

The Sign of the Pelican on the Cross of Christ

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Pie Pellicane, Jesu Domine,
Me immundum munda tuo sanguine,
cuius una stilla salvum facere
totum mundum quit ab omni scelere.

Oh tender pelican, Lord Jesus,
Purify me, who am unclean, in your
blood,
One drop of which can save
The whole world from all its sins.

(From the *Adoro te devote*
of Thomas Aquinas)¹



Fig. 1. Illustration from “De Pelicano”
(chapter viii) of Christopher Plantin’s
1588 edition of Epiphanius’s *Physiologus*
(p. 30).

A sunny day, one of the first this spring. My wife Marguerite and I are strolling along, pleased as punch with the weather and one another, down the sidewalk edging the U of M’s Francis Quadrangle in the direction of the famous free-standing columns that serve as the central focus of the College quad and the icon of the city of Columbia, Missouri. Before we come parallel to the columns we turn aside, make our way up a set of stairs past a gaggle of waiting school children, and into Picard Hall, residence of the university’s diminutive but well chosen art and archaeology collection. As we enter, passing under the replica of the Chartres Tympanum, with its stately figure of Christ flanked all around by the symbolic representations of the four evangelists, I marvel once again at the blue room to our left filled with massive, pasty white plaster casts of the famous statues of the Western world, the Loacoon Group,

¹ Latin and English quoted in Hyman H. Kleinman, *The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas: Perspectives in Criticism* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), 25

Apollo Belvedere, the Ludovisi Hera, the Venus di Milo, the Venus di Medici, who knows how many other Venuses, the well-known bust of Homer, and the one of Alexander the Great. Upstairs, passing through the Saul and Gladys Weinberg Gallery of Ancient Art, I pause to take a few snaps of the bust of the Emperor Hadrian as Diomedes (Fig. 2). As I do my wife rolls her eyes and barbs me with a query the substance of which turns on the conviction that I had already taken enough pictures of that “old plaster guy,” on our previous visit to provide more images of same than I am ever likely to have need of or use.

Let me rush to state, however, to go on record, as it were, that in the implication of her question my wife was wrong, DEAD WRONG! One never knows when a particular image of the Emperor Hadrian as Diomedes, taken from a particular angle, in a particular light, might come in handy. Nor, it should be said, was she giving due weight to the fact that the lighting in the gallery was better on this day than it had been



Fig. 2. The “Old Plaster Guy,”
alias Hadrian as Diomedes.
(Photo: R. Huggins)

when we visited before. Worse still, I am firmly convinced that even her bumpkinish remark about the “old plaster guy” was entirely feigned and disingenuous. It had in fact been *her* keen observation about a detail I had overlooked on one of the other pieces in the European section that had bought us back today so that I could take a picture of it. I suspect the real motive behind her remark was to speed things along so we could get on further down the quad to the Anthropological Museum in Swallow Hall to view their collection of old arrowheads and cracked pots. In discussing the matter further with her afterward, she suggested that the potentiality of a cappuccino brownie down the Uprise Bakery afterwards *might*—and only *might* mind you—have played into her attempts to move things along it as well.

Anyhow, the picture we had come for was a detail from a 15th century devotional cross attributed to a “Follower of [the Florentine artist] Benozzo Gozzoli, known as ‘Alunno di Gozzoli,’” (a curious redundancy since Alunno di Gozzoli *means* “disciple or student of Gozzoli”). As it happens it was the great Bernard Berenson himself, that doyen of 20th century Renaissance art historians and master (used here in a specialized sense as the masculine form of the feminine noun *mistress*)

of one of the daughters of the author of the *Christian's Secret to Happy Life*, who identified this otherwise anonymous piece.² My attempt to photograph it did not come off well because it was covered in glass, which made reflection a problem, and because the detail I wanted was so small. After several attempts I decided my best course was to seek a digital image of the detail from the museum itself. I was directed to the small basement office of the scholarly and genial Jeffery B. Wilcox, Curator of Collections for the museum, who helped me. As he looked into getting me the image he chatted helpfully about the cross and about how the thirteen-piece Samuel H. Kress Study Collection of which it was a part had come to be donated to the museum. S. H. Kress, which most of us know as the five and dime store king, was apparently also the Grand Poobah (my word not Wilcox's) of American art collectors. The National Gallery in Washington, D. C., was largely his idea, with a substantial part of its vast collection having been generously infused into its spacious galleries from his own private stash of masterpieces. After that there was a sort of second level of donations to museums around the country (pieces from his collection winding up, for example, in the Nelson-Atkins Museum here in Kansas City), and then finally a third level to universities in the form of study collections. The *Alunno di Gozzoli Devotional Cross* I was interested in, Fig. 3, came to the university museum as part of one of these third level donations back in 1961.³

What had drawn my wife's attention to this cross and what intrigued me was a detail of a pelican and its children, explained on the accompanying card as follows:

Below God the Father, a pelican feeds its young with blood by



Fig. 3. Follower of Benozzo Gozzoli, called "Alunno di Gozzoli," Italian, *Devotional Cross* (1480-1490). (Photo: R. Huggins).

² Norman E. Land, "An Overview of the Collection," in *The Samuel H. Kress Study Collection at the University of Missouri* (Norman E. Land, ed.; Columbia, MO, and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 29.

³ The story is told in more detail in Marilyn Perry, "Five-and Dime for Millions: The Samuel H. Kress Collection," in *Kress Study Collection*, 3-11.

piercing its own side. During medieval times, the pelican was believed to engage in this behavior, which was thought to parallel Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

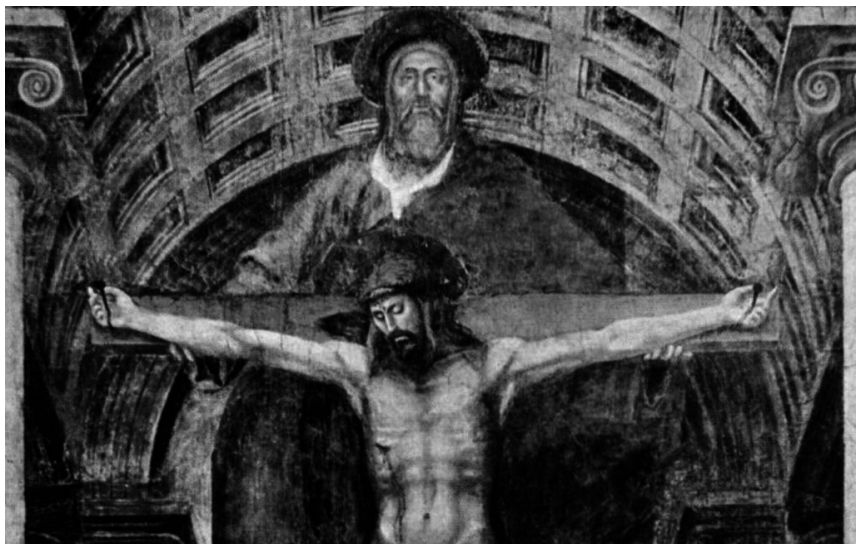
In looking at the black and white detail of the pelican (Fig. 4), the reader is not able to see that the dark spot on the mother pelican's breast, setting off the heads of the baby pelicans, is blood red.



Fig. 4. Follower of Benozzo Gozzoli, called “Alunno di Gozzoli,” Italian, *Devotional Cross*, 1480-1490, (detail) (Source: *Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri—Columbia*).

Part of the interest of this particular image was the placement of the pelican between the figure of God the Father in the quatrefoil at the top and the INRI (Iesus Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum) *titulus* above the head of the figure of the crucified Jesus. Given its placement and its particular rendering on this cross, the casual observer might easily mistake it for a figure of a dove representing the third-person of the Holy Trinity, as it appears, for example, in Masaccio's famous 15th century fresco at Santa

Maria Novella in Florence, in which the Father, the Dove (Holy Spirit), and the crucified Jesus are represented in just this way (Fig. 5).



*Fig. 5. Masaccio, Italian, Holy Trinity, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 15th Cent.
(Source: Yorck Project at Wikimedia Commons).*

This is not to imply that the placement of the pelican motif in our devotional cross unprecedented or even unusual. We may think for example of the 15th century processional cross attributed to Neri di Bicci at the University of Michigan Museum of Art (which is strikingly similar to our cross),⁴ or again of the 14th century processional cross at the Brooklyn Museum of Art by the Master of Monte del Lago.⁵ Indeed crosses with pelicans above the figure of Christ—often seen, as here, nesting with their children in what looks like a tree growing out of the top of the cross itself are plentiful.⁶

⁴ See Land, “Overview,” in *Kress Study Collection*, 31-32 (Figs. 14-15) Accession No. 1942.6.

⁵ *Double Sided Processional Cross*, Italian, 14th cent., (Accession No. 34.845).

⁶ See, e.g., Giotto di Bondone (or his studio), *Crucifix*, Italian, ca. 1315, Louvre, Accession No. M.I. 357); Giotto (?), *Painted Crucifix*, Italian, ca. 1325-35, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College (Accession No. AMAM 1942.129); Sassetta, *St. Francis Kneeling before Christ on the Cross*, Italian, 15th cent. (Cleveland Museum of Art; Accession No. 1962.36). Sometimes it appears as if the nest is setting right on top of the cross itself, see e.g., Niccolò da Foligno, *The Crucifixion*, Italian, c. 1468, Pomona College Museum of Art

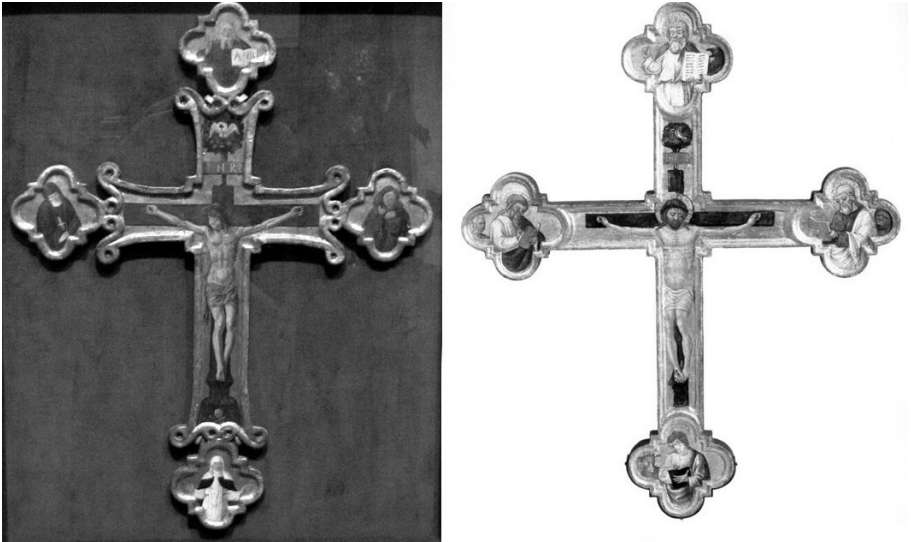


Fig. 6. Compare the Alunno di Gozzoli cross with the very 15th century processional cross attributed to Neri di Bicci (Source: University of Michigan Museum of Art).

In her magisterial work on Christian Iconography, Gertrud Schiller remarks that the “pelican is a common motif in *Arma Christi* images.”⁷ *Arma Christi* pictures images depict scenes cluttered with the instruments of Jesus’s betrayal and passion. A good example including our motif of a pelican nesting in a tree growing out of the top of a cross is seen in Lorenzo Monaco’s 15th century *Man of Sorrows* (Fig. 7).

(Accession No. P61.1.9). This last work is also from the Kress collection.

⁷ Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (2 vols.; trans. Janet Seligman; Greenwich, CT: New York: Graphic Society, 1971-1972), 2:137.

