

Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge*. Reaktion, 1992.

3 In the Margins of the Cathedral

Them that are outside, God judgeth (I Cor. 5:12)

Unlike the monastery, which was opposed to the world, the cathedral stood within clamorous streets, a powerful symbol of God's expanding business among the rising urban communities of the thirteenth century. Cities within cities, these vast structural complexes were ruled by a feudal magnate – the bishop – and were inhabited and maintained (except for some English monastic foundations, such as Canterbury and Norwich) by canons who, unlike monks, could own and bequeath property. Their margins were domains to be contested, like the *parvis*, or 'paradise', the narrow strip leading up to the west front, which at Amiens Cathedral was fought over by townspeople and clergy for two centuries.¹⁰⁰ It is the influence of a nineteenth-century nostalgic myth that leads one to think of these vast structures of stone, mortar and glass as expressing the social unity of the populace. More often than not, as at Amiens, Reims and Laon in France and Lincoln and Coventry in England, the economic strain of building a new cathedral aroused violent conflict between secular and religious powers, and the overtaxed populace frequently rose up against the clergy.¹⁰¹ The French Capetian crown, one of the earliest centralized monarchies, was also an important impetus in the ideology of cathedral building that spread the Gothic style of the Ile de France throughout Europe. Although a number of great cathedrals were under way in the late twelfth century, the important event that to some extent ratified their power was the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, in which the Church consolidated its hegemony over souls by excluding heretics, Jews and usurers from the sacred precincts and stipulated mass and confession at least once a year for every Christian. As the biggest edifices in existence, these vast mass-machines were not unlike the shimmering Postmodern towers of today's corporate headquarters; their advanced architectural and technical complexity was symbolic not only of the wealth within but also of the power to exclude those without.

Gargoyles.
Cathedral of
Notre-Dame, Paris

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a gargoyle is 'a grotesque spout, representing some animal or human figure, projecting from the gutter of a building (especially in Gothic architecture), in order to carry the rainwater clear of the walls'. These carved devices were used on ecclesiastical buildings and also on townhouses. The late fourteenth-century English poet John Lydgate describes how 'every hous keured was with lead / And many gargoyl and many hidous hed', although ecclesiastical control of urban space is evidenced in a document censuring a clerk of Arras for failing to obtain episcopal permission for placing 'gargouilles' on the façade of his house.¹⁰² First recorded in a building document of 1295 – 'stones that are called *gargoules*' – the word derives from the roots *garge* (to gurgle) and *goule* (throat). Many of these functional monsters are indeed all mouth, spurting from gaping gullets both human and dragonish (illus. 38), but others invert the bodily topography of ejection and turn their bottoms out to the street. The gargoyle is all body and no soul – a pure projector of filth, the opposite of the angel whose body is weightless and orifice-less.

The use of animal heads as waterspouts was not an invention of the thirteenth century but can be traced back to Antiquity. Their elaboration in the Gothic period was a means of sustaining the monstrous margins of Romanesque buildings discussed in the previous chapter. Part of their fascination must have been their 'function' as pseudo-fountains, animated by the forces of nature. This is how they are explained in the *Roman d'Abladane*, a 'classical' Romance written by a canon of Amiens cathedral, which describes a 'marvel' of the old city being two 'gargoules' on the city gates that spew nice or nasty substances upon people entering the city, depending on whether their intentions were good or bad.¹⁰³

The meaning of these emetic engines has long been controversial. In the nineteenth century, when historians sought to give exact meaning to every creature in the crevices of the cathedral, they were thought to illustrate specific texts, such as Psalm 21:12, 'Therefore shalt thou make them turn their back', or Psalm 22:13, 'They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion. I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint'. More outlandish

suggestions include their being the earliest depictions of dinosaurs dug up during the Middle Ages, planetary constellations and portraits of heretics. For one early iconographer, the abbé Auber, they represented devils conquered by the Church that were made to perform menial tasks.¹⁰⁴ In Joris-Karl Huysman's Symbolist novel of 1898, *La Cathédrale*, gargoyles are called 'hybrid monsters, signifying the vomiting forth of sin ejected from the sanctuary; reminding the passer-by, who sees them pouring forth water from the gutter, that when seen outside the church, they are the voidance of the spirit, the cloaca of the soul'.¹⁰⁵

