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STARLINGS, WHALES AND HERRINGS: ANIMALS AS PORTENTS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Abstract

The present article explores the early modern preoccupation with omens – extraordinary occurrences observed both on earth and in the sky – which were universally believed to presage some future events and/or provide humans with providential signs and messages. Animals apparently formed a category of particularly common portents, due to their ubiquity and traditional links with the supernatural. Numerous examples of such omens demonstrate that animals and their behaviour were capable of evoking a variety of interpretations (moral, political, religious, etc.) and were indispensable in upholding the emblematic vision of the world, which, providentially, was supposed to be full of signs that could be deciphered by careful observers for their own benefit.

Keywords: animals, omens, early modernity, England, providence

Słowa kluczowe: zwierzęta, omeny, wczesna nowożytność, Anglia, opatrność

The proto-ethnographical work *Antiquitates Vulgares* of 1725 clearly demonstrates that its author, the Reverend Henry Bourne – a Newcastle minister, local historian and collector of folk beliefs and customs – took great interest in omens, those extraordinary happenings, events and signs visible on earth and in the sky that apparently violated the natural course of things. In his opinion, these unnatural phenomena – wherever and whenever they occurred – invariably captivated people’s attention, doing it so effectively that they remained, as he observed, “still in the Mouths of all”.¹ Bourne was undoubtedly right pointing out

¹ Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares; or, The Antiquities of the Country People. Giving An Account of several of their Opinions and Ceremonies. With Proper Reflections upon each of them; shewing which may be retain'd,*

universal fascination shared by his contemporaries, who were always ready to discuss what they construed as anomalous but meaningful phenomena and spread rumours about them. Although the early ethnographer's words were uttered to describe a mode of thought popular at the beginning of the 18th century, they were also meant to be applicable to earlier times. The belief in supernatural signs was a crucial component of the early modern culture, which in that respect substantially borrowed from the antiquity and Middle Ages. In accordance with centuries-old but still much-used thinking schemata, what was viewed as an omen was supposed to presage future events, to be a commentary on current affairs and, generally speaking, to provide instruction or warning for both individuals and larger communities. An omen, as was presumed, was one of the ways – perhaps the most spectacular one – the supernatural reality communicated with humans. The universal propensity and willingness to recognize and interpret supernatural signs were thus inherent parts of the contemporary mindset, which, understandably, focused on watching out for portents and attaching a variety of meanings to them (personal, political, religious, moral, eschatological, etc.). This was reflected in vast literature, learned and popular, written by a multitude of authors, who, responding to their readers' expectations (and satisfying their own curiosity), meticulously recorded innumerable accounts, past and present, of supernatural occurrences.²

The omens described in those texts could basically be divided into two categories. In the first group there were those that could be seen in the skies: all new stars, comets, two or three extra suns, multiplied rainbows, circles around the sun and moon (as well as images visible on their faces), moving lights, images of gigantic figures or objects, armies clashing, and so on and so forth. Celestial portents, for obvious reasons, could only be observed from a distance, unlike those that occurred here, “on earth”, and thus could be experienced in a more direct manner. The latter included, for instance, rains of blood, earthquakes, landslides, disastrous floods, droughts and fires, exceptionally violent storms, lightning strikes, collapsed buildings or births of deformed children. The category of “earthly” omens that is worth noting contained an astonishingly large number of signs involving animals, the fact that appears to have received relatively little scholarly attention. Generally, the portentous beasts were not fictitious or mythical, as one might expect, but ordinary, wild or domestic creatures humans knew so well from their everyday experience. The reason for considering animals particularly ominous – no matter if they were birds, mammals, insects

and which ought to be laid aside. By Henry Bourne, M.A. Curate of the Parochial Chapel of All-Saints in Newcastle upon Tyne (Newcastle: J. White, 1725), 70.

