Pillars of Faith
Intellect and Imagination in the Catholic Tradition

Elena Gacek
egacek@nd.edu

Professor E. H. Botting
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Few people would disagree with the statement that the Catholic faith experience of today’s world is noticeably different from that of Medieval Europe. Why? Perhaps due to the intellectual developments of the eighteenth century, the advent of the “Age of Reason” – instead of blindly accepting religious dogma, as in the Middle Ages, everything is now examined through, or at least alongside, the hypercritical lens of science, where incontrovertible ‘proof’ is a necessary prerequisite to belief. However, as shown by Adso of Melk’s contemplation of religious artwork in Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, the difference between then and now isn’t the *presence* of rational thought, but rather its *application*. Today, reason is the consummate counterargument, a weapon to disprove and dismantle anything that contradicts the observations of our senses. On the contrary, during Adso’s time, reason was treated as an interpretive device, a roadmap to understanding how the world could be – and was – something *more* than a simple collection of sensory perceptions. The Middle Ages founded ‘reason’ upon tenets of religion; now, religion and reason are all but completely divorced. However, that doesn’t mean that works of art conceived in the medieval worldview don’t have the same power or meaning in modern times. Actually, by allowing intuitive sensation and rational contemplation to interact in our observation of medieval artworks, such as the French sandstone capital from the mid-twelfth century in the Snite Museum, we are best able to conceptualize the difference between medieval and modern Catholic experience, and thus to deepen our understanding of both.

In the medieval Catholic tradition, fantastical carvings didn’t seem contradictory to reason, but rather logical explanations of religious teachings. In Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, set in the early fourteenth century, a young Benedictine novice named Adso is very much
moved by the carved stone entryway to a monastery church. A tympanum portraying the Second Coming of Christ, filled with turbulent motion and intertwining figures, is supported by several columns with similarly decorated capitals. Immediately upon viewing the carvings, Adso marvels at the fearsome awe of such figures, like Christ’s “right [hand] uplifted in an attitude of blessing or – I could not tell – of admonition,” (Eco 41). He then goes on to describe a multitude of hybridized creatures, animals and men and combinations thereof, which, “despite their formidable appearance, were creatures not of hell, but of heaven,” (41-2). Beneath these strange yet holy images of God’s creation, pillars displaying menacing lions and “other visions horrible to contemplate” (44) mystify Adso, forming an “enigmatic polyphony of sainted limbs and infernal sinews,” (43). For the young monk, these visions represent stories and tales he has studied in the Scripture, and he concludes that their purpose is to serve as pictorial symbols for the involuntary, irrepressible emotions inspired by such stories. To Adso, the beasts in the carving are completely ‘reasonable’ portrayals of the indomitable, overarching power of God, because they inspire the same type of mystifying fear and respect. Adso might have similar thoughts about the sandstone capital in the Snite’s medieval collection. Here, a winged angel appears to brandish a sword at a many-legged, menacing demon attempting to overpower a mortal man. Without hesitation, Adso might say that such an image portrays the world as a constant battle between the forces of hell and heaven – that God and His angels are noble warriors battling for our salvation while we, impotent humans, can only pray that they continue to protect us from damnation. To Adso, this conclusion is as logical as those he draws about the monastery carvings – in art, the forces that truly act in our
world are symbolized in a way such that they evoke the emotional responses we *should* have in response to forces evil and divine.

When the same stone capital is viewed in the light of modernity, a reaction as genuine and vibrant as Adso’s occurs but rarely, if at all. Steeped in the ideals of science, the first instinct of a modern observer wouldn’t be to seek religious inspiration or emotional stimulation in the capital, but instead to satiate objective curiosity – what is “going on” in the image, and why? The content of the capital is viewed as a mere story, and the capital itself as a relic from a Catholicism somehow different, far-removed from that of today, separated entirely from real life and relevancy. However, after discerning the subject matter of the pillar, if we are able for a moment to “turn off” our ‘reason,’ to interact with the work through emotion rather than logic, we can feel the fear, glory, power, terror, damnation, struggle, uncertainty, salvation, and hope with which the dusty old stone is impregnated. In allowing ourselves to forget about our immediate cultural context, we become wrapped up in that of the capital, in the realm of medieval Catholicism.

From this standpoint, differences between the Catholic tradition of old and that of today can be *felt* rather than determined analytically – as children we learn about a loving, caring, gentle God, but the God we *feel* in this capital is passionate, violent against evil, terrifying in the sheer intensity of His greatness, omnipotent in ardent, burning glory. After internalizing these emotions, if we bring ourselves back to the modern, proof-based, ‘scientific’ mentality, it is not with clouded judgment, but with greater clarity that we approach the historical, sociopolitical, and theological progression of the Western tradition and of Catholicism – the experience we gain from engaging with the artwork informs and enriches our interpretation of the past, and how it became the present.
Works Cited
