Modernist Bestiary

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Published by University College London

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Modernist Bestiary: Translating Animals and the Arts through Guillaume Apollinaire, Raoul Dufy and Graham Sutherland.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81876.
The Bestiary or the Procession of Orpheus was Graham Sutherland’s last major work. The prints he made to accompany Apollinaire’s poems of the same title, published in 1911 and originally illustrated by Raoul Dufy, were exhibited at Marlborough Fine Art in London in 1979, the year before Sutherland died. Not all Apollinaire’s poems were included, and Sutherland added an extra image unrelated to the text. In the exhibition catalogue, Sutherland described his initial discomfort at being asked to make drawings for what was to be a bilingual Italian/French edition:

I don’t always feel really at home making illustrations, tending to feel that I am a prisoner of the text. Moreover I have to admit that at the time I knew very little about Apollinaire, except as an activator during the revolutionary years of literature and painting in Paris. But I read the poems and very especially the notes, and in the summer of 1978 decided to have a try and produced a few gouaches … the more I thought of the poems, the more I felt that the work might be within my capacity after all – and who in truth could resist such a line as ‘among the heavenly hierarchies … we can see beings of unknown shape and surprising beauty’?¹

The most fabulous of the creatures in Sutherland’s 1978 Bestiary is the final one, the ox, also the last in Apollinaire’s Bestiaire. Of ‘Le Bœuf’, Apollinaire wrote, ‘Ce chérubin dit la louange / Du paradis …’ / ‘This cherub speaks in praise/Of Heaven ...’² The cherubim, one of the
heavenly hierarchy of angels, were identified, as Apollinaire writes in the notes, as a winged bull, but were ‘in no way monstrous’. In Sutherland’s print, the winged ox or bull, horned head haloed by the moon, seems to hurtle down or spin in a dark cloud towards a green wood. Out of the black clouds and swarming around the cherubim are monstrous forms of unknown shape. At the bottom, a small doorway opens onto bright green light; on our side of the opening, two smaller creatures hover: the winged ox, again upside down, and a donkey – the ox and ass, perhaps, of the Bible, who witnessed the birth of Christ. A winged ox is the symbol of the evangelist St Luke, too, which had figured in Sutherland’s designs for the tapestry for Coventry Cathedral, Christ in Glory, of 1962. As well as the multiple biblical associations, though, this scene in Sutherland’s Bestiary echoes with references to Dante’s Inferno. In canto IV, Dante sees the great spirits who, through no fault of their own, were not baptised and thus cannot go to heaven. Limbo is a green meadow, an open area full of light, and Dante sees on the ‘enamelled green’ the shades of philosophers, scientists, heroes and poets of the ancient world, including Orpheus.

Orpheus, Apollinaire tells us in his notes, was not only the first musician, with his tortoiseshell lyre, a poet and singer, the inventor of all the sciences and all the arts, but also a magician and prophet who predicted the coming of Christ. References to Christianity as well as classical and medieval myth and legend are scattered through Apollinaire’s Bestiaire, and the final poem ends with a cheery if ironic nod to a future life:

Ce chérubin dit la louange
Du Paradis, où, près des anges,
Nous revivrons, mes chers amis,
Quand le bon dieu l’aura permis.

This cherub speaks in praise
Of Heaven, and there, with the angels
My friends, we will live again,
When the good lord allows.

While the cherubim in Apollinaire’s poem may sing of paradise, it is a gateway to a green light that Sutherland shows, the limbo outside both heaven and the lightless depths of hell, where Orpheus would wait forever. Sutherland engages visually in subtle ways with the tensions between Christianity and the classical myths; the powerful effect of
Sutherland’s print lies partly in the contrasts between the tiny emerald-green opening onto a beyond and the dark wood, the golden light around the cherub’s head, and the disturbing phallic and bulging shapes of the monsters. There is promise, but perhaps only of limbo, and there are threats. Tension was a crucial aspect of Sutherland’s visual approach. Of his thorn pictures and the early Northamptonshire Crucifixion, he wrote: ‘One reacts to the reality of tension in a subject, physical and spiritual or psychological; and that tension paraphrased and ordered should become immediate and intensified in one’s painting.’

The winged ox and cherub combined is the only mythological hybrid animal in the Bestiary. Lured as he was by the promise of unknown beings ‘of surprising beauty’, Sutherland’s beasts in this bestiary are nonetheless mostly close to nature, although exactly what this means with respect to traditions of representation is not straightforward in the history of Sutherland’s engagement with animals. The 1978 Bestiary was the third of Sutherland’s bestiaries, following on from The Bees (1976–7) and A Bestiary (1968). The latter set of 26 colour lithographs includes not only carefully observed birds and animals, such as a ram, a toad and an owl, but creatures in the process of transformation, such as ‘Emerging Insect’, and a curious image entitled ‘Insect (Simulating Seeds)’, in which it is not clear whether the simulation is in nature or pictorial; perhaps the point is that it is both.