² Omens attracted the attention of a great variety of authors – e.g., pastor and translator Stephen Batman (d. 1584), astrologer William Lilly (1602-1681), antiquary John Aubrey (1626-1697), religious polemicist Richard Baxter (1615-1691) as well as a legion of anonymous hacks producing popular pamphlets – who collected and published stories about various portents, extracted from both contemporary and historical (ancient and medieval) sources. Taken together, all early modern texts about the supernatural matters, written in England and elsewhere, form a voluminous catalogue of omens observed in Europe from the antiquity to the 18th century.

or fish – may have been that they had been traditionally associated with the supernatural sphere (divine or demonic) and believed to have direct access to invisible things, hidden from human eyes. Such abilities of animals made them excellent instruments that could be used by Providence – or, just the other way round, by Satan and his servants – for their own purposes.³ Paradoxically, the potential appeal of such signs resulted from the ordinariness of animals and their omnipresence in and around human abodes. The psychological mechanism at work here was that if something ordinary and regular, to which one hardly paid attention, all of a sudden turned into something extraordinary and awe-inspiring, it surely impressed witnesses even more and further contributed to the aura of mystery and wonder exuded by omens. The purpose of the present paper is to explore and point out an amazing variety of animal portents as well as interpretations they evoked in the early modern culture.

One of the more interesting examples of how animal behaviour could deviate from the norm, to the amazement of those watching it, was the battle of starlings that took place in 1621 in Ireland, the news of which, in spite of the distance, spread all over Britain. In the autumn, two flocks – one from the east, another from the west – started gathering over the city of Cork. What was unusual about the birds' activities was that they behaved like two armies preparing for a battle: they kept positions at two opposite sides of the city, they made reconnaissance flights and got involved in minor skirmishes, as if checking the opponents' strength. A few days later, on the 12th of October, they finally clashed, so violently that the city was soon showered with seriously wounded and dead birds. As it was related with horror, "some [fell down] with wings broken, some with legs and necks broken, some with eies pickt out, some their bills thrust into the brests & sides of their aduersaries, in so strange a manner, that it were incredible..."⁴ After the first battle, the starlings fiercely attacked each other several times until the dusk, when they suddenly disappeared in order to return two days later and once more cover the streets and roofs of Cork with thousands of bloody carcasses.⁵

The author of the relation – published in 1622 in the form of a several-page pamphlet – could not contain his amazement at this airborne war. It was common knowledge that starlings are migratory birds that sometimes form huge murmurations but they do not

³ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 167-174; Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 161-178, 262-264; Alfonso Maria di Nola, *Diabel. O formach, historii i kolejach losu szatana, a także o jego powszechnej a złowrogiej obecności wśród wszystkich ludów, od czasów starożytnych aż po teraźniejszość*, trans. Ireneusz Kania (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 306; Paweł Rutkowski, *Kot czarownicy. Demon osobisty w Anglii wczesnonowoczesnej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), 21-22.

⁴ *The wonderfull battell of stavelings fought at the citie of Corke in Ireland, the 12. and 14. of October last past. 1621. As it hath been credibly enformed by diuers noble-men, and others of the said kingdome, &c.* (London: [G. Eld], 1622), 2-5.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 5-7.

do that in order to fight. As he commented, such a senselessly ferocious battle, moreover, fought in accordance with humanlike rules of warfare, was “neuer heard or seene at any time in any Country of the world”.⁶ The starlings’ bizarre actions could be explained as an intervention of God, who could, at will, change the nature and habits of His creatures, if only it suited His plan to communicate a message to the people.⁷ For that reason, as it reads in the author’s recapitulation of the story about the starlings over Cork, Christians should always remember that all similar events “prognosticate either God’s mercy to draw vs to repentance, or his iustice to punish our sinnes and wickednesse, if we doe not make haste to repent in due time...”⁸

