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BEAST IMAGERY AND THE BESTIARY

VIOLLET-LE-DUC has said that 'of all arts, architecture is certainly the one which has the greatest affinity with the instincts, the ideas, the interests, the progress, and the needs of the people.' In other words, in architecture the *soul* of the people expresses itself, fashioning the stone as with an unseen hand, whether it be in the absolute calm of the gods of Egypt or in the infinite variety of the fretted forms of mediæval France. It was not the granite of the Nile Valley or the sandstone of France that alone tempered the manner of the Egyptian or the French worker in stone. It was not merely to suggest the greatness of his god or of his king that the Egyptian set up colossal temples or statues, but chiefly to express his innate sense of the immensity and the force of the superhuman laws by which he felt himself to be surrounded. It was the realisation of this that put its seal on his thought and, as a natural consequence, on the formal expression of that thought. So, too, in French mediæval architecture, the dominant idea was the rendering of what was 'close to men's lives and their history.' We see this the more clearly when we consider the Gothic cathedral by the side of such literary creations as *The Romance of the Rose*. These, although alike made up of intricate detail, yet differ so greatly in their range of expression, that the one, a romance of gallantry, fades away into the past in common with the lovers who fed their souls upon it, and only appeals to us now as a mere literary curiosity, whilst the other is, so to speak, a sublime epic, interpreting both the secular and the religious movements of the age, and suggesting to us, even at this distance of time, their vast complexity. And the reason of this is not far to seek. In literary composition, which is, in its essence, analytic, there is wanting, in an imperfectly developed language such as was that of France in the Middle Ages, the material out of which to develop the delicate lights and shades of sentiment and of thought which are essential to perfection of expression. Architecture, on the other hand, is a synthetic art, and the artist finds ready to hand a concrete material through the medium of which he can express his ideas, the lights and shades, in his case, depending mainly upon the dexterous use of the chisel upon that material. It is because of this

radical difference between the two that, amongst primitive peoples, or in civilisations in a state of transition, there is more complete expression in art than in literature.

In the details of the religious architecture of mediæval France, the ideals of the time, with all the chaos and contrast peculiar to an age of transition, are suggested in the Romanesque church and in the Gothic cathedral alike; Heaven and Hell, the sublime and the grotesque, keeping close company in the mediæval mind. Side by side with symbolic beasts of Eastern ancestry, we find Bible subjects, the favourite ones being 'The Last Judgment' and 'Dives and Lazarus,' subjects so dear to the poor man, to whom the future life, governed as he believes it to be by the law of equality, offers such solace. Think what it must have meant to the down-trodden peasant to see himself, in effigy, in the company of apostles and saints in scenes of 'The Last Judgment;' to see not only the tombs giving up their motley dead, but also St. Michael with his scales, and Satan with his claws, deciding the fate of trembling humanity, lord and villain alike. Think, too, what it must have meant to him to see rich and poor alike represented nude, in spite of the Church's condemnation of such pagan licence, thus emphasising yet more forcibly the great law of equality which men were beginning to see faintly dawning on the far-off horizon of the future.

Such representations are indicative of the beginning of a reaction against the limitations set by feudalism and the Church (or rather by the Church as exemplified by monasticism), a reaction induced by the wider range of thought and experience which the Crusades, and contact with the East through travel and trade, had brought about, and also by the encouragement given by the democratic teaching of the Mendicant Orders, and by their glorification of poverty.

The most complete expression of mediæval thought took the form of cathedral-building. In these mighty structures, 'where light and shade repose, where music dwells lingering'—monuments of religious enthusiasm and civic pride—all the thought of the Middle Ages took a visible form, expressed either in traditional motives or in individual fantasies, symbolism mingling with realism. It is to the cathedral, then, that we must turn if we would understand the evolution that was taking place in life and art.

French religious art, as part of the general evolution of Christian art, had adopted pagan motives from both Rome and Byzantium, adapting and developing them in accordance with its own spirit. It is especially through the animal imagery, both symbolic and grotesque, which was the outcome of this process, that we must seek to understand the religious as well as the social and satirical spirit of the age, and how closely these elements were interwoven. At no time, and in no country, perhaps, did symbolic animals play a more important part, both in literature and in art, than they did in the

Middle Ages in France. The beast confronts us everywhere, greeting us at the church portal, on cornice and capital, in painted window and illuminated manuscript, in sermon and song, in fable and romance, and in its own special province, the Bestiary, or Book of Beasts, aptly called 'the Christian symbolic menagerie of the Middle Ages.' In many of these instances the beast was chosen to represent virtue as well as vice. It was not till the later Middle Ages that the beast-carving in the sanctuary, like the beast-fable in literature, was made use of as a form of satire, behind which the exponent of social wrong, whether artist or minstrel, could, so to speak, hide himself, and give unbridled expression to the growing want of respect for those in high places.