Emile Mâle, the most influential cryptographer of the cathedrals, disagreed. Anything that was not included in the text of Vincent of Beauvais' great encyclopaedic *Speculum* was the meaningless product of pure fantasy:

What do they signify – the prodigious heads that emerge from the façade of Notre-Dame of Reims, and those funereal birds veiled by shrouds? . . . No symbolism can explain these monstrous creatures of the cathedrals. The bestiaries are silent. Such creatures came from the imaginations of the people. These gargoyles, resembling the vampires of cemeteries, and the dragons vanquished by ancient bishops, survived in the depths of people's consciousness; they came from ancient fireside tales.¹⁰⁶

Mâle here, in fact, alludes to something that helps explain the popularity, at least, of the dragon form of gargoyle – the stories of the founding bishops of cathedrals who, like Marcellus at Paris and St Romain at Rouen, were famous for having rid their respective towns of such creatures.¹⁰⁷ In both cities these ecclesiastics were carved in triumph over the tamed monster on the portals of their cathedrals (illus. 43). At Rouen the serpent was known as the 'Gargouille', and its destruction by St Romain with the aid of a condemned prisoner was celebrated on his feast day every year, when a criminal would receive the 'privilege of St Romain' and be released. Then, too, the stone representations 'came to life' in an animated version of the beast that was paraded through the city in a re-enactment of the saint's power over slithering things.

By the thirteenth century the apotropaic power of the images of evil had been transformed into just such a civic show, replacing fear with fun. This loss of demonic associ-



39 Man with scroll, woman with book. St Andrew's Church, Heckington, Lincolnshire

ation can also be seen in the widening reference of gargoyle sculptures to include the human as well as the monstrous. They become butts of satire, depicting such despicable trades as butchers, prostitutes and moneylenders, or universal sins, such as gluttony. Among England's richest array of gargoyles – on the fourteenth-century parish church at Heckington, Lincolnshire – is an elegantly dressed woman holding an open book (illus. 39). Traditionally, women were not supposed to take knowledge into their own hands, although this volume may contain illicit lighter reading, perhaps a Romance. Other social sins are twisted into gargoyle functions, suggesting that the evils excluded from the Church are not only those of lay society. According to a sermon of the English preacher Bromyard, gargoyles are like the slothful clergy 'who complain of the least task'. Just as the animals at Aulnay satirized the clerical hierarchy of the day, the more diverse and unstable religious orders of the fourteenth century were mocked in the disorder of many a projecting sculpture. The rise of marginal imagery has been related to the vernacularization of religion in this period and the increasing role of preaching. Bromyard uses sculptural references as *exempla* in his sermons; for example, the old notion of images being illusory and useless is used to describe those that likewise pretend to be what they are not:

At times, on these great buildings we see a stone displaying a grinning open mouth, and from other indications, appearing as if it supported the whole edifice. But nevertheless a plain stone hid in a corner does far more of the work; for the other is rather for show than for support. Such may well be compared to those persons who, when they hear the cry of poor beggars for alms . . . with open mouths bewail . . . but do not offer a helping hand.¹⁰⁸

Laughter and fear are closely related, and as Ernst Kris noted in his essay 'Ego Development and the Comic',

the grinning gargoyles on Gothic cathedrals . . . intended to turn away evil . . . tend to become mere comic masks; by the fifteenth century the process is complete and, instead of threatening, they are intended to amuse.¹⁰⁹

Like the French word *drôle*, or amusing, which has lost its original associations with the uncanny, the gargoyle's mouth becomes the clown's. Yet this process is also one of demonization and lays an increasing emphasis upon human perversity and monstrosity. This runs parallel to the intensifying psychological emphasis upon sin and self-reflection after the Fourth Lateran Council. No longer did the onlooker see the gargoyle as a hideous primordial beast that had been put to flight by the local bishop or as a dark succubus of the Devil, it became a reflection of the possible perversity in oneself.