The moralistic explanation of the “wonderful” battle of starlings went together with a prophetic interpretation according to which the incident (and the like) was above all a foreshadowing of some terrible happenings in the future. In 1622, a dreadful disaster befell Cork: on the last day of May, a single lightning blast started a huge fire that destroyed almost 1,500 buildings in the city and its outskirts.⁹ Merely three weeks after the conflagration, in London, an account appeared, in which – apart from an inventory of damage and a description of how it was done – the most important information was that the fire should not be a surprise to anyone, as it had been augured, four months ahead, by the great battle of starlings! That the birds’ fight prefigured the destruction of Cork was confirmed by certain striking analogies: exceptionally dark clouds gathered in resemblance of huge flocks of starlings darkening the sky and the first lightning that set fire to the city struck in the east, where the birds had collided for the first time and where the first victims hit the ground. What is more, the spreading fire apparently copied the starlings’ manoeuvres: when the flames also appeared in the western part of the city, they quickly moved on to join the original fire in the eastern wards, thus imitating the clash of the two winged armies coming to Cork from the east and west. The starlings undoubtedly seemed to be an instrument of God, who wanted, through them, warn inhabitants of the city and exhort them to repent (it was suggested that their principal sin was usury). Unfortunately, the people of Cork either ignored the sign given to them, or simply failed to read it correctly *pre factum*, with fatal consequences for themselves.¹⁰

⁶ *Ibidem*, 2.

⁷ *Ibidem*, A³.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 8-9.

⁹ Richard Caulfield (ed.), *The Council Book of the Corporation of the City of Cork, from 1609 to 1643, and from 1690 to 1800. Edited from the original, with Annals and Appendices compiled from public and private records* (Guildford: J. Billing and Sons, 1876), 102.

¹⁰ *A relation of the most lamentable burning of the cittie of Corke, in the west of Ireland, in the province of Monster, by thunder and lightning With other most dolefull and miserable accidents, which fell out the last of May 1622. after the prodigious battell of the birds called stares, which fought strangely over and neare that citie the 12. & 14. of May 1621. As it hath beene reported to divers right honourable persons* (London: I[ohn] D[awson], 1622), A³-A^{3v}, 3-4, 9. The news about the great fire of Cork (as well as the battle of starlings hat

In contradistinction to the entirely civilian story about the Irish starlings, other battles of birds mentioned in early modern sources were predominantly related to human warfare. This motif had been well known since ancient times. For instance, according to Appian, the battle of Philippi between the troops of Brutus and Octavian was preceded by a duel of two eagles that fought in plain view of soldiers from both armies waiting for their turn. When the bird on the side of Brutus was finally defeated and fled, Octavian's legionaries, encouraged by the omen, launched an attack and, as the sign had foretold, routed the adversaries.¹¹ Similar accounts were also in abundance in the Middle Ages and later. In the reign of Charles VIII of France, the defeat of the Bretons in their battle with the French "was foreshewed by a skirmish between the magpies and jackdaws".¹² In 1625, in Troppau, Silesia "a great multitude of little Crowes [...] appeared in the Ayre", killing "many amongst themselves", and one year later, on the same spot, a battle between the Weimar and Imperial forces took place. It was the latter that lost, leaving more than 4,000 corpses of their soldiers on the battlefield, which was the death toll prefigured by all the dead crows which had been lying in the same place in the preceding year and whose carcasses had been then collected and stuffed into bags by the local peasants. An addendum to the story was that nine years later the same – apparently fatal – location witnessed another bloody fight, in which the Emperor's soldiers were defeated again, this time by the Saxons.¹³ Referring to recent Civil War developments in England, Alexander Ross, Charles I's chaplain, noted that "[i]n this land of late years our present miseries and unnatural wars, have been forewarned by armies of swallows, martins and other birds fighting against one another".¹⁴ Although it was birds

presaged it) was also spread among British readers (listeners) through popular ballads: *Most lamentable Burning of the Cittie of Corke (in the Province of Munster in Ireland) by Lightning: which happened the last of May, 1622. After the prodigious Battell of the Stares, which fought most strangely over and neere that City the 12. & 14. of May 1621* (London: E.A., 1622) and *A Battel of Birds Most Strangely fought in Ireland, upon the eight day of September last, 1621. where neere unto the City of Corke, by the river Lee, weare gathered together such a multitude of Stares, or Starlings, as the like for number, was neuer seene in any age* (London: W. I., 1622).

¹¹ Appian's *Roman History with an English Translation by Horace White ... in Four Volumes*, Vol. IV (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1961), 353-357.

