Let us assume for a moment that Catholicism has been dead for centuries, and all tradition of its rites wholly forgotten. Only the cathedrals remain, dumb, alienated from their purpose, monuments, now unintelligible, of an unremembered creed. One day a number of archaeologists decide to reconstruct the ceremonies once held in them, the very ceremonies for which they were built, and without which they can be nothing but a dead letter. Artists, indulging in the sweet dream of giving back a momentary life to these great, stranded vessels, try to make of them, for one brief hour, the theatres of that mysterious drama which was formerly played out within their walls in mist of perfume and a drone of chants; undertake, in a word, to do for the Mass and for the cathedrals what the cognoscenti of the South have done for the theatre at Orange and for the Tragedies of the ancient world. I am quite sure that Government would be only too glad to subsidise such an effort. What it has done for Roman ruins it could not fail to for France's own monuments, for those cathedrals which are noblest and most original expression of the French genius.

See them, then, these men of learning, busying themselves, discover the vanished significance of our cathedral churches. Meaning comes back to carving and to painted windows: mystery, incense-sweet, hangs like a cloud within the temple aisles, and the building takes up once again its ancient song. The Government is well advised to grant its subsidy; grants it, indeed, with better reason than in the case of Orange, of the Opéra and of the Opéra-Comique, for this resurrection of catholic ceremonies is packed with interest—historic, social, plastic, musical. These ceremonies are rich with beauties which Wagner alone has come near to rivalling, in Parsifal, and only then, because he took them as his models.

Car-loads of snobs descend upon the Holy City (whether it be Amiens, Chartres, Bourges, Laon, Rheims, Beauvais, Rouen or Paris), and, once a year, experience that thrill which formerly they sought at Bayreuth or at Orange, sampling a work of art within the frame that originally was made to contain it. But alas!—as at Orange, they can never be anything but sightseers and dilettanti. Do what they may, the soul to which once this ritual spoke is theirs no longer. It matters not that the artists engaged to sing the chants, the actors brought to play the priests, have been ably coached, have, absorbed the spirit of their parts. In spite of all they may do, we cannot help feeling how much more beautiful the festivals must have been when real priests said the Office, not with the object of giving to sophisticated onlookers an idea of what it was all like, but because they believed in the virtue of their rites as truly as did the artists who carved the Last Judgment in the tympanum of the porch, or set the lives of the saints in the stained glass of the apse. What higher, truer note must all have struck when the assembled people made their response to the priest, and bowed when the bell sounded for the Elevation, not with the detachment of actors in a revival, but because they, too, like their priest, like the man who had carved the stone, had faith.
Such would be our feeling if the catholic religion had died. But it still lives, and if we would know what a thirteenth century cathedral was really like when it was a living entity in the full exercise of its function, there is no need for us to have recourse to the reconstructions of a frozen antiquarianism. We have but to enter, at no matter what hour, when the Office is being celebrated. The miming, the singing and the chants are not dependent on the skill of actors. It is the ministers of the Faith who there officiate, not for art's sake but for religion's, and, therefore, more artistically. No 'extras' could give a greater sense of reality, of sincerity, to the scene, because it is the members of the congregation who play the extras here, though such a thought never enters their heads. It may be said that, thanks to the continuity of ritual in the Catholic Church, and thanks to the unshaken hold of Catholic faith on the hearts of the French people, the cathedrals are not only the loveliest monuments of our national art, but are the only ones that still have life in them, pressed down and flowing over, the only ones that still perform the functions for which, originally, they were made.

But the breach of the French Government with Rome seems likely, in no short time, to bring up for discussion, and probable adoption, a projected Act, the effect of which must be that, at the end of five years, our churches may, and often will, be alienated from their true purpose. Not only will no subsidy be forthcoming for the celebration of the rites, but the very fabrics will be transformed in what ever way may seem fit to those in authority, to serve the purposes of museums, lecture halls and casinos.

When the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ shall no longer be celebrated in our churches, the life will have gone out of them. The Catholic Liturgy is one with the architecture and the carvings of our cathedrals, because these things derive from the self-same symbolism. I have shown, in a previous essay, that there is scarcely a scrap of sculpture in a cathedral church, no matter how secondary in importance it may seem, which has not its symbolic value.

No comparable spectacle, no such mirror of knowledge, spirit and history has ever been offered to the eyes and to the understanding of men... The same symbolism extends even to the music which fills the vast hollow of the building, for its seven Gregorian tones image the seven theological virtues and the seven ages of the world. It is no exaggeration to say that a performance of Wagner at Bayreuth (and still more, of a piece by Emile Augier or Dumas in a subsidised theatre) is a trifling thing compared with High Mass in Chartres Cathedral.

It need scarcely be pointed out that those only who have studied the religious art of the Middle Ages are capable of completely analysing the beauty of such a spectacle. All the more reason, therefore, that the State should see to it that the continuity is not broken. It supports the teaching of the Collège de France, which reaches only a small number of persons, and must seem cold and lifeless when set beside the complete and close-knit symbolism of the Resurrection in the High Mass as celebrated in a cathedral. Compared with such symphonies, the performances given in all our other subsidised theatres are but literary trivia. But let me hasten to add that those who can read the symbolism of the Middle Ages like an open book are not the only people for whom the living cathedral, that is to say the carved and coloured building, with its echoing music, provides the greatest of all spectacles. A man may have a feeling for music even if he knows nothing of harmony. I am aware that Ruskin, explaining the spiritual meaning that determines the arrangement of the chapels in the apse of a cathedral, says: 'You will never be able to feel the charm of architectural forms if you are not in sympathy with the thought from which they have emerged.' It is no less true, however, as we all of us know, that a man wholly ignorant of these things, a simple dreamer, may enter a cathedral without trying in any way to understand, content
to let his emotions take charge, and get from what he sees and hears an impression, which, though it will doubtless be less clear-cut, may be no less powerful.[…]

I said just now that nearly all the images in a cathedral church are symbolic. But some are not: those, I mean, of folk who, having contributed their pence to the decoration of the fabric, have wished to keep for themselves a place there for all time, so that they may, from some upper niche, from the embrasure of some window, follow silently the sacred Office, and share soundlessly in the prayers, in *secula seculorum*.[…]

[…] It is their wish that the Holy Spirit, each time that He descends, should recognise His own. It is not only kings and princes who there display the insignia of their rank, the crown, the Order of the Golden Fleece. Moneychangers, too, are openly displayed, checking accounts, merchants selling furs (see in Monsieur Mâle's book the reproductions of these two windows), butchers slaughtering, knights in heraldic surcoats, craftsmen carving a pillar's capital. From their windows in Chartres and Tours and Sens, in Bourges, Auxerre and Clermont, in Toulouse and in Troyes, coopers, furriers, grocers, pilgrims, ploughmen, armourers, weavers, carvers of stone, butchers, basket-makers, cobblers, money-changers—there, within hearing of the Sacred Office, no longer will they listen to the Mass (if this Act becomes law) though for that purpose did they give to the building of the church their prized and hoarded wealth. No longer will the dead govern the living. But the forgetful living will have ceased to carry out the wishes of the dead.