This process of the humanization of the diabolic does not occur with other creatures – the so-called chimeras – perched on pinnacles and buttresses that, strictly speaking, do not have the gargoyle's function. The most famous beak-headed and melancholy example on the north tower of Notre-Dame in Paris, popularized in Charles Meryon's etching *Le Stryge* ('The Vampire') of 1853, was, in fact, one of the Romantic recreations of the architect Viollet-le-Duc, who had restored the Cathedral in 1843 (illus. 40). Gothic chimeras are Northern versions of the griffon, the fantastic beast-guardians found in Italian Romanesque portals and based on Classical sources. Extraneous to the architecture, they are carved to seem as though they had just alighted, like crows. It was these truly marginal additions of the cathedral that most intrigued observers of the last century in their quest for the 'spirit' of



40 Chimeras, restored by Viollet-le-Duc in 1843. Cathedral of Notre-Dame, Paris

Gothic. It is likely they terrified medieval onlookers by their lack of human reference.

The third type of Gothic marginal sculpture consists of corbel-heads and capitals more clearly derived from Romanesque traditions. Sometimes the interior of the cathedral is invaded by their physiognomic mockery, as occurs in the nave and crossing of Wells Cathedral, c. 1220, where human heads of all types and social classes punctuate the rhythms of the stiff-leaf carving. In the south transept is a whole series of figured capitals: as well as Marcolf pulling a thorn from his foot and a complex scene of violent vineyard robbers is the famous so-called 'toothache sufferer' glowering down at the observer (illus. 41).¹¹⁰ Although this is a variation on the face-pulling grimace, the attention paid to the mouth – the site of so many different kinds of sin – makes this sufferer an emblem of abject human pain. While the old idea that he is related to a nearby curative shrine has to be discounted, his placement in the laypeople's area of the building is important. It is not surprising to find an eruption of 'low life' squabbling

41 Mouth-puller. Capital, Wells Cathedral



and suffering in the very spaces where, Churchmen complained, a lot went on besides devotion.

At the cathedral of Semur-en-Auxerrois in Burgundy, the appearance of chattering corbel-heads in the choir itself, which was built in the 1230s, is even more startling. Here, the lower course of corbel-heads around the east end represent nobles and clergy, while higher up are more scurrilous fools and twisted figures.¹¹¹ Both Wells and Semur are smallish structures, and their marginal images can be seen from ground-level quite easily. The soaring scale of many cathedrals, however, often makes it impossible to see the marginal sculpture from below, either within or outside the sacred structure. The deformed and base are ejected by being made invisible. But this did not prevent the carvers lavishing care on the minute delineation of the unseen.

The difference between the inchoate, monstrous corbel types of 1120 we find at Aulnay (illus. 35) and those of only a century later that stud the shadowy and hidden interstices high up amid the gables and buttresses of Reims Cathedral



42 Face-pulling head. Reims Cathedral

is astounding (illus. 42). These later heads are completely human and so powerful in their physiognomic exactness that art historians have described them as portraits of the artisans who made them or as case histories of certain mental illnesses.¹¹² Nowhere else in thirteenth-century sculpture does the carver get to display his skill at animating the human face, the slobbering mouth and the glinting eyes as he does here in these corner creations. Carved in the mason's yard, these hidden faces, when fitted into place, were not visible from far below, suggesting that they were, perhaps, sites of practice. Skill was important to the carver, for we know from later documents that the cost of spoiled stones was taken out of their wages. In this sense the freedom they exhibited in this one type of undictated, unseen and unauthorized sculpture emerges as rage, jeering and tongue-showing that mocks the edifice and its authorities. Disordered fragments of human personalities stuck onto the edges of the Heavenly Jerusalem, they disrupt our notion of the cathedral as the 'Bible in stone', since they refer to no biblical personage or text. A side-show of abnormality and ugliness, unknown until photographers were able to scale the buildings on scaffolding a century ago, they are the most human, and the least divine, forms on the sacred edifice. Their liminal status widens the gap between

