers in our history, Leibniz is becoming increasingly pertinent to our present age, prescient in his view that knowledge can be coordinated in a manner somewhat like the computer is achieving today, and optimistic in his hope that any given human problem, if translated into an informational medium common to us all, is solvable. The intercommunication that is available today at electronic speed, to any and all collaborators, is a post-structuralist variation on a Leibnizian theme.

With the jump, the distinction between primary and secondary sources evaporates. The book, which had been the Gutenberg center, is supplanted by the reader. The post-Gutenberg reader is a deconstructed viewer who transcends the original author. The text of the original author, when examined, is simply the focus, the center, of the moment. But, if selected, any commentary on that
text can become the new center. Nishitani grasped this in his concept of the master/slave interaction in which any aspect can function as subject, where it is master. All other factors are relegated to the predicative pattern. But then any predicate, formerly slave, can become master, all else subservient.\textsuperscript{13}

Third, novel artistic horizons are opened. The book encourages passivity, as the mind conforms to what is there, whereas the nodal characteristic of a medium such as the internet inspires activity, as oneself becomes the constellating center. Television also encourages passivity, whereas the computer monitor invites active participation in making new worlds actual. Virtual fields reduce apathy. The user makes things happen. Interaction with virtual fields is kinesthetic as well as visual. The other sensory modalities can be added one by one.

Prior to the information age we were primarily spectators. Virtual realities demand active participation. Creative new art is encouraged, though not in the form of material architecture, as Speer demonstrated at Nuremberg. New artistic vistas of information are now emerging, in which elements of the gothic ideal are preserved. A virtual world has the least walls, yet it is an edifice, hence an artifact, and it is capped with a vault, the hyperbolic limits of which are constantly receding.

The University of New Orleans, the institution with which I am
affiliated, was inaugurated in 1958. Work was begun on the library, which was projected as a five tiered structure. Three floors were completed. A generation later the University, anticipating the acquisition of additional books, added the fourth story, with the understanding that the fifth and last would be constructed as future needs arose. But the virtual era, an extension of the gothic ideal, intervened. A generation passed. Today, years after its completion, the fourth floor contains offices and cavernous spaces, but relatively few shelves. A fifth level, if it is ever built, will not be needed for books. If the present building were destroyed, necessitating a replacement, the task would be relatively simple. A modest office complex for the downsized library staff is all that would be needed, and the small computer on the desk of the head librarian would be adequate to the task of accessing all of the recorded information available anywhere in the world.

In conclusion we may say that the material information of the Gutenberg era, which was lodged finally in the library with its thick walls, has been transcended by the electronic ether of the virtual era. In the information age, the sky is receding, though we are still within a McLuhanesque artifact.

That aspect of virtual reality which extends the gothic ideal is: immersion in an informational field; where, once lured, we can have instant access to any facts that might arouse our curiosity;
becoming enlightened to the all-at-oneness of the many separated bits of knowledge, some of which we actually experience. The bits are initially unconnected. They are in disjunctive disarray. Virtual experience, like a Whiteheadean actual entity, lures what is out there and brings it in here. Through the process of concrescence, in our inner superjective nature, pragmatic and purposive, the disjunctively discrete bits are unified in a conjunctively coherent field.

Gothic is an originally religious ideal that has found secular expression in the virtual era. Geometry is eclipsed, but minimum walls and maximum light are retained. The cybernaut of today seeks mystical satisfaction through self-transcendence as the accumulating bits of disjunctively discrete information attain a virtual critical mass and burst conjunctively into syntheses of illumination exceeding the boundaries of previous vision.
NOTES

1. Panofsky, p. 43.
2. Mt 12:6
3. Mk 4:22
6. Dionysius the Areopagite, p. 95.
11. Heim, pp. 29ff.
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8. Nishitani, Keiji. Religion and Nothingness. Berkeley:

