

## Chapter 3

# Chartrian Methods of Interpretation: *Integumentum*

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### INTRODUCTION: EVERYTHING MEANS SOMETHING

Bernard of Clairvaux was a towering figure of the early twelfth century. He is held largely responsible for the spread of Cistercian monasteries throughout Europe and for the reform of monastic life across the religious orders of the day. His speeches helped launch the second crusade in 1146, a year after his friend and pupil became Pope Eugenius. Bernard was a poet, theologian, mystic, and prolific writer of letters. He wrote to bishops, lords, ladies, kings, and popes. Collectively, these letters reflect a sharp wit, a command of rhetoric, and a style that presents this monk as both humble and powerful.

Perhaps two of his most cited writings serve to demonstrate how he understood his world to be filled with symbol and allegory—in need of interpretation. In one, he offers a mystical interpretation of scripture. In another, he reports his disdain for the artistic representations that adorned the Abbey of Cluny. The first of these was a commentary on the Song of Songs. It serves as a lesson to the members of his monasteries: “Today the text we are to study is the book of our own experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. I am attempting to discover if any of you has been privileged to say from the heart ‘Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His lips.’” [Song of Songs 1:1]<sup>1</sup>

Here we see Bernard begin with a statement that would have sat well with the masters and students of the cathedral schools. However, his quick move “inward” is a hallmark of the differences between the Chartrian and

the Cistercian mindsets. It is not that the approaches are mutually exclusive—after all, many a master, including Thierry of Chartres, ended his days within the walls of a Cistercian monastery. But the primary focus is markedly different.

In the pages that follow, Bernard proceeds to interpret the text of the scripture. Bernard interprets the kiss as symbolic of the union between the individual soul and Christ, the Bridegroom. His analysis stands as a classic example of an allegorical interpretation of this text. In his analysis of the biblical text, everything means something—as if the scriptural text was patiently awaiting the contemplative eye of a devout reader to reveal its secrets.

In the following oft-cited quote of Bernard, we see him chastising the glorious art of the Monastery of Cluny:

What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloisters where the monks do their reading, extraordinary things at once beautiful and ugly? Here we find filthy monkeys and fierce lions, fearful centaurs, harpies, and striped tigers, soldiers at war, and hunters blowing their horns. Here is one head with many bodies, there is one body with many heads. Over there is a beast with a serpent for its tail, a fish with an animal's head, and a creature that is a horse in front and a goat behind, and a second beast with horns and the rear of a horse.<sup>2</sup>

After registering his fear that these depictions will distract from the reading of the monks, and questioning the great expense, he continues, “I shall say nothing about the soaring heights and extravagant lengths and unnecessary widths of the churches, nothing about their expensive decorations and their novel images.” Bernard, sincerely or sarcastically, concludes, “Let them be, since it is all for the greater glory of God.”<sup>3</sup>

We offer these two examples from Bernard to highlight two aspects of the symbolic world of the twelfth century. Monks read scripture with an interpretive lens to reveal inner truth about God and themselves. Artists were interpreting in stone, paint, and glass what they heard in those scriptures. But what about everything else that was read and experienced? What would be the result of taking this or a similar technique to interpret Plato, Ovid, or Macrobius? What would happen if one sought the hidden meanings within the book of our outer experience—that is, of the natural world? This technique was available in the early twelfth century. It was called *integumentum*.

### **Integumentum**

The clearest twelfth-century description of integument is found in Bernard Silvester's commentary on Vergil's *Aeneid*. He says that *integumentum*, is