¹² Alexander Ross, *Arcana microcosmi, or, The hid secrets of man's body discovered in an anatomical duel between Aristotle and Galen concerning the parts thereof: as also, by a discovery of the strange and marvellous diseases, symptomes & accidents of man's body: with a refutation of Doctor Brown's Vulgar errors, the Lord Bacon's natural history, and Doctor Harvy's book, De generatione, Comenius, and others: whereto is annexed a letter from Doctor Pr. to the author, and his answer thereto, touching Doctor Harvy's book De Generatione* (London: Tho. Newcomb, 1652), 219.

¹³ L. Brinckmair, *The vvarnings of Germany By wonderfull signes, and strange prodigies seene in divers parts of that country of Germany, betweene the yeare 1618. and 1638. Together with a briefe relation of the miserable events which ensued. All faithfully collected out of credible High Dutch chronicles, and other histories by L. Brinckmair Captaine. As also a learned and godly sermon preached before the lords the States at Norrimberg. Anno 1638* (London: John Norton, 1638), 25-26.

¹⁴ A. Ross, *Arcana microcosmi, op. cit.*, 219-220.

that seemed to play the leading role in all soldierly divinations, quadrupeds sometimes had their say as well, as was observed, for example, in Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*. Raleigh, while listing a variety of omens that accompanied Alexander the Great's passage through Egypt, also mentioned the quite contemporary Italian battle fought in 1513. "[T]he night before the battle of Novara, all the dogs which followed the French army ran from them to the Switzers, leaping and fawning upon them, as of they had been bred and fed by them all their lives". The meaning of this curious incident was revealed in the morning, when the French troops were "utterly broken and put to ruin".¹⁵

Amazement and anxiety could also be caused by single wild beasts, especially, if they appeared where they should not be, that is within the boundaries of human settlements, both in the country and in town. Wild animals' penetration of the space inhabited by people was often interpreted as a sign of impending evil. The naturalist Thomas Pennant, in his *British Zoology*, wrote, for instance, about a belief that, if cities were visited by an eagle owl – usually inhabiting inaccessible rocks and desert places – it always foreshadowed misfortune.¹⁶ He repeated this opinion after Pliny, who fifteen centuries earlier called the eagle owl "a funereal bird" (*bubo funebris*), "weird creature of the night" (*noctis monstrum*) and an extremely bad omen, so bad that when in 43 A.D. one of such owls entered the shrine of the Capital, it was necessary to perform a ritual of purification for the entire city.¹⁷ Generally, owls had an unsavoury reputation: "If an Owl, which they [i.e. ordinary people] reckon a most abominable and unlucky Bird, sends forth its hoarse and dismal Voice, it is an Omen of the Approach of some terrible Thing; that some dire Calamity, and some great Misfortune is near at Hand".¹⁸ Pennant clarified that most people usually meant the tawny owl, whose cries were popularly "given the power of presaging death".¹⁹

Apart from owls, cats, ravens, magpies, and even ospreys were also commonly believed to portend imminent death, especially, when they were seen or heard at night, near the household (in particular, on the roof), in which there was a seriously ill person.²⁰ A sim-

¹⁵ Walter Raleigh, *The historie of the world in five bookes 1 Intreating of the beginning and first ages of the same, from the Creation unto Abraham. 2 Of the times from the birth of Abraham to the destruction of the Temple of Salomon. 3 From the destruction of Jerusalem, to the time of Philip of Macedon. 4 From the raigne of Philip of Macedon, to the establishing of that kingdome in the race of Antigonus. 5 From the settled rule of Alexanders successors in the east, untill the Romans (prevailing over all) made conquest of Asia and Macedon ... Book III* (London, 1652), 153.

¹⁶ Thomas Pennant, *British Zoology*, Vol. I (London: William Eyres, 1776), 202.

¹⁷ Pliny, *Natural History with an English Translation in Ten Volumes*, Vol. III (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1967), 314-315.

¹⁸ H. Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares, op. cit.*, 71.

¹⁹ T. Pennant, *British Zoology, op. cit.*, 208-209.