Animals had long fascinated Sutherland, and his treatment of them is integral to his investigation of pictorial form and of forms in nature. Animals could emerge, for example, from the suggestive morphologies of tree roots and trunks, which Sutherland might develop or leave as ambiguous shapes. When I was searching for earlier images of animals, time and again I thought I glimpsed one – a bird, perhaps, or a hippopotamus, or something more mythological and hybrid – only to find on checking the title that the thing was almost always vegetable rather than animal: Fallen Tree against Sunset (1940) or Green Tree Form: Interior of Woods (1940), for example. The tree trunk had momentarily suggested a corresponding but different association: animate, with legs and a snout. The hard ridges of tree bark can easily become the bristly hide of a boar or a rhinoceros. Looking first and reading the title afterwards turned out to be a way into a key and enduring aspect of Sutherland’s highly individual way of perceiving and recognising forms.

Sutherland’s openness to the chance encounter, to a poetry of visual analogies often inspired by a found object, is one of the aspects of his work that connects to surrealism. The link was noticed by the organisers of the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London, who were
scouting for exhibitors, and Sutherland was invited by Roland Penrose to contribute. The two oil paintings he sent, *Thunder Sounding* and *Mobile Mask*, were not the expected landscapes and were described by Alley as ‘in essence *jeux d’esprits*’. Sutherland was not attracted to the movement as such; he was in a sense a solitary artist, and his intransigence and aims differed from those of the surrealists:

“The one field in which the surrealists helped me to widen my range was in their propagation of the idea that there was worthy subject matter for painting in objects the painter would never have looked at before … Surrealism helped me to realise that forms which interested me existed already in nature, and were waiting for me to find them.”

The parallels with surrealism, nonetheless, are more frequent than Sutherland acknowledged. As well as the morphological metamorphoses and interest in found objects, he was committed to making visible and present the unknown. ‘The unknown is just as real as the known, & it must be made to look so. I want to give the look of things to my emotionally modified forms.’

The idea that reality is much broader than what is materially present to the eye was fundamental for the surrealists. The difference is that Sutherland pursued this in the interests of his art, of the pictorial, while for the surrealists the imagination was mobilised in the interests of the real for its own sake.

In *Green Tree Form: Interior of Woods*, a fallen tree thrusts outwards towards the spectator, its forked branches giving it the appearance of a monstrous undefined animal, while light falls on the near trunk, emphasising the double meaning of the word. The overall shape reappears in one of the plates in Sutherland’s 1968 *Bestiary*, although now more clearly defined as something resembling both a hippopotamus and a rhinoceros, as *Chained Beast*, picking up the theme of the painting *The Captive*, of 1963–4. This chained beast had an over-determined origin: Goya’s prisoners from *Disasters of War*, panels of lions in high relief on the façade of the Ospedale di San Marco, and a shape in the side of a lane in Kent which reminded Sutherland of a rhinoceros. Another early painting, however, *Toad* (1958), is a minutely observed realistic image: a fat-bellied toad slithering along outside a sewer grating. This points to a concern with observing the essential characteristics of animals: ‘only through this demonstration of their nature do animals pay unconscious tribute to the power which created them.’ Although the manner of representing the chosen animals and birds in the later
**Bestiary** is on the whole quite straightforwardly naturalistic, the imagery as a whole, the setting and scale of the creatures, is not. For example, The Elephant with its hoary skin and tusks is set in a collage-like set of scenes, with at the bottom a close-up of an open – grinning or screaming – mouth, which references the famous motif in Francis Bacon’s paintings. The human creatures – Orpheus himself and the sirens – are the most abstracted, recalling Sutherland's long explorations of correspondences between mechanical and organic forms. Sutherland delights in the interrelationships between the more abstract aspects of the composition and the rich associations of the animals, which reveal themselves slowly. The formats of the prints are not only extremely varied but look to traditional pictorial structures in such a way as to invite speculation about their link to the subject. The image of The Grasshopper, for example, could be the first letter of an illuminated manuscript of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. The strong black lines structuring the image look calligraphic and echo the curious sign-like character of the grasshopper in profile. The image harks back to *Cigale 1* (1948), the first of Sutherland's oil paintings of animals which shares the heraldic fixity of the later print. This was painted in the south of France, where the sound of cicada is ubiquitous.