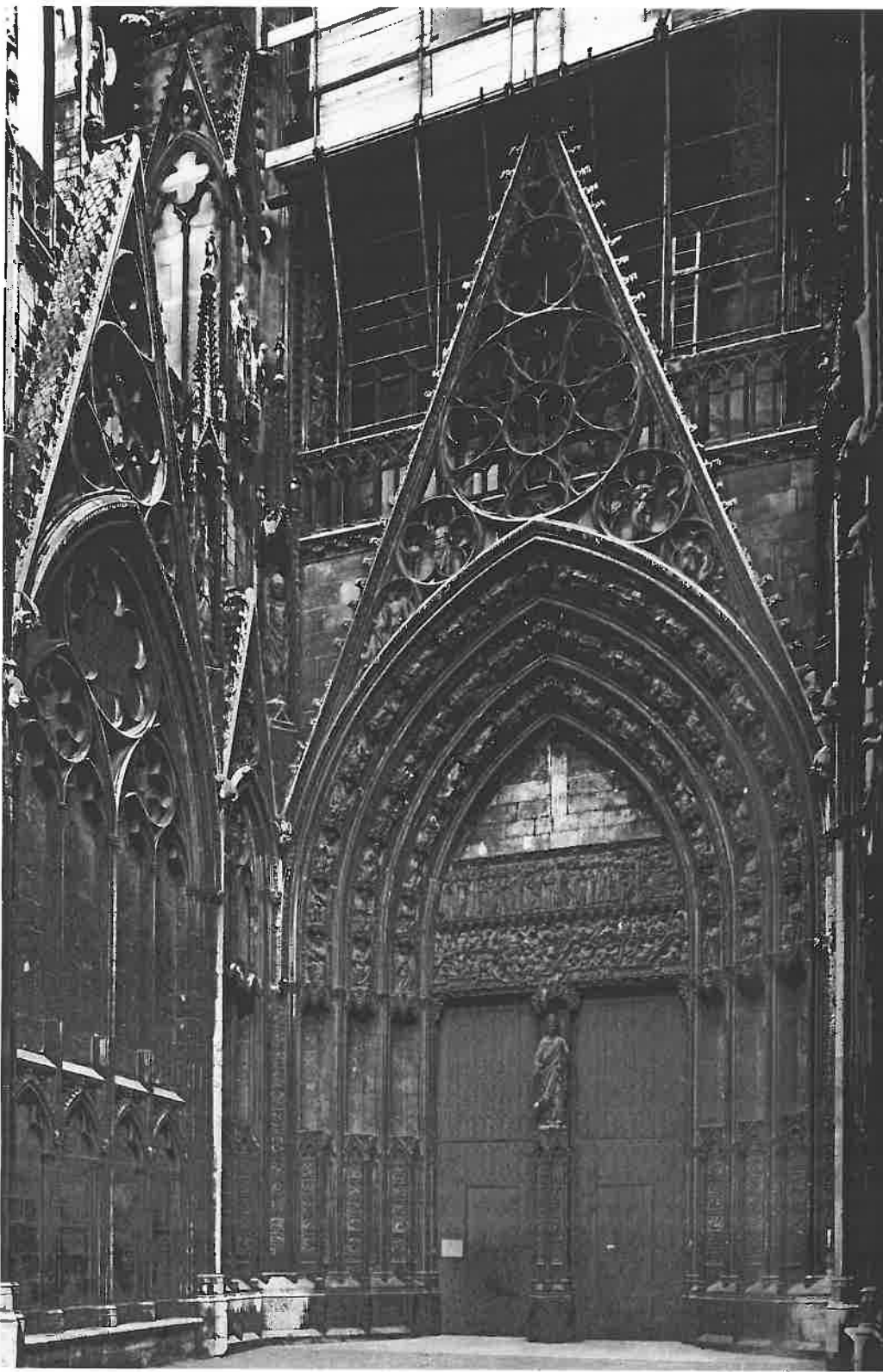
sacred and profane rather than smoothing it over. Being neither the angels that curve around the external choir buttresses at the 'head' of the edifice nor the beaked terrors that perch on the west front, they are squeezed somewhere in-between, somewhere within the world of humanity.