It may well be asked why beasts should have been almost universally chosen to symbolise either virtue or vice. Whilst the mystic Eastern thinker might suggest, as a possible answer, a belief in the doctrine of metempsychosis, the more matter-of-fact Western might theorise, as did Lessing, that as animals retain their natural characteristics, they are better adapted for the purpose than is man, modified as he is by civilisation.

Long before the time of written history, animal imagery played a part in men's lives, though what that part was it is impossible to determine, even when we have carefully examined the animal forms scratched on bones found in caves once inhabited by primitive man, which tempt us to ask the question whether they represent totems, and whether totemism was the origin of the beast in art and in literature. But we hesitate even to surmise, in face of the warning of a well-known writer that we cannot be too cautious in speaking of totems and totemism. At all times, and in all countries, a love of the marvellous is to be found in the human soul, and it is in this connection that the history of the belief in symbolic animals is interesting.

The strange, fanciful beast-carvings found in Christian architecture were, in great measure, the outcome either of Oriental tradition through unconscious copying or irrepressible semi-conscious paganism, or of treatises on symbolic animals dating probably from the second century A.D. The most important of these treatises, in that it became the one from which all later ones drew their inspiration, was the Physiologus, or Naturalist, compiled from many sources by an Alexandrian Greek. This was condemned by the Church in the fourth century, but was reinstated by Gregory the Great, and from the seventh to the twelfth centuries was regarded as a Christianised summary of natural history, calculated both to teach and to edify. It formed the basis of the French bestiaries, and its influence may be traced in many mediæval works, the most celebrated perhaps being the *Speculum Naturale* of Vincent de Beauvais, the *Speculum Ecclesiæ* of Honorius of Autun, and *Li Tresors* of Brunetto Latini, the friend and master of Dante. It served, through these media, to

inspire the mediæval artist as well as the mediæval poet, and it is by knowing something of its quaint conceits that we must seek to understand both the one and the other. At the same time it must not be inferred that all sculptured objects, whether natural or grotesque, made use of to beautify either cathedral or church, were necessarily symbolic. That there was frequently a desire on the part of the mediæval artist merely to express life in its various aspects, without any ulterior motive, is evident from the world of birds and beasts and foliage which manifestly were carved for the sole pleasure of representing animate nature.

The natural history of the Physiologus was doubtless based upon Aristotle's *History of Animals* and Pliny's *Natural History*, supplemented by moral reflections founded upon current opinion and ancient tradition. Such a treatise would appeal in an especial manner to the mediæval mind, imbued with a love, almost amounting to a mania, of accumulating and arranging facts, or so-called facts. The widespread popularity of the work is evidenced by the many translations of it—Ethiopic and Icelandic amongst others—made between the sixth and the thirteenth centuries for peoples as far asunder in sentiment as in local habitation. That such a treatise, with a symbolism at once subtle and simple, should have appealed to the man living in hot sandy wastes as well as to the man contemplating ice and perpetual snows, is but another proof that the human soul is fundamentally the same everywhere in its craving to penetrate into the region of the mysterious and the marvellous. These translations interest us to-day, not for this reason alone, but also because they are one of the means of bringing us somewhat into touch with the literary and poetic feelings of peoples we should otherwise know but little of; for although only translations, and sometimes of mere fragments only, the translators have contrived to give a distinctive character to their work. The Anglo-Saxon version made in the eighth century (which, having been rendered into English, is easy of reference) proves to us, by its poetic beauty and vigorous expression, that the land we now call England was not entirely abandoned to war and servitude, but that the torch of the Muses, though perhaps flickering but faintly, was still alight.

When we open the Physiologus or a French bestiary, a motley procession of beasts and birds, and of those 'that glide beneath the wave,' seems to pass before us, the illustrations of which at once attest their Eastern origin, recalling by their forms, as well as by their attitudes, the wall decorations of Theban tombs. But considerations of space make it impossible to refer here to more than one or two examples of the members of this menagerie which are mentioned and moralised upon; and therefore the lion, the eagle, and the whale, as typical representatives of the three elements, earth, air, and water, have been chosen to give some idea of the material by the aid of

which the mediæval artist, as well as the mediæval poet, stimulated his imagination.