Many of the images in *The Bestiary*, such as the grasshopper and the lion, have internal painted frames, again resembling the illustrations of the beasts in a medieval bestiary. The Mouse, a delightfully delicate and virtually monochrome aquatint, is distinct in that way from the others. There are five sub-panels beneath the main picture, resembling the predella panels of an altarpiece. These were often painted in grisaille, by contrast with the main image. The mouse is eating a wooden beam, whose perspectival slant faintly recalls a crucifixion but is effectively more like a floorboard. In the predella panels, the mouse is gnawing at the foundations, so their pictorial position 'underneath' is taken literally. Overall there is a light brownish wash, while the wood itself is white like the moon.

Several of the prints have a blank space beneath the main image, in the same place and similar in format to the predella panels in The Mouse, which recalls the space left at the bottom of devotional images for a text or inscription, which would give thanks to the Virgin, or Christ, or a saint, for the miracle recorded in the image (illustration 12). These were popular in Catholic Europe and also in Latin America. Sutherland could not have known the use Frida Kahlo made of these retablos, in one case...
(My Birth, 1932) leaving the cartouche blank because there had been no miracle. There may be a technical reason for the blank bands, but they are so noticeable, especially in The Flea and The Serpent (where it is coloured bright green), that an association with retablos (if not Kahlo) is possible.

The image of the flea, outsize, comfortably in bed, shoes and bedpan underneath, rubbing its feelers after a good dinner, the background a striking overall red the colour of blood and with carefully drawn holes pierced into the red flesh, is the most anthropomorphic of Sutherland’s beasts. This echoes Apollinaire’s text where the fleas, which feast on man, are most closely related to human beings, being partly composed of them:

Puces, amis, amantes même,
Qu’ils sont cruels ceux qui nous aiment!
Tout notre sang coule pour eux.
Les bien-aimés sont malheureux.

Fleas: our friends, even our lovers; How cruel they are, those that love us! We lose all our blood only to them. For ill-fated are the well-beloved.

The anthropomorphism and exaggerated scale, however, also recall children’s books and book illustrations – it could easily be the beginning of a tale of a flea – an irony Sutherland seems to relish.

Affect in the prints is as various as the formats, and often ambiguous. Apollinaire’s references to Greek mythology were described as being ‘tied in with a delicious (sometimes malicious) sense of humour, using animals as a vehicle for commenting on humans’.10 There is a certain cruelty, which may in fact be the consequence of an identification with the creature. In The Tortoise, appropriately the first animal image in both Apollinaire and Sutherland (illustrations 2 and 10), whose shell is Orpheus’s lyre:

Du Thrace magique, o délire!
Mes doigts sûrs font sonner la lyre.

The sure touch of my fingers, what delight, Sounds the magical Thracian’s lyre.
The strings of the lyre are drilled through the tortoise's head and legs. Sutherland is reminding us that the tortoise shell was once part of a living body. The tortoise, which still roams wild in places like Georgia, Armenia and Greece, seems, in spite of its magnificent, hard and beautifully patterned shell, to be one of the most vulnerable of creatures. It is the source of music and song at a cost.

In the medieval bestiaries, such as MS Bodley 764, creatures we would view as mythical or fantastic, such as satyrs, the phoenix or the unicorn, are treated as no less part of the animal kingdom in nature as the horse or the wolf. That the only mythological beast in the Bestiary, the winged ox or cherub, is the last of the animals, as it is in Apollinaire's Bestiaire, may have prompted Sutherland to add a final image, unrelated to the original. Sutherland's cherubim is a kind of hinge to a world view, or its absence. The taxonomies of classical literature and their successors the medieval bestiaries were ordered according to a predominant world view and its hierarchy. The apparently haphazard sequence of Sutherland's Bestiary is challenged by the last two images, of the winged ox and the pyre. This final picture is a sinister scene, presumably a funeral pyre, the fire being tended by a small figure with long tongs who is seated on an ambiguous form resembling an almighty hand with blood-red fingertips. 'I have added one or two images that have no direct reference to the poems, but which refer, perhaps, to the difficulties of life and living', Sutherland wrote. Solace in a pantheistic belief in nature, whose complexity and variety exceed human understanding, sharply confronted by the mysteries and difficulties of life, by living and what if anything lies beyond.

Notes

1 Sutherland 1979. Referred to in this book as The Bestiary or the Procession of Orpheus, as the work is listed at the Tate, or Bestiary.
2 Translations from the French provided by Timothy Mathews.
3 Apollinaire 1965, 35.
5 Sutherland 1977.
6 Sutherland 1968.
7 From a conversation with Andrew Causey, 1966, quoted in Alley 1982, 77.
9 Hayes 1980, 142.
10 Alley 1982, 168.
Bibliography