A RIOT OF THE IMAGINATION AT ROUEN

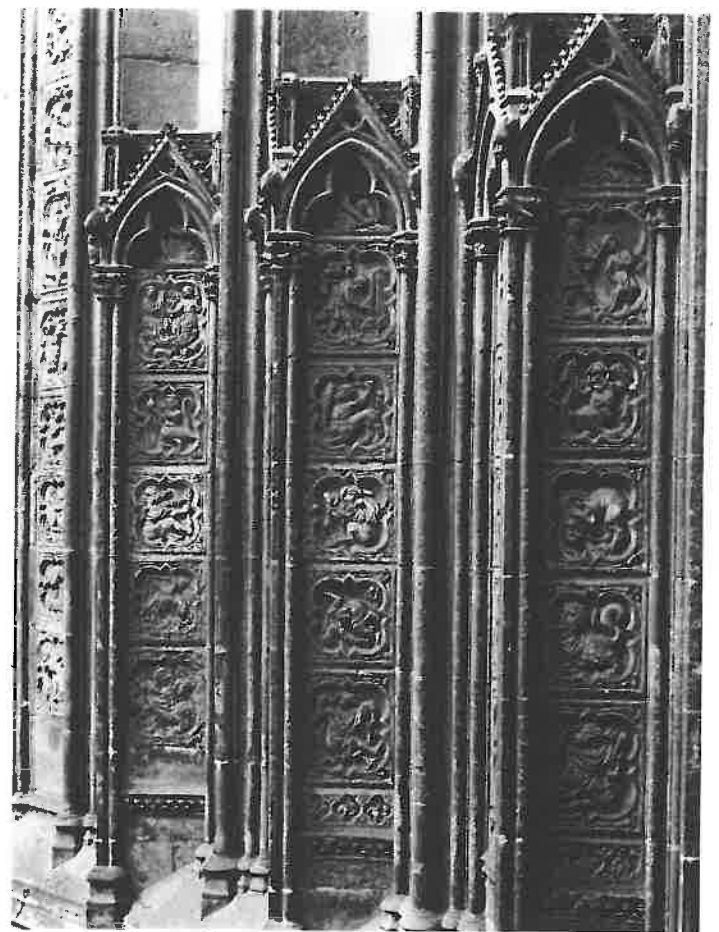
Indecency and irony had no part in the artist's fun. The monstrous obscenities that have been pointed out in our cathedrals existed only in the minds of certain biased archaeologists. Thirteenth-century art is extremely chaste, astonishingly pure.¹¹³

Emile Mâle saw Gothic images as innocent and 'free of thought', and yet, in making the medieval artist conform to his Victorian vision, he overlooked how 'indecent and irony' had an important part to play in the rituals of the cathedral as well as in the workings of 'the mind' itself. One of Mâle's examples of monstrous images that 'mean nothing' are those carved on the Portail des Libraires at Rouen (illus. 43). This portal off the north transept was begun by Archbishop de Flavacourt in 1278 and faces a long, tunnel-like court hemmed in with later buildings – the Bishop's Prison and the Treasury. There are three niches either side of the door below an unfinished Last Judgement, and beneath these are square pedestals set diagonally. Their outer faces are carved with dozens of quatrefoil medallions. Their intricate structure is typical of the geometrical exactitude of Gothic architectural framing and can be seen on the south portal on the other side of the building, where the quatrefoils contain narrative biblical and hagiographic scenes. However, what is framed by all this elegant ecclesiastical order at the Portail des Libraires, is chaos.

Each quatrefoil contains a single babewyn, posing and strutting self-consciously (illus. 44). These creatures – women with birds' bodies, dwarfish grylli, exulting goats, pig-headed dancers and hooded old men with tails between their legs like hideously overgrown genitals – exhibit nearly every single convention of babewynerie that was current, including some rare and incredibly inventive images. There is a 'real' monster among them – a performing monkey and his jongleur trainer



44 Genesis and a host of creatures. Portal des Libraires, Rouen Cathedral



—perhaps an allegory of the soul trapped within the body (illus. 45). Each has its frame, as if each were a specimen or example in a Bestiary manuscript. In fact, they represent a kind of anti-Bestiary in the sense that these mingling of parts and pieces of animal and human defy classification. They are like Asgemundus, the ‘ruler of the arse-hole’, a demon described at the climax of the monastic Latin poem *Ysengrimus* as

a devil whose beak is that of a hawk, whose mane is horse-like, with the tail of a cat, the horns of an ox, and the beard of a goat. Wool covers his loins and his back is feathered like a goose; he has the feet of a cock in front, and those of a dog at the rear.¹¹⁴