²⁰ John Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain: Chiefly Illustrating the Origin of our Vulgar and Provincial Customs, Ceremonies, and Superstitions ... A New Edition, with Further Additions. In Three Volumes*, Vol. III (London: George Bell and Sons, 1877), 188; Nathanael Homes,

ilar meaning was attached to the howling of dogs²¹ or the gnawing of domestic textiles or clothes by mice and rats.²² An ordinary cricket's chirping evoked emotions too: it could be equally ominous if the insect unexpectedly appeared at home²³ and if it abruptly fell silent after many years of residing in the hearth.²⁴ Judging by the number of references in contemporary sources, a special fear, mixed up with fascination, was instilled by the death watch beetles, small insects living in and feeding on rotten wood elements of old houses. Describing the popular attitude towards the insect, John Wallis wrote that “[b]y its regular pulsations, like the ticking of a watch, [the insect] sometimes surprises those that are strangers to its nature and properties, who fancy its beating portends a family-change, and the shortening of the thread of life.”²⁵ To put it less poetically, the “clicking” of a death-watch was universally viewed as an omen of the death of somebody in the house in which the sound was heard.²⁶

Those who heard death watches ticking, owls hooting or ravens croaking knew at once that these should be treated as portents (whether they believed in what they were supposed to mean is another matter). Such an “instinctive” reaction followed from the well-established and highly conventional common knowledge about omens related to particular species of animals. However, witnesses of events interpreted as signs could deviate from existing schemata and create their own, original interpretations. This was the case with a whale that, in 1658, swam up the River Thames and was killed by Londoners near

DÆMONOLOGIE, AND THEOLOGIE. The first, The Malady, Demonstrating the Diabolicall Arts, and Devillish hearts of MEN. The Second, The Remedy: Demonstrating, God a rich Supply of all Good ... (London: Thomas Roycroft, 1650), 59; H. Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares, op. cit.*, 71.

²¹ Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary; with a Collection of Local Proverbs, and Popular Superstitions ... A New Edition, Corrected* (London: E. Jeffery, 1811), 115; J. Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities, op. cit.*, 184-186.

²² John Melton, *Astrologaster, or, The figure-caster Rather the arraignment of artlesse astrologers, and fortune-tellers, that cheat many ignorant people vnder the pretence of foretelling things to come, of telling things that are past, finding out things that are lost, expounding dreames, calculating deaths and natiuities, once againe brought to the barre* (London: Barnard Alsop, 1620), 46; Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy, What it is, with All the Kinds, Causes, Symptoms, Prognosticks, and Several Cures of it. In Three Partitions. With their Several Sections, Members, and Subsections, Philosophically, Medically, Historically Opened and Cut up* (London: William Tegg, 1854), 238; F. Grose, *A Provincial Glossary, op. cit.*, 115.

²³ N. Homes, *DÆMONOLOGIE, AND THEOLOGIE, op. cit.*, 59.

²⁴ J. Melton, *Astrologaster, op. cit.*, 46.

²⁵ John Wallis, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Northumberland: And of so much of the County of Durham As lies between the Rivers Tyne and Tweed; commonly called, North Bishoprick. In Two Volumes, Vol. I* (London: W. and W. Strahan, 1769), 367.

²⁶ William Ramesey, *Helminthologia, or, Some physical considerations of the matter, origination, and several species of wormes macerating and direfully cruciating every part of the bodies of mankind ... together with their various causes, signs, diagnosticks, prognosticks, the horrid symptomes by them introduced: as also the indications and method of cure, all which is medicinally, philosophically, astrologically, and historically handled* (London: John Streater, 1688), 271; F. Grose, *A Provincial Glossary, op. cit.*, 116.

Greenwich. According to the popular report from the hunt, the unusual suicidal behaviour of the fifty-eight-foot animal was surely an omen, comparable to those sometimes seen in the air. Moreover, it should be viewed as a “token of heavens displeasure”, clearly demonstrating that “the day of the Lord is at hand” and that it was high time to convert to true Christianity. The author of the relation stressed that the whale’s appearance was different than the arrival of “several great fishes”, recorded in old chronicles because each of them had been merely “a signe of some dangers approaching”. In contrast, the present whale seemed to be a manifestation of “special favour of providence”, as it was apparently sent by God trying to admonish the sinners, and thus save them. The positive providential nature of the entire event was, in his opinion, confirmed by the curious fact that no one – neither whalers, nor spectators – was hurt in it.²⁷ In turn, the antiquary John Aubrey pointed out that the whale had appeared in London “a little before” the death of Oliver Cromwell, who allegedly “was troubled at it”, apparently, taking it more personally than others, as a portent of his own demise (the whale was killed on the 3rd of June, the Lord Protector died three months later, on the 3rd of September, 1658).²⁸