In examining these types, the Physiologus and the French bestiaries will be considered together, they being the same in substance, though the symbolism is more developed and elaborated in the latter than in the former.

The Physiologus, in common with the bestiaries, begins with the lion, the king of beasts, the emblem of Christ, and the most frequently used symbol of the Christian menagerie. To the lion is attributed three characteristics, first: that when he is pursued he obliterates his track with his tail; secondly, that he sleeps with his eyes open; and thirdly, that the cubs are born dead, and are brought to life on the third day by his breathing upon them. These characteristics are naïvely explained and commented upon in the French bestiaries, the earliest of which was translated about 1130 A.D. by the Anglo-Norman clerk Philip of Thaon, for Aélis of Lorraine, the second Queen of Henry the First of England. The opening sentence, introducing the work as 'a book of science,' shows us the mediæval attitude towards these, to us, childish though sometimes ingenious, moral reflections. It begins thus: 'Philip of Thaon into the French language has translated the bestiary, a book of science, for the honour of a jewel, who is a very beautiful woman —Aélis is she named, a Queen she is crowned—Queen she is of England: may her soul never have trouble!' But after this courtly opening there is little elaboration, perhaps because Philip of Thaon had but a limited gift of imagination, or was more of a courtier than a moraliser, or perhaps because the royal lady at whose command he laboured, preferred her spiritual food in as concentrated a form as possible. Owing to this poverty of expression, quotations to illustrate the manner of mediæval moralising will be taken from *Le Bestiaire Divin*, the most elaborate example of its kind for inventive thought, and one giving an idea of the boredom which the good folk of the Middle Ages could inflict upon themselves. It was written about the beginning of the thirteenth century by one William, a clerk of Normandy, who begins, as was usual, with the king of beasts, the first characteristic of which, as before alluded to, is there said to symbolise the incarnation of Christ, which 'truly he did covertly'; and the writer goes on to say that

the meaning is very clear. When God, our sovereign Father, who is the spiritual lion, came by his grace on to this earth for our salvation, so wisely veiled he his coming, that the hunter knew not that he was the source of our salvation, and marvelled how he came amongst us. By the hunter we must understand him who makes man to do wrong, and who pursues him in order to destroy him; he is the Devil, who desires evil.

The second characteristic symbolises that on the Cross it was the *man* Christ, and not the *God* Christ who suffered:

When the lion [Christ] was put upon the Cross by his enemies the Jews, who judged him wrongfully, his humanity there suffered death. When the spirit quitted the body, the *man* fell asleep on the holy Cross, but the *Godhead* kept watch there. And think of him in no other way if you would rise again. For the Godhead could never be touched, or felt, or scourged, or beaten. Mankind can wound the man without injuring the Godhead, which shall be shown to you by a parable which can leave no doubt. Cut a lofty and spreading tree when the sun is shining, and in the rent of the first splinter you will see a ray of the beautiful sun; and, as the rent increases and the sunbeams extend, nowhere can you touch, injure, capture, or hold the ray. You can cut down the whole tree without injuring the sun at all. Thus was it with Jesus Christ. Humanity, which he took upon him for our sake and for love of us, and garbed himself in, suffering trouble and labour and death, of this the Godhead felt naught. This you believe if you do well.

Of the third characteristic, which was a favourite symbol of the resurrection of Christ, as well as of the general resurrection, the writer says:

When God was placed in the tomb, for three days only remained he there, and on the third day the Father raised him from the dead by breathing upon him, even as the lion breathes upon his little cub. Now I have told you of the lion; the truth about him is written.

The tradition that the lion sleeps with his eyes open may partly account for its effigy being placed, as is so often the case in Romanesque and Gothic churches, over the entrance or on either side of the portal, as guardian of the sanctuary; although the original idea of making use of a lion's image in such positions was doubtless derived from the traditions of ancient civilisations, such as those of Assyria, Egypt, and Greece, where lions, as guardians of tombs and gates, are constantly found as emblems of strength and prowess, and as inspiring fear.

Although not mentioned in the bestiaries, it is of interest to note that the same beast may symbolise entirely different principles, just as it embodies different qualities. The lion in some instances is typical of the Devil, who 'as a roaring lion walketh about seeking whom he may devour;' and thus on some early tombs we find the sculptured effigy of the deceased person with the feet resting on a lion, to indicate triumph over the powers of hell, whereas, on later ones, the lion in the same position symbolised strength and bravery.

In mediæval literature, the characteristics attributed in the bestiary to the lion are applied in sundry and strange connections—sometimes to the hero, as in Wolfran von Eschenbach's poem, where Parsifal and his brother are compared to a lion's whelps 'roused to life and energy by the roar of battle'—sometimes to the lover, who could be brought back to life by the voice of his mistress, as the breath of the lion brings to life its young—sometimes to the counsellor, who advises his lord, when he has erred, to blot out the remembrance of his error by repentance and by good deeds, just as the lion, when pursued, obliterates his track with his tail.

The tradition of the eagle renewing its youth, and testing the capacity for endurance of its offspring, is one of the most poetical legends to be found in the bestiary. It opens quite simply:

The eagle is the king of birds. When he is waxed old, in a marvellous manner he becomes young again. When, in old age, his eyes have grown dim and give him pain and trouble, he seeks, when the sun is shining brightly, a clear and pure spring whence the water issues fresh and sparkling. First he soars very high into the air above this spring, towards the ray-emitting sun. When, aloft there, he comes into the heat, he fixes his eyes on the sun's rays, and so long does he look on them that his sight is quite seared. When his eyes begin to burn in this heat, and likewise his wings, then he descends thence into the spring, there where the water is most sparkling and clear, and therein he plunges three times until he is, as he well knows, quite refreshed and rejuvenated, and healed of his old age.

Such keen sight has the eagle, that if, circling about in the air above, he is as high up as a cloud, he can nevertheless see a fish swimming beneath him in the river or the sea. Then he swoops down to seize it. He fastens on it, and so combats with it that he drags it to the bank by main force. Another characteristic is strange. If the eagle is neither sure nor certain that some of the eggs have not been changed, and others put in the nest, before the fledglings can fly well, he takes them up into the air towards the beams and the radiance of the sun when it shines brightly. The one that can look steadily at the rays of the sun, it loves and cherishes dearly, and the one that has not the strength to gaze upon its splendour, it abandons as a bastard, and never more concerns itself about it. The eagle, which thus rejuvenates itself, sets us a good and beautiful example, for in like manner must labour the man, be he Pagan or Jew or Christian, who would renew his old garment. When the eye of his soul is so dimmed that he cannot see sure salvation, then should he seek the spring which is divine and life-giving. This spring is baptism, which quickens all whom it cleanses. For this I call to witness the Gospel, in which I find it written that those who of water and of the spirit are not thus cleansed, are not re-born or made pure, and can in no way enter the heavenly kingdom. He who is baptised in this clear spring in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, surely, without gainsaying, can see and look upon the true sun, which shines clearly. This sun is Jesus Christ, the gentle and the godly one. He who puts his trust in him is renewed by looking on him, just as is the bird who fixes his eyes on the other sun, which holds all the elements in their place, and which created all this world and all things that are.

Allusions to the tradition of the unflinching gaze of the eagle upon the sun are constantly to be met with in mediæval literature, and are employed in various ways to make them fit into the manifold circumstances of life; but the only instance which will be recalled here is that in which Dante, about to enter the first Heaven, sees Beatrice gazing upon the sun, and exclaims, 'Never did eagle so fix himself thereon' ('Aquila si non gli s'affisse unquanco'), and, having himself so lately faced the fiery ordeal of Purgatory, the final cleansing by fire that was to fit him for Paradise, he adds, 'and I fixed mine eyes upon the sun, transcending our wont' ('e fissi gli occhi al sole oltre a nostr' uso').

Perhaps the most dramatic of all the traditions to be found in this bestiary is the story of the whale, whose sudden plunge, with

its human freight, into the depths of the ocean, still sends a thrill of horror through the mind.

To-day I will recount to you a great wonder of the deep. There is a marvellous monster, very knavish and very dangerous. It is called *Cetus* in Latin, and is a bad neighbour to mariners. The top of its back resembles sand. When it raises itself slowly in the sea, those who must needs sail by verily believe it to be an island, but hope deceives them. On account of its size, they make for it for refuge; and because of the tempest by which they are driven, they think themselves to be in a safe place, and throw out their anchors and their bridge, kindle a fire, and cook their food, and in order to make fast their ship, they drive a large stake into the sand, which seems to them to be land. Then they kindle a fire, I pledge you my faith. And when the monster feels the heat of the fire which burns on its back, forthwith it plunges with great suddenness down into the depths of the sea, and makes the ship to sink with it, and all the crew to perish. In like manner are deceived the wretched, miserable unbelievers who put their trust in the Devil, and who, when their captive soul is sad, indulge in dalliance and tarrying, which sin inclines to. At the moment when they least expect it, comes the cursed one, whom may a terrible fire consume. When he feels that they are clinging closely to him, suddenly he plunges with them straight down to the nethermost hell. Of a certainty those who go thither perish.

In this graphic piece of word-painting, the whale represents the Devil, and the sea the world. The sand on the back of the whale is the riches of this world, the ship is the body, which should be under the control of its steersman, the soul. Thus the Devil allures man to his ruin; for when he puts his whole trust in the pleasures of this world, suddenly, and without warning, the Devil drags him down to destruction.

Although so far we have only considered beasts in their connection with the teaching of the Church, passing allusion must be made to the other rôles in which they played a part in the sculptured details of the Christian temple, where they are constantly to be met with as grotesques—either as grotesques pure and simple, or as forms of satire. It was the encroachment of the beast-image within the sacred precincts that brought down anathemas upon all imagery from St. Bernard, who, when he founded the Cistercian Order, allowed no sculptured representations either within or without the sanctuary. St. Bernard was the incarnation of the religious enthusiast and the political agitator, and withal a twelfth-century puritan. With his despotic intellect and his despotic will, he, in his zeal, like the Puritan of later times, could find no place for the weaknesses of human nature, notwithstanding the fact that the Church had always upheld the use of imagery to assist, as said a kindly Bishop of Auxerre in the twelfth-century, 'those who were likely to be distracted by vanity or weariness.'

As a rule, the word 'grotesque' conveys to the mind the idea of something abnormal and whimsical; but Ruskin, in *The Stones of Venice*, has given us the key to its interpretation when he tells us that 'in true grotesque we shall find the evidence of deep insight

into nature.' It is only by ourselves having, in some measure, this deep insight into nature, that we can in any wise appreciate the spirit of the grotesque; for the essence of things is always veiled rather than outwardly expressed, just as the spirit of the universe is concealed beneath outward appearances. Consider the gargoyles on cathedral or church—strange, unearthly creations for the most part, petrified, as it were, for centuries 'twixt heaven and earth. How ludicrous some, how terrible others! And yet, when we examine them, how full of hidden meaning we find many of them to be! What a depth of insight into nature must many a nameless stone-worker who chiselled these monsters have possessed!

But, passing within the cathedral or church, we there find the grotesque lurking in out-of-the-way corners under the subtler guise of satire. Perceiving how skilfully animal symbolism could be adjusted to, and used for enforcing, the Church's dogmatic teaching, the artist further conceived the idea of using the beast-image, under various forms, to satirise the evils of the time, whether ecclesiastical or feudal, although much that might be taken for conscious satire was often the mere unconscious adaptation, for the sake of their decorative qualities, of oft-repeated motives, used in the spirit of the early Italian painter who decked his Madonnas' gowns with broideries of Arabic characters, or the semblance of such.

The beast-image, like the beast-fable, is one of the oldest forms of satire used to point a moral or to condemn a wrong, and was suited to times when such truths could not with safety be too openly demonstrated. It is this expression of satire, this veiled manifestation of the undercurrent of thought, which was the dominant note of the age, and which gives us the real clue to a right understanding of the spirit of the time, and of all that was to emanate from it. Satire, thus expressed in architecture, as well as in many other ways, was one of the earliest signs of a movement at once subtle, gradual, and varied. Progress in social life is the result of two contrary forces—enthusiasm and criticism—the one positive, the other negative; the one elevating ideas and beliefs, sometimes abnormally, the other undermining and wearing away all that is useless, overwrought, and extravagant in these ideas and beliefs. Satire, as a form of criticism, is a negative force. It does not create—rather it disintegrates, but, whilst disintegrating, it transforms and renews. The effect of criticism in the social world may be compared to some chemical process in the natural world, where matter, no longer serving its purpose under one form, is released in order that it may be recombined into something suited to other conditions. It is the satirical, critical spirit of the Middle Ages, the disintegrating force which exposed ideas and superstitions no longer in harmony with awakening desires and aspirations, which was one of the factors that made the Renaissance possible.

ALICE KEMP-WELCH.