45 Portal des Libraires, Rouen Cathedral



45 Jongleur and monkey, two monsters and a lower marginal scene of (?)charity. Portail des Libraires, Rouen Cathedral



46 Shrouded mourner, Creation scene and parody of the Virgin Birth. Portail des Libraires, Rouen Cathedral

Juxtaposed above all this formlessness is the narrative of the World's formation. On the left of the doorway, reading from left to right, is Adam and Eve's life on earth – from their expulsion from Paradise to the death of Abel. On the right of the doorway, reading left to right, are the seven days of Creation. Heavily draped figures brood in the lunettes above, like the figures of Christ's ancestors so admired in that part of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel (illus. 46). Generation is, in fact, crucial to the scheme – the generation of animals, monsters and thoughts in the powerful medieval imagination.

According to Vincent of Beauvais – the thirteenth-century

scholastic on whom Mâle depended so much when building his *summa* in stone – the imagination acts as a repository of images that go beyond those perceived by the five senses, such as the chimera, a creature he describes as having the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent. For Albert the Great, *phantasia*, lying between imagination and memory, was the faculty that allowed one to imagine a man with two heads, or a being with a human body, the head of a lion and the tail of a horse.¹¹⁵ In this respect, the sculptures at Rouen represent the products of the imagination as argued by Scholastic philosophers of the time.

Beneath God, dividing the light from the darkness, a woman opens her cloak like a modern magician to present a bestial dog-baby, perhaps a parodic Virgin and Child composition (illus. 46). In this period, deformed offspring were considered the result of sin, usually the breaking of a sexual taboo. But there was also a belief that women could bear the children of demons. William of Auvergne, the Bishop of Paris, wrote a treatise on the supernatural *succubi*, the demons that fertilized women through the intermediaries of animals, often bears.¹¹⁶ In Padua in 1265, a woman confessed to a priest that she had slept with a horned goat. On the portal at Rouen, goats and humans mingle, becoming bird-women, dog-men and hermaphrodites, like exhibits in a medieval freak show.

Rather than being freaks in our sense, these images are conceived as products of the terrifyingly promiscuous medieval imagination. For imagination was not only understood to be a cognitive faculty lodged in the front of the brain, nearest the eyes and thus closely linked to vision, but a force that could actually create forms. As the thirteenth-century Polish scholar Witelo argued, imagination, being an intermediary between mind and matter, allowed demons to couple with human beings, since what was perceived in the *phantasia* was, in some cases, real. It was for this reason that pregnant women were urged not to look at monkeys (illus. 45) or even to think of monstrous things, lest their imaginations impregnate their offspring with hideous forms. Similarly, it was a medical commonplace that if an adulteress thought of her husband during the sexual act her child would resemble not her partner, but the absent husband.¹¹⁷ Vision was both fecund and dangerous. The opposite of God's ordered creation, the Rouen carvings display its crazed corollary, the flawed, distorted products of purely human invention. Picturing the mind's profligate excess is a brilliant conceit, since this is exactly what these forms were in front of the designer's mind, the place of imagination in medieval faculty psychology.

Our modern notion of the separateness of sacred and profane experience has blinded us to seeing the worldliness of the medieval cathedral, although the tourist shops that fill many English cathedrals today capture some of its original mercantile ambience. According to the testimony of

thirteenth-century French clerics such as Humbert of Romans, churches were places not only for prayer but where people 'indulge in idle chatter, do business transactions and secular work . . . and some desecrate the church by doing physical violence there'. Humbert particularly attacks those who, on Feast days, 'go in for excessive eating and drinking, and other such things belonging to carnal pleasures', those who 'turn God's feast into a feast of the world'.¹¹⁸ The babewyns at Rouen, including quack doctors and overdressed women, are probably related to warnings against this profanation of the sacred space.