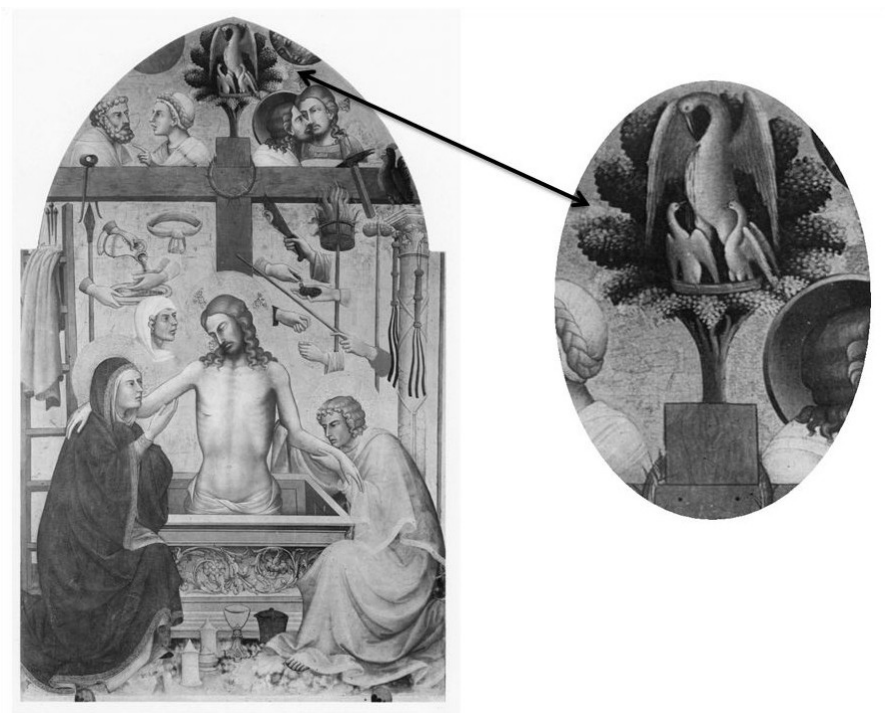


Fig. 7: Lorenzo Monaco, Italian, *Man of Sorrows*, Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, 1404 (and detail) (Source: Yorck Project at Wikimedia Commons).

The motif of a tree growing out of the cross with a nesting pelican apparently represents a variation on the iconic theme of the cross of Christ as a living tree or tree of life.⁸ A splendid example of the latter s comes from a 13th/14th century German manuscript from the West German Cistercian Abbey of Kamp now in Yale's Beinecke Library (Fig. 8).

I. A QUESTION OF ORIGINS

So then, where I wondered did this pelican motif originate? A little poking and scratching around in places like the magnificently stocked Spencer Art Reference Library on the top floor of Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art revealed that it came from a work called the *Physiologus*, which is sometimes attributed to the 4th century Greek

⁸ See for example the Nuremberg Rood Cross in Schiller, *Iconography* 2 (Fig. 489).

father Epiphanius of Salamis, but perhaps dating back as early as the end of the 2nd century AD.

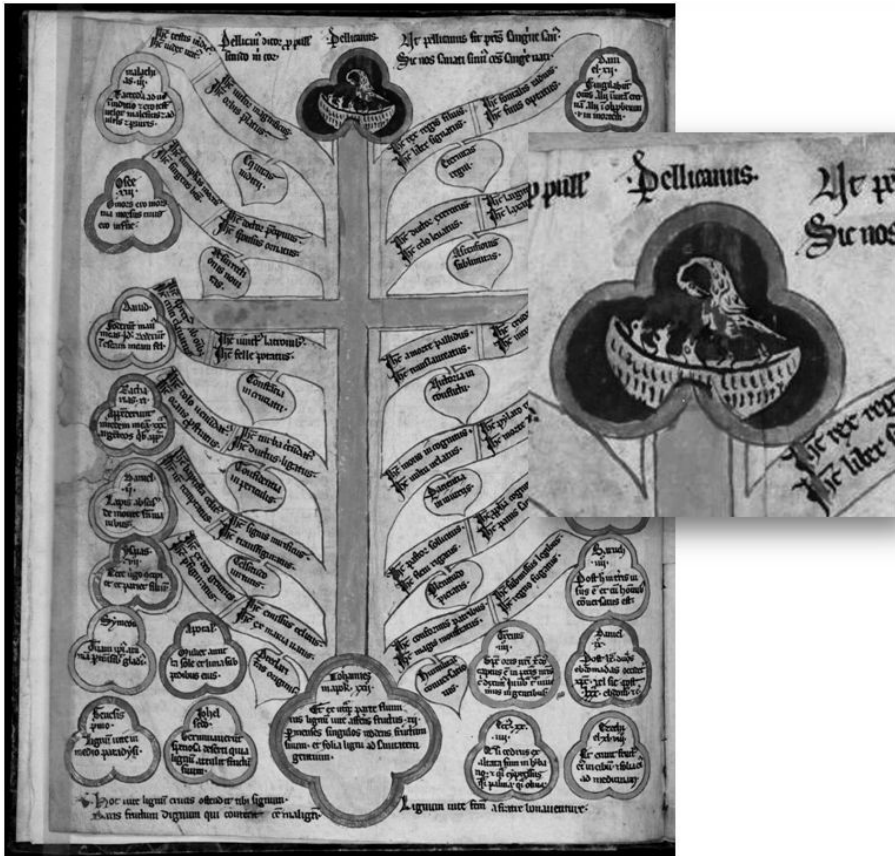


Fig. 8. *Speculum theologiae*, German, Beineke MS 416, p. 1v (and detail)
(Source: Beinecke Rare Book Room at Yale University).

The *Pysiologus* also served as the basis of the Medieval Bestiaries. On pursuing this further I discovered that the story told in the *Physiologus* and retold and expanded in later Bestiaries contained interesting additional details not mentioned in the description accompanying the Alluno di Gozzoli cross, nor the published discussion from the University of Missouri Kress collection catalogue itself. The following for example, rife with such details, comes from the Aberdeen Bestiary, which was produced around 1200 AD. There we read in part:⁹

⁹ Aberdeen University Library MS 24, Folio 34v-35r; ET: Colin McLaren &

‘I am like pelican of the wilderness’ (Psalms, 102:6). The pelican is a bird of Egypt, living in the wilderness of the River Nile, from which it gets its name. For Egypt is known as *Canopos*.

It is devoted to its young. When it gives birth and the young begin to grow, they strike their parents in the face. But their parents, striking back, kill them. On the third day, however, the mother-bird, with a blow to her flank, opens up her side and lies on her young and lets her blood pour over the bodies of the dead, and so raises them from the dead.

In a mystic sense, the pelican signifies Christ; Egypt, the world. The pelican lives in solitude, as Christ alone condescended to be born of a virgin without intercourse with a man. It is solitary, because it is free from sin, as also is the life of Christ. It kills its young with its beak as preaching the word of God converts the unbelievers. It weeps ceaselessly for its young, as Christ wept with pity when he raised Lazarus. Thus after three days, it revives its young with its blood, as Christ saves us, whom he has redeemed with his own blood.

The most notable elaboration in the above text, which as it turns out is also a commonplace feature in the traditional retelling of the pelican motif, is the reference to the baby pelicans rising up against their parents, being struck dead by them, and then raised up again after three days by having blood shed on them. It is no surprise that for the Church this imagined recurring sequence of events in the lifecycle of the pelican appeared to provide a wonderfully symbolical retelling of the story of the creation, fall, and redemption of humanity.

II. THE PELICAN AND THE FOUR-FOLD METHOD

The reader will notice that this description of the pelican in the Aberdeen Bestiary is linked to Psalm 102:6 (Vulgate 101:7). This brings into play here as in a number of Bestiaries, the Medieval four-fold method of biblical interpretation. According to this method a given scripture can to be investigated from four different perspectives in order to plumb the depths of its varying senses expressing the divine intention in producing it. These four are the Literal sense, the Allegorical sense,

the Moral (or tropological) sense, and the Anagogical (or eschatological) sense. The approach was summed up in the Latin, for example, by Nicholas of Lyra as follows:¹⁰

Litera, gesta docet
Quid credas, Allegoria
Moralis, quid agas
Quo tendas, anagogia

Robert M. Grant renders these in English as:¹¹

The *letter* shows us what God and our fathers did;
The *allegory* shows us where our faith is hid;
The *moral* meaning gives us rules of daily life;
The *anagogy* shows us where we end our strife.

The portion of the passage quoted here from the Aberdeen Bestiary touches only upon first the “letter,” i.e., the literal sense, the supposed “facts” about Pelicans, and then second their allegorical sense (or in case “mystic sense”). This Bestiary also contains an extended section on the moral sense relating to the pelican’s self-sacrificial act:

In a moral sense, we can understand by the pelican not the righteous man, but anyone who distances himself far from carnal desire. By Egypt is meant our life, shrouded in the darkness of ignorance. For *Egiptus* can be translated as 'darkness'. In Egypt, therefore, we make a wilderness (see Joel 3:19), when we are far from the preoccupations and desires of this world. Thus the righteous man creates solitude for himself in the city, when he keeps himself free from sin, as far as human frailty allows.

The pelican kills its young with its beak because the righteous man considers and rejects his sinful thoughts and deeds.

Nothing really is said in the Aberdeen Bestiary about the forth, or anagogical, sense as relating to the pelican.

Even though the Medieval four-fold method was left behind with the advent of the Renaissance and Reformation, the symbolism of the

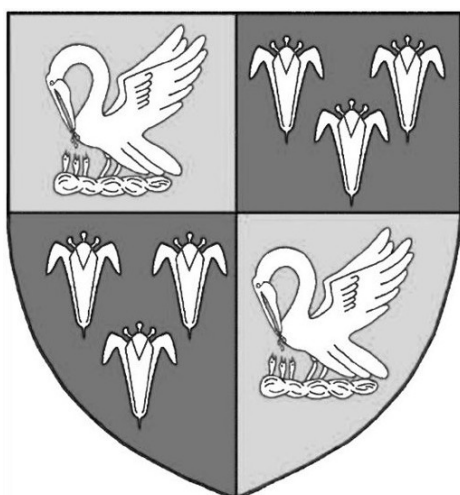
¹⁰ Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1349) in William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 101.

¹¹ Robert Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 19.

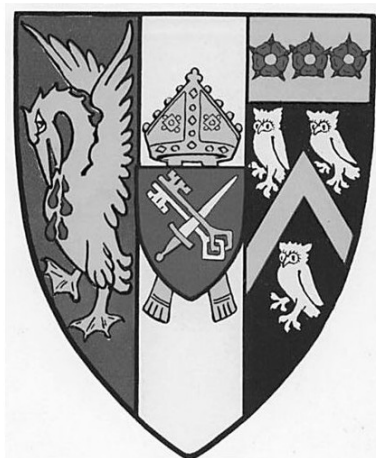
pelican has continued to make itself felt in our Western Culture. The symbol of the pelican after all represented self-giving love, an ideal that will always speak to the human heart, and one that found its most perfect expression in Christ's loving and giving himself for us (Gal 2:20).

The symbol of the Irish Blood Transfusion Service, or the *Seirbhís Fuilastriúcháin na hÉireann*, is a highly stylized pelican. Donate blood a hundred times and you get recognized with a reward of a porcelain pelican.¹² We find theme echoed as well in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where Laertes says, "To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms / And like the kind life-rendering pelican / Repast them with my blood."¹³

The allegorical link between the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and the pelican story is reflected too in the Coats of Arms for the *Corpus Christi* Colleges of both Oxford and Cambridge, *Corpus Christi* meaning "body of Christ" in Latin (Fig. 9).



Corpus Christi College
Cambridge



Corpus Christi College
Oxford

Fig. 9

¹² "Irish Blood Transfusion Service Annual Report 2006," 35. http://www.giveblood.ie/About_Us/Publications_Guidelines/Annual_Reports/IBTS_Annual_Report_2006.pdf.

¹³ Act IV, Scene 5, l. 3020-23.



Fig. 10. Flag of the State of Louisiana

It even turns up as the symbol of the State of Louisiana on its flag (Fig. 10), as is described in the Louisiana State Code:¹⁴

The official flag of Louisiana shall be that flag now in general use, consisting of a solid blue field with the coat-of-arms of the state, the pelican tearing its breast to feed its young, in white in the center The design of the flag depicting the pelican tearing at its breast to feed its young shall include an appropriate display of three drops of blood.

As we look back on this description of the pelican we may smile at what might appear to us as a quaint pre-scientific perspective. But in reality it could just as well be described as reflecting not pre-science, but the science of another time and place. But it also reflects the early Christians' expectation that earthly things, having been created by God—and not by some inferior being, as, for example, the Gnostics and others who denied the essential goodness of creation believed—to be filled with a rich symbolism of heavenly realities. The 3rd century theologian Origen of Alexandria describes this expectation well in the third book of his commentary of Song of Songs:¹⁵

¹⁴ Title 49, RS 49:153, §153, A.

¹⁵ Quoted in *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore* (trans. by Michael J. Curley; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979),

The apostle Paul teaches us that the invisible things of God may be known through the visible (*invisibilia Dei ex visibilibus intelligantur*), and things which are not seen may be contemplated by reason of and likeness to those things which are seen. He shows by this that this visible world may teach about the invisible and that earth may contain certain patterns of things heavenly, so that we may rise from lower to higher things (*ut ab his, quae deorsum sunt, ad ea, quae sursum sunt, possimus adscendere*) and out of those we see on earth perceive and know those which are in the heavens. As a certain likeness of these, the Creator has given a likeness of creatures which are on earth, by which the differences more easily might be gathered and perceived. And perhaps just as God made man in his own image and likeness, so also did he make the remaining creatures after certain other heavenly images as a likeness. And perhaps every single thing on earth has something of an image and likeness (*habent aliquid imaginis et similitudinis in caelestibus*) in heavenly things, to such a degree that even the grain of mustard which is the smallest of all seeds may have something of an image and likeness in heaven.

What Origen says also reveals his own links to Neo-Platonism, and echoes Plato's own doctrine of forms of ideas, according to which all earthly things represent imperfect passing shadow-reflections of heavenly archetypes, which Plato called *forms* or *ideas*.

Not all ancient Christians, it should also be said, received the story undergirding the pelican motif uncritically. We see this for example in the 4th/5th century Church father Augustine of Hippo's cautious way of telling the story:¹⁶

These birds are said to slay their young with blows of their beaks, and for three days to mourn them when slain by themselves in the nest: after which they say the mother wounds herself deeply, and pours forth her blood over her young, bathed in which they recover life. This may be true, it may be false: yet if it be true, see how it agrees with Him, who gave us life by His blood.

In this I have to say I appreciated Augustine's cautiousness, and yet, I still cannot help but wonder who is guilty of a graver error, the person who says that nothing that can be learned about God by listening to the

xiii-xiv.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Exposition on Psalms* 102.8 (NPNF¹ 8:497, slightly modified).

voice of nature, because on that subject nature is supposedly absolutely silent, or the one who listens to nature to hear from God but misinterprets her or even overspecifies what she says? In an age that has largely ceased looking for signs of God in nature at all, indeed which sometimes treats even the idea of such as dangerously subversive, it is a question that well deserves asking. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky proclaims the work of His hands," says Psalms 19:1, and the Apostle Paul: "From the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what He has made" (Rom 1:20). In the same context Paul draws from his statement the implication that all those who turn away from God are, in so doing, "without excuse." In the Apostle Paul's view anyhow God wouldn't buy the defense Bertrand Russell had proposed for himself in the event that he died and found out that God existed after all, namely that he would tell God, "Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence."¹⁷ Experientially I have to say I agree with Paul. If it really were true that there was "not enough evidence," if the heavens really were silent about the glory of God, and since the creation of the world God's invisible attributes . . . eternal power and divine nature, really were not clearly seen, or even evident at all, then what's all the recent fuss been about. If the rule makers, the gatekeepers, the boundary guardians of our myopic, fundamentally retentive, post-Christian culture really believe nature is silent, why do they spend so much time trying to force people to stop listening to her? If you have got your truth that works for you and I have got mine that works for me, why do you keep on trying to impose your truth about nature's silence on me? "Hey man, don't push your trip!" But after all is said and done Paul was right, and the Psalmist. The heavens *do* declare the glory of God, and so does the little pelican with her children. If not precisely in the way the Medievals thought, yet even so.

¹⁷ Quoted in Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 131.