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Taming Nature in the Luttrell Psalter

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Abstract: *The subject of my paper is the way nature was perceived by medieval Christians, whose lives had a religious foundation. More specifically, I analyse the depictions of nature in the Luttrell Psalter, one of the most famous 14th-century English illuminated manuscripts. Although in the 14th century the beauty of the world consisted of order and neatness, the Luttrell Psalter abounds in wild and domestic animals with no master, and furthermore there are unnatural beasts, which defy the divine order and natural expectations.*

Starting from medieval philosophy, I also discuss the connotations of the term “nature” and the way nature was depicted in the Psalter, which was a religious book, used in both private and public prayers. I consider that the significance of both the natural and the grotesque decorations can be grasped only by finding the tenuous connection with the verses written on the same page. The narrative cycles (both with religious and rural themes) have a meaningful place and role in the economy of the text, too.

I believe that the illuminations in the Luttrell Psalter folios illustrate man’s inability to control nature, as he was supposed to do according to God’s commandment. Such a representation may actually be a stimulus to strengthen the reader’s connection with God through prayer (and/or the reading of the Psalter), in order to improve his perception of reality as well as his relationship with surrounding nature.

Fourteenth-century England was a land of contradictions, as one could see humble and orthodox Christian devotion side by side with both ruthless pride, on the one hand, and scholarly heresies condemned by the Church and by mystical writers, on the other hand. The Luttrell Psalter is a mixture of contrasts. For example the heavenly content (of the Psalms) is accompanied by grotesque illuminations. Furthermore, while the Psalms present and uphold a spiritual reality, the illustrations depicting the yearly agricultural activities show an interest in material possessions.

Nature in Late Medieval Reality

When the term *nature* was used in medieval philosophy, it did not originally refer to the natural environment made up of plants and animals, but rather to the inner essence of these beings. Starting with the “*nature* of God” which had as a synonym the term *essence* or *being*, the term appeared in phrases like “human

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nature” and the “nature of evil”, etc. Thus any living creature was understood as having its own inner *nature*, as an *essence* common to all those which were like it.

In the mediaeval philosophies, as in those of antiquity, a natural being is an active substance, with operations flowing from its essence, and necessarily determined by that essence. As for Nature, it is simply the sum-total of natures; and its characteristic attributes are therefore the same, that is to say fecundity and necessity (Gilson 365).

Nature, as in the environment, was regarded as entities that served a certain (human) necessity and their main “attribute” was “fecundity”, namely verdant and uncontrolled growth. Unexplored and dangerous forests were regarded as an epitome of this Nature, whose nature (i.e. essence) was alien to human nature. Human nature was also essentially different from divine nature, but they could be united (both unaltered and uncorrupted) in the person of Jesus Christ. Nature, on the other hand, as the creation of God, was perceived as subordinate not only to God, its Creator, but also to man²⁸, who (i.e. Adam²⁹) named it, that is gave names to animals, by recognising their inner essence. This ability to be in communion with nature and to govern it by understanding its inner rationality, that is its “general rule ... based on the necessity” (Gilson 366), was lost by Adam after original sin.

Therefore once man left Eden, he lost his close – we might say instinctive or natural – connection with Nature and he started to fear his surroundings and worse: to misunderstand or misinterpret his own nature, as he was unable to find his specific position and role within the order of the world. It is only once Jesus Christ redeemed fallen creation and released Adam and Eve from hell that that original (and authentic) order could be restored; and it is only in saints, such as Saint Francis of Assisi³⁰ or Saint Jerome and his lion, that the connection with the encompassing nature is regained. This is possible because, once the relationship with God is strengthened, the comprehension of the innermost nature of Nature (as well as his own inward nature) becomes available to man.

²⁸ The idea can be found in Psalms, too: Psalm 8:3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; 4 What is man, that thou art mindful of him? ... 6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: 7 All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; 8 The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. 9 O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

²⁹ “Omnibus animantibus Adam primus vocabula indidit appellans unicuique nomen ex presenti institutione iuxta conditionem nature cui serviret. Gentes autem unicuique animalium ex propria lingua dederunt vocabula”. (Adam was the first to provide words for all living things, naming each one in conformity with the existing order **according to its function in nature**. The races of man later named each animal in their own languages.) Quotation from the Aberdeen Bestiary: Folio 5v. (‘Aberdeen Bestiary’)

³⁰ Saint Francis of Assisi is depicted on folio 60 v. He is dressed in black and is showing his stigmata, while preaching to animals (among them a lion and some birds). Psalm 32: 7-10 is written on the page, and the words of the Psalm state that a man should not be compared with animals (horse or donkey) which have no understanding, because God gave men intelligence and instructions.

The rule (or the law), as a consequence of order, gives meaning to and becomes the principle of nature. Once the rule is broken and therefore the order challenged, chaos and monsters appear, as "...monstrosities are accidental failures of nature frustrated of its due end by an unforeseeable concourse of circumstances" (Gilson 368). Therefore everything that deviates from the natural order is monstrous. The drolleries and grotesque characters, which appear from time to time in medieval stories, architectural decoration and illuminated manuscripts, are thus regarded as creatures outside the realm of order, breakers of harmony and peace, both ridiculous and frightening.

An interesting metaphor used in the medieval ages was that of nature as a book written by God. This was visible in some homilies, since "for the preacher the book of nature must figure with the Bible as a source of material" (Curtius 320). Actually writing the book of nature or in the book of nature is not an unscriptural concept, as it appears several times in the Bible³¹. The presence of the laws of God written in the human heart, for instance, appears in the Psalter: "I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). Thus it can be seen how God is not only the original creator, but also the one who gives the order, the rules or the commandments and they are inborn or "natural" to humans, becoming thus part of human nature.

It is interesting to point out that mystical theology used these ideas, too, and later on they became so popular that they passed into common usage (Curtius 321). It is the idea that Nature and natural things are directly connected with divinity that led to the proliferation of bestiaries, whose authors narrated symbolical stories related to many animals, either true or fantastic, insisting though on the theological connotations attached to them.

The Luttrell Psalter³² begins with a calendar (folio 1 and the next 11 pages), followed by the Psalms (beginning on 13 recto), several canticles (259 verso), the Mass (283 v), an antiphon for the dead (295 r), and ends with a liturgical section (folios containing Gregorian chant in Gothic square musical notation).

Organised and Ordered Nature

When one reads the medieval bestiaries, he can find little scientific information, yet in many cases there are stories or legends which are supposed to have a moral meaning or a biblical reference³³.

³¹ Perhaps the most clear such quotation is Saint Paul's "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in the fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3).

³² The text of the Luttrell Psalter follows "the Gallican Psalter", which was the regular Psalter text used in the 14th century, both in the public and private services.

³³ I will only mention a few lines that can be found in the Aberdeen Bestiary (one of the best examples of such a work, which was written and illuminated in England around 1200): "when a lioness gives birth to her cubs, she produces them dead and watches over them for three days, until their father comes on the third day and breathes into their faces and restores them to life" ('Aberdeen Bestiary 2').

Without being a bestiary, the Luttrell Psalter (309 folios) abounds in illustrations of animals, both domestic and wild, either real or fantastical, and the quality of the pictures is impressive (although unfortunately the decorations of the last pages were not completed). When discussing the artistic value of these illustrations, one notices that one of the illustrators, responsible for the central portion of the book (folios 145-214), is superior to the others (Backhouse 14). He is the one who made most of the contemporary life scenes, in very lively compositions, delicately depicting, domestic animals at work, cultivated fields and gardens, as well as birds and dogs.

These scenes can be seen on many pages: 158 r (the windmill), 163 v (the tending of sheep), 166 v (feeding a hen and her chicks), and especially as a cycle between folio 169v and 173v³⁴. The Psalms that are written on these pages (166v-173v) are Psalms 94-97, and they are Psalms of thanksgiving, glorifying God, (Psalm 94:1 “O come, let us sing unto the Lord”; Psalm 94:2 “Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving”) because he is the creator and the ruler of the world (Psalm 95:5 “The sea is his and he made it”; Psalm 95:7 “We are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand”).

Men have been given not only spiritual salvation, but also material gifts, the surrounding nature being one of them, so they feel the need to thank Him for His many blessings. These *material blessings* are in a way exemplified in the bottom of the pages, which show a harmonious and ideal existence, based on the collaboration between man and nature (both vegetal and animal). As if to show who the owner of the fields (apart from God) was the shield with the arms of the Luttrell family appears on one of these pages (171r), held by a monkey riding a bird.

The great importance given to these earthly activities cannot come as a surprise since according to C. S. Lewis, quoting A. J. Carlyle, “the typical knight of the Middle Ages was far more interested in pigs than in tournaments” (Lewis 147). Yet, these familiar activities were regarded as unsuitable for the aristocratic elites, so they could be found only at the edges of some privately commissioned illuminated manuscripts. When Geoffrey Luttrell would read “Psalm 96:12 Let the field be joyful, and all that is therein; then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice” (172v) he would look at his fields and feel as if the text referred personally to him and his neat fields.

These marginal illustrations in the Luttrell Psalter paint rural life in a very favourable way. Depicting controlled nature – namely tamed, useful and subservient to man – in books is consistent with the metaphor of the world as the book of God, which springs from the belief that the universe, which is perceived as ordered, is the work of God, i.e. rational and meaningful.

Not only the cultivated landscape was an epitome of ordered nature, with positive connotations, but also scenes of hunting (f. 64r), or hawking (f. 163r, 41r, 159r), events which implied planning and training, although it was not profit, but entertainment which was sought for. Besides several images of hunting, in the

³⁴ 169v (the gooseherd), 170 (ploughing), 170 v (sowing), 171 r (harrowing), 171 v (breaking up clods), 172 r (removing weeds), 172 v (reaping), 173 r (stacking sheaves), 173 v (the harvest wagon), 176 v (a rabbit warren), 181 r (the watermill).

manuscript there are depictions of animals which were customarily hunted, like the wild boar (f. 19v), the fox (f. 31r, 64v) or the stag (folio 13r, the opening page with the first Psalm). Other animals, with both positive and negative connotations, are also present as decorations.

The symbolism of the stag³⁵ is well-known, as it is the image of Christ, magnificent and impressive, yet gentle and harmless. He was regarded as “the symbol of Christ, like the lamb or the unicorn ... the Church Fathers do not hesitate to make puns and to establish a correspondence between *servus* and *cervus*: the stag is the Saviour³⁶ ... hunting the stag becomes a metaphor for salvific love” (Pastoureau 83). One is not surprised to see that the walls of some rooms in the Palace of the Popes (Le Palais des Papes) in Avignon are painted with hunting scenes.

The image of the stag appears in the Luttrell Psalter as a small illumination on the very first Psalm, but equally on the same page there are two representations of monkeys (as there are others on many folios 189r and 189v, to name just two), an animal which was considered diabolical³⁷, and immoral. The monkey (le *singe*) also had a different significance, pointing to the idea of *mimesis*, since its name was an anagram of the sign (le *signe*) according to Michael Camille (13). The dove, with its divine symbolism, is also depicted several times.

I must point out that the decoration of Celtic illuminated manuscripts interacts with the written text in an essentially different way than in the Luttrell Psalter. In the Book of Kells or Lindisfarne Gospels (both illuminated roughly in the eighth century), the bird-headed snakes and the leaves are an integral part of the letters (at least of the decorated initials), and thus the animal world is part of the holy text itself. Therefore the Word and the world of God were interwoven in the texture of the gospels. This unity is irreversibly lost.

In the twelfth century the decorations of the manuscripts³⁸ depicted events that were mentioned in the religious text, and sometimes there were vegetal ribbons which had solely an aesthetic motivation. The ordered text, in both these illuminated manuscripts, is not accompanied by chaotic hybrid monsters. The Luttrell Psalter with its intricate decorations varying from geometrical designs and leaves, to animals, people and monsters, is unique in its complexity.

³⁵ A frequently-quoted fragment from the Psalter, which strengthens the stag’s positive connotation, is the beginning of Psalm 42:1 “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God”.

³⁶ I must point out that in some bestiaries many other animals are associated with Christ, for instance the panther, which is a symbol of Christ because of it is beautiful (*speciosum*) and ...gentle (*mansuetus*). And also because of the fact that it stays in the cave for some three days when it has eaten its fill (folios 8v, 9r from the Aberdeen Bestiary)

³⁷ According to Aberdeen Bestiary for instance: “Cuius [Symia] figuram diabolus habet.” (The Devil has the form of an ape, folio 12v).

³⁸ Winchester Bible or Aberdeen Bestiary, for instance.

Monstrous and Exotic Nature

Besides real animals, in the Luttrell Psalter one can also find many monstrous creatures, which very often mock human reality, going beyond nature and the natural.

I will partially contradict Bakhtin's statement that "in medieval art a strict dividing line is drawn between the pious and the grotesque; they exist side by side, but never merge" (according to Camille 11). When reading the Luttrell Psalter one can notice that on most of the pages the monsters intrude in the text, expanding beyond the margin (on many pages there are line-fillers having geometrical designs or the form of drolleries, animals and leaves). Thus nature, either ordered (in geometrical or vegetal forms) or wild and untamed (like the hybrid monsters), becomes part of the manuscript – more than just a simple decoration, but rather as part of the inner structure of the book.

Such composite monsters, made up of separate pieces, which belong to various animals, can be attractive and repulsive, hilarious or/and vulgar, yet each time beautiful in their originality. Nevertheless, originality was never sought after in medieval times. In other words the images resembled small, spontaneous and random 'jokes' meant to lighten and enliven stern lectures, so that the listeners' attention did not waver. One could also say that they brought to mind the fairs that were held on religious feasts, which people visited right after leaving the church where they had attended mass. On the other hand, these drolleries could be interpreted as the exotic, the unknown, or the wish to escape the tamed and familiar life. They resemble the unknown or unexplored edges of the medieval maps of the world (*mappa mundi*), waiting to be conquered and integrated into the natural familiar realm. They have the same effect of both scaring and attracting (amusing) people as the gargoyles, i.e. the monsters that can be seen on medieval cathedrals.

The association between a profound religious text and funny monsters may seem unusual for the 21st-century reader, yet such a juxtaposition was commonplace for medieval Christians.

What we today may perceive as contradictory cultural codes [the writing of the word of God and the amusement of marginal art] might not have been seen as so separated during the Middle Ages. In a typical non-illustrative manuscript (Paris, *Bibliothèque nationale*, fr. 19152) we can find moral tales, saints' lives, fables, courtly poems and two bawdy *fabliaux* bound together. The concoction of hybrids, mingling different registers and genres, seems to have been both a verbal and a visual fashion for elite audiences (Camille 13).

I must also point out that Chaucer's famous *Canterbury Tales* is exactly such a "concoction" vacillating in "different registers".

This does not imply that there is no connection between the drolleries and the text. Sometimes it may be argued that such a connection can be established. For instance on folio 43v, in a line of the Psalm 22 one can read "They gaped upon me with their *mouths*, as a ravening and a roaring lion" (Psalm 22:13), and the decoration on the right of the page, a bit lower than this verse, shows a snake-like monster eating a man's head, which is in the monster's big, open *mouth*. Similarly, on folio 162v (Psalm 89) one can see two small illustrations: one of a man stepping over a fence and destroying it (a possible hint at Psalm 89:41 "He is a reproach to

his neighbours”) and another of a few men attacking a civilian with *swords*, one of them hitting his head (a possible illustration of Psalm 89:43 “Thou hast turned the edge of thy *sword*”).

The significance of a decoration is very often more than what is obvious. For instance, for Janet Backhouse (p. 53) the rowing boat (f. 160 r) is just an example of travelling, while the same picture is “a visual allegory of Sir Geoffrey’s spiritual struggle to do his duty” for Michelle Brown (p.19). Furthermore when looking at the design of a text, the 21st-century reader expects a connection between the illustrations and the general idea of the text or a depiction of an event mentioned in the text. Yet, what one witnesses in the Luttrell Psalter is that sometimes a word draws the illustrator’s attention and unexpected pictures spring from such associations

As a partial conclusion I want to say that although in the Middle Ages they did not have the idea of sublime, wild natural beauty, and beauty meant order, and cultivation, nevertheless in the illuminations of this manuscript one can see a dream-like or surreal type of beauty, like artistic play within the text. The holy text is embellished by these decorations like misplaced and mismatched pieces of jewellery brought by devoted Christians to a shrine.

The Psalms and the World – Spiritual versus Physical Reality

Commissioning and making a book of prayers (or Psalms) was in itself an act of piety, and this particular Psalter was meant both for private and public use. The congregation of the parish for which the Luttrell Psalter was written could admire it, as it might have been on display on certain liturgical feasts or local celebrations. Such a luxurious book was meant to be read, but also venerated, as a sacred artefact.

Usually the blazons and the heraldic shields fill up the margins of the Psalters and Books of Hours commissioned by status-conscious aristocracy (Camille 100), and there are two such instances in the Luttrell Psalter (f.171r and, 163r). However unlike other manuscripts, this Psalter has a portrait of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell, who commissioned it, represented at the end of Psalm 109 (folio 201 r) as a mounted knight, in his best trappings, while his wife and his daughter-in-law hand him his helmet, lance and shield. Another portrait, maybe not so obvious though, is the one at the feast (folio 208 r), where the lord’s family (his wife and daughter-in-law, included) sit at the table, together with two monks, probably those who work on writing and illuminating the book).

The Luttrell Psalter includes some narrative cycles, which appear on several subsequent pages. While the images of rural life were rather thoroughly analysed by Janet Backhouse (in 2000), the cycles of religious feasts have not been carefully evaluated. Probably the longest is the one depicting the life, Passion, Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the following events from the history of Salvation. The Annunciation is twice depicted on folio 86 r and also on folio 44v; and images of beautifully vested bishops appear several times (on folio 45r, after the Annunciation, and on folios 85r and 85v before the Annunciation, which starts the cycle depicting Jesus’ life).

The cycle occupies more than twenty folios³⁹ (85r-96v) and it is followed by a cycle depicting events from the Virgin Mary's life (97r-101v) and other folios presenting angels and saints (102r-108v). On all these pages one can see icon-like pictures and grotesque decorations side by side (although the drolleries seem less disgraceful). There are also many illustrations of saints: Saint Andrew (f.40r), Saint John the Baptist (f.40v), Saint Lawrence (f.48r), Saint Catherine (f.), Saint Archangel Michael (f. 46v), St. Christopher (45v), Saint Bartholomew (ff. 107v and 108r), etc. Perhaps the most interesting scene is the depiction of Saint Thomas Becket's martyrdom (f. 51r).

Therefore, should one assume that these monsters are actually representations of or hints at the devil? Are they symbols of temptations which a Christian reading the Psalms should resist? Do these monsters overwhelm the pages of the Psalter? The answer to the last question is no. I believe that it would be wrong to assume that the illustrations depicting unnatural creatures occur more often than the spiritual or divine illuminations. They are visible, but this is mostly because they contrast with the austerity of the text, yet they do not appear to be more important than the religious decorations in the economy of the text.

On the other hand it seems to me that nature as depicted in the Luttrell Psalter is wild and uncontrolled. It is true that there are some notable instances in which man is seen as able to subdue nature, namely in the images showing the agricultural activities, but they are very few and restricted to the second part of the book, as if they are the exception. Depictions of animals are very many as they run free on many pages. They seem to illustrate man's inability to control nature, as he was supposed to do according to God's commandment. In other words he is incapable of fulfilling his divinely allotted mission.

Nature as shown in the Luttrell Psalter is mocking man, who is just a powerless pawn: a spectator, not an achiever, as he should be. The few agricultural pictures, where man is shown as actively shaping Nature, stand out as examples. The images of wild uncontrolled nature contrasting with tamed, ordered reality may also point to the fact that by strengthening his connection with God, through prayer (and/or the reading of the Psalter), a Christian may improve his perception of reality as well as his relationship with it.

Yet, in order to comprehend the real *nature* of the Luttrell Psalter (in the philosophical meaning of the word), one must read the Psalter with an open heart,

³⁹ the Nativity (folio 86 v), Magi follow the star (folio 87v), the Adoration of the Magi (folio 88 r), the Flight into Egypt (folio 88 v), the Circumcision of Christ (folio 89 r), the Presentation in the Temple (folio 89 v), Christ's Entry into Jerusalem (folio 90 r), the Last Supper (folio 90 v), the Betrayal of Christ (folio 91 r), Christ before Herod (folio 91 v), the Mocking of Christ (folio 92 r), the Scourging of Christ (folio 92 v), Christ carrying the Cross (f.93 r), the Crucifixion (ff. 93v – 94 r), the Deposition (f.94v), the Resurrection (f.95), the Ascension (f.95r), Pentecost (f.96v). The Annunciation of the Conception of the Virgin to her mother, St Anne, and other scenes from Virgin's life follow in the next pages (folio 97 r – 99 v). The cycle with events from Christ's and Virgin Mary's lives ends with the depiction of the Judgement Day (folio 101 v), where angels, playing trumpets, escort a group of naked souls towards their Judgement. Despite the content here is nothing terrifying about this image.

open both to religious and artistic feelings, experiencing both devotion and enchantment. The pious Christian is overwhelmed by the intensity of the Psalms, read during his private devotion, and he is similarly awed by the audacity of some illustrations. The question about the real significance and nature of the Luttrell Psalter remains open.

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