Aubrey’s *Miscellany* also contains other examples of more personal, unconventional omens. When in 1643 Major John Morgan “fell sick of a Malignant Fever”, he was lodged in a garret of one house near Salisbury. As two servants attending the patient reported, “there came a Sparrow to the Chamber Window, which peck’d the Lead of a certain Pannel only, and only one side of the Lead of the Lozenge, and made one small hole in it. He continued this pecking and biting the Lead, during the entire time of his sickness (which was not less than a Month) when the Major went away the Sparrow desisted: and came thither no more”.²⁹ In the story, the eccentric bird – although this particular species failed to have unequivocal cultural connotations with the supernatural – evidently served as a harbinger of death (perhaps even its personification?), which seems to show that, by virtue of individual associations, practically any non-standard phenomenon could, and often did, acquire the status of a supernatural sign.

Keen on collecting all stories of portents he could obtain, John Aubrey paid special attention to the fact that animal omens were quite frequently related to the vicissitudes

²⁷ *Londons wonder being a most true and positive relation of the taking and killing of a great whale neer to Greenwich; the said whale being fifty eight foot in length, twelve foot high, fourteen foot broad, and two foot between the eyes. At whose death was used harping-irons, spits, swords, guns, bills, axes, and hatchets, and all kind of sharp instruments to kill her: and at last two anchors being struck fast into her body, she could not remove them, but the blood gusht out of her body, as the water does out of a pump. The report of which whale bath caused many hundred of people both by land and water to go and see her; the said whale being slaine hard by Greenwich upon the third day of Iune this present yere 1658. which is largely exprest in this following discourse* (London, 1658), A³-A^{3v}, A⁶-A⁷.

²⁸ John Aubrey, *Miscellanies upon the following subjects collected by J. Aubrey, Esq.* (London: Edward Castle, 1696), 37.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 41-42.

of the English royal history. He recollected, for instance, that, as a student at Oxford in 1642, he had an opportunity to observe Charles I having supper. It was then that he heard the king's story about how he, while hawking in Scotland, saw a covey of partridges attack his hawk. Aubrey's relation contains an explanation that the partridges actually signified London, so the incident was basically a prefiguration of Parliament turning against the monarch and starting the civil war.³⁰ Another story, also connected with the unfortunate Charles I, concerns the king's famous bust, now lost, made by Gianlorenzo Bernini in 1636. When the sculpture was being transported by boat on the Thames, "a strange Bird, the like whereof the Bargemen had never seen, drop'd a drop of blood, or Blood-like upon it; which left a stain not to be wiped off".³¹ An equally sinister omen heralded Charles II's death: "a Sparrow-hawk escaped from the perch, and pitched on one of the iron crowns of the white tower, and entangling its string in the crown, hung by the heels and died. Not long after, another hawk pitched on one of the crowns".³²

It should come as no surprise that animal omens in the early modernity – the time of bitter religious conflicts – were often discussed in the context of the Reformation and Protestantism. Such was the case of a cod caught in the sea in 1626. When the fish was brought to the marketplace in Cambridge, where its belly was cut, it turned out that inside there was a book, wrapped in canvas, slimed and damaged by an apparently long stay in the fish's bowels. Fetched immediately to the university, the finding caused much excitement among academics. They concluded that it was a collection of religious texts from the preceding century, in which the leitmotif was a necessity of taking the cross in the face of adversity and commendable readiness to die a Christian death. One of the authors was John Frith, a Protestant martyr sentenced to death in 1533 under Henry VIII. A dominant opinion that immediately spread in Cambridge was that, in this unusual manner, God wanted to

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 37-38.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 38. Interestingly, Aubrey reinforced his story – which unfortunately cannot be verified, as the king's bust was destroyed (most probably) during the Whitehall Palace fire in 1698 – even further with a mention of Bernini's critical comments upon his royal model's face: "the sculptor found great fault with the fore-head as most unfortunate. There was a seam in the middle of [the king's] fore-head, (downwards) which is a very ill sign in Metoposcopia" (metoposcopy being a division of physiognomy, which discovered a person's character and foretold his future from lines and marks on the forehead).

³² John Aubrey, *Miscellanies upon Various Subjects* (London, 1784), 59. As it seems, the belief that the king's death is preceded and foretold by some unusual signs has failed to disappear together with the traditional monarchy, remaining an element of the royal mythology. In 1952 Michael Parker, the Duke of Edinburgh's personal secretary, accompanied the future queen, Princess Elizabeth, during her official visit to Kenya, which she paid in place of her seriously ill father. In 2012, Mr Parker recalled that on the 6th of February, in the early morning, there appeared an eagle and kept hovering over Elizabeth for a long time, threatening, as he then thought, her safety. It was only later, when the news from England arrived, that he realized that the eagle had come at the same time as King George VI died and the crown passed to his daughter (Hugo Vickers, "Diamond Jubilee: the moment that Princess Elizabeth became Queen", *Daily Telegraph*, January 29, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/the_queens_diamond_jubilee/9046958/Diamond-Jubilee-the-moment-that-Princess-Elizabeth-became-Queen.html).

announce the coming of hard times for English and European Protestants, which, incidentally, was quite an obvious prophecy with the Thirty Years War being in progress. Thanks to Divine Providence, John Frith, like Jonah in the Bible, spoke “from the fish’s belly” and, through the book found in it, delivered a sermon about fortitude that should be displayed by all true Christians trusting in the Lord.³³

If the Cambridge cod was a “living bookcase”, other extraordinary fish, caught from time to time, could be called “books”. In 1587, six miles north of Marstrand in Denmark, fishermen found “fower Fishes” in their net, on the scales of which there was a sequence of mysterious characters. An anonymous English pamphleteer decided to decipher the apparently divine code. Having carried out a “Poligraphical, Theologicall, Thalmudicall & Cabalistical” analysis, he came to the conclusion that the characters were in fact words of Christ, who thus signalled His Second Coming that was to take place quite soon, i.e. in the year 1600.³⁴ The imminent coming of the Kingdom of God was also prognosticated by “a most strange and wonderfull Herring”, caught near the coast of Norway in 1589, which had “on the one side the picture of two armed men fighting, and on the other most strange [red] characters”. In this case, the person describing the Norwegian herring case did not know what exactly the symbols meant but he was absolutely certain that they contained an admonition against God’s impending wrath and “a heavie sentence against the sinnes of this age”, which should encourage the sinners’ contrition and repentance.³⁵ An argument for such an interpretation was that the merciful God had always warned mankind by means of a variety of portents before he punished them for their iniquity. The best evidence was, for instance, the Egyptian plagues, in which it was animals – frogs, mosquitoes, flies and locusts – that served as terrifying omens.³⁶ Besides, there was another significant Biblical analogy: the very well-known story about Balthasar’s feast (Daniel 5,1-30) interrupted by the miraculous appearance of God’s writing on the wall that foretold the fall of the wicked king.³⁷ In the past, God placed

³³ *Vox piscis: or, The book-fish contayning three treatises which were found in the belly of a cod-fish in Cambridge Market, on Midsummer Eue last, anno Domini 1626. Letter wryten unto the faythful folowers of Christes Gospell* (London, 1627); Alexandra Walsham, “Vox Piscis: or The Book-Fish: Providence and the Uses of the Reformation Past in Caroline Cambridge”, *English Historical Review* 114/457 (1999): 574-606.

³⁴ *A breefe coniecturall discourse, vpon the hierographicall letters & caracters fovnd upon fower fishes taken neere Marstrand in the kingdome of Denmarke, the 28. of Nouember 1587. Treating by considerations poligraphicall, theologicall, Thalmudicall & cabalisticall. Scene and allowed* (London: Edward Allde, 1589), A³-B, C.

³⁵ Jan Van Doetecam, *A most strange and wonderfull herring taken on the 26. day of Nouember 1597, neere unto Drenton sometime the old and chiefe cittie of the kingdome of Norway. Hauing on the one side the picture of two armed men fighting, and on the other most strange characters, as in the picture is here expressed. First printed in Dutch at Rotterdam by Ian van Doetecam. And now translated into English* (London: [J. Windet], 1598), A³.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, A², A²v.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, A³. In the same place (A³-A³v), Van Doetecam mentioned signs drawn by Jesus on the ground while an adulteress was being lynched (John 8,3-9). In this case, Christ’s writing was supposed to confirm

His warrant on the palace wall, but He could as well have written it – then and now – in any other possible location, including the fish’s body.

Summing up his account, Doetecam gave a thought to the question about why God should, of all places, “write” on a fish and, what is more, why He chose a rather inconspicuous common herring for a messenger. If the riddle was to be solved – as it was advised – one should focus, paradoxically, just on the fish’s commonness and, surprisingly, on its edibility. It was because God, in His wisdom, intended to appeal to people through what they were most familiar with, and what else could that be if not their staple food? “[A]mong the fishes of the sea – the author remarked – there is none so common at our table as the Herring, no fish more used in any land, nor better knowne among all sorts of people”. It meant that God, “laying his judgements in our dishes” and “in the very meat which we should eat”, counted on repentance of the greatest possible number of Christians, who could be effectively induced to improve their ways by first hearing the news of the extraordinary herring and then being reminded of it “at every meale”.³⁸

The fish from the 16th- and 17th-century English pamphlets were portents of a distinctly Protestant provenance: they were related to the Bible and, above all, they emphasised the superiority of the written over the visual, which was taught by the Protestant religious theory and practice. However, these cods and herrings with letters and figures on their scales actually show, symbolically, the role animals played in the early modern omenological culture. The preface to *The vvarnings of Germany*, a popular anthology of portents, noted that “the world is Gods great booke in Folio” and “every creature is a severall page, in which we may reade some instruction”.³⁹ In the same vein, Edward Topsell, the author of monumental *The historie of foure-footed beastes* (1607), that “every living beast” was a word in the chronicle of the world written by God, and elsewhere he compared animals to letters in the alphabet of “the visible thinges of the world” that may provide access to “the invisible thinges of God”.⁴⁰ This was one of innumerable contemporary examples of how the so-called emblematic way of thinking worked. It did try to show that the world was a huge and impressive cryptogram full of meanings, signs and analogies, which were hidden but

the effectiveness of divine admonition, as the men – as the author construed it – were ashamed by what they read and abandoned the idea of stoning the woman.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, A^{3v}.

³⁹ L. Brinckmair, *The vvarnings of Germany*, *op. cit.*, *^{2v}.

⁴⁰ Edward Topsell, *The historie of foure-footed beastes Describing the true and liuely figure of euery beast, with a discourse of their seuerall names, conditions, kindes, vertues (both naturall and medicinall) countries of their breed, their loue and hate to mankinde, and the wonderfull worke of God in their creation, preseruacion, and destruction. Necessary for all diuines and students, because the story of euery beast is amplified with narrations out of Scriptures, fathers, phylosophers, phisitions, and poets: wherein are declared diuers hyeroglyphicks, emblems, epigrams, and other good histories, collected out of all the volumes of Conradus Gesner, and all other writers to this present day...* (London: William Iaggard, 1607), A^{5v}, 759.

still possible to be deciphered with the use of reason, experience and intuition.⁴¹ In such a meaningful universe, the connection between nature and humans – understood both as individuals and communities – seemed obvious. For that reason, it was quite natural to keep a close watch of the birds and other animals, in order to attempt at finding a presage of future consequential events in their appearance and behaviour, such as political upheavals, wars, battles, epidemics, natural disasters and other misfortunes, about which God, in His mercy, would like to warn unregenerate mankind.

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⁴¹ William B. Ashworth, Jr., "Natural History and the Emblematic World View," in *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, ed. David C. Lindberg, Robert S. Westman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 303-332; Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), 64, 75; A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, *op. cit.*, 172.

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