The idea of the external walls of an edifice being associated with sin can be found in contemporary writings, such as the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Roman de Fauvel*, in which emblems of Evil are described as carved or painted on the outside walls of a garden and palace. Rouen's north portal was notoriously tainted in this respect. Not only was Cain's murder of his brother carved there (illus. 44), an actual murder had occurred on the very spot; the sanctified ground of the cemetery beyond, desecrated by this shedding of blood, was moved.

The function of the courtyard also involved the 'sins of the world'. In the previous century the north doorway had been the site of a chapel of the Virgin which, along with some of the canons' houses, had to be demolished in 1280 so that the portal could be built. The doorway later came to be called the *Portail des Libraires* because in the fifteenth century there were twelve booksellers' stalls arranged in the courtyard outside, which were rented from the Chapter at a price of 60 livres each. Before this date there is evidence to suggest it was called the *Portail des Boursiers*, or Moneylenders, and that it was a major entrance to the building.¹¹⁹ This association with mercantile activity and the venial sin of usury is especially interesting in the light of the Last Judgement in the lintel of the doorway, which depicts avaricious merchants being led to Hell. Did the cacophonous monstrosities in the quatrefoils similarly sound an ominous warning to the worldly activities that went on before them? Did the 'changing' money chime with the shape-changing and protean perversity of the creatures carved in stone? The whole doorway complex is, in fact, unfinished (illus. 43). The Last Judgement takes place on the lintel where the moneylender shrieks in fear as he is led

towards the mouth of Hell, but Christ is missing in the apex of the scheme. Was this court, with all its murderous and mercantile associations, too worldly for God to judge over? Or did the gap come to signify in its absence the soon-to-be-completed Doom that could happen any day?

It would be wrong to think of these images as addressing only those outside the sacred precincts. Like monastic monsters, they served just as much as reminders to the religious community within. Rouen had been notorious for its clerical abuses. At an enquiry of 1248 the chapter was found to 'wander about and talk with women during the celebration of the divine services', and individual priests were named as 'ill-famed' for 'incontinence, drunkenness, manslaughter, trading and usury'.¹²⁰

The canons, when they did not pay others to stand for them, spent almost every waking hour of their lives singing the divine office, except at certain sanctioned disruptions that occurred on the Feast of Fools. Usually celebrated on Innocent's Day (28 December) or the Feast of the Circumcision (1st January), the Feast of Fools was essentially a rite of inversion, allowing the lower ranks of clergy, who served more menial tasks in the cathedral compared to the wealthier prebendary canons, to let off steam. The Church hierarchy continually tried to suppress the rites and revelries of what was called the *festum stultorum* or *asinaria festa* from as early as 1207, when Pope Innocent III condemned mask-wearing and other *theatrales ludi* performed by the deacons. The most lengthy attack on these riotous rites came later, from the pen of the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson:

Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the Hours of Office. They dance in the choir dressed as women, panders or minstrels. They sing wanton songs. They eat black puddings at the altar while the celebrant is saying mass. They play dice there. They cense with stinking smoke from the soles of old shoes. They run and leap through the church, without a blush at their own shame. Finally they drive about the town and its theatres in shabby traps and carts; and arouse the laughter of their fellows and the bystanders in infamous performances with indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste.¹²¹

This describes exactly the breaking down of boundaries between the Church and the world and the inverted order of the canons' hierarchically structured lives that is typical of the liminal festival. But does this licensed disruption of clerical energy have anything to do with the ludic carvings on the Portail des Libraires? Certainly it suggests the capacity of the clergy to utilize the transformative power of ritual play and inversion, mock-riot and masking for themselves. Even in the more orthodox Prophet's Play performed at Rouen – again, probably by the lesser clergy – there is an *ordo* of Baalam, while the ass that is called for is played by what we would call a pantomime horse!¹²² Certainly such evidence of ludic ritual suggests the limitations of Mâle's 'chaste' view of Gothic sculpture, since the carvings addressed not only the sinful city outside but also encompassed the liturgical laughter that the canons and priests could themselves at times entertain. Gothic art has for too long been studied as 'rational' architectural order, while the irrational, magical impulses that also helped create its illusory transcendence have been ignored.

MISERICORDS AND POSTERIOBS

For centuries the choir of even the smallest parish church had been the site of one of the most fertile of the marginal genres that Bakhtin has called 'the lower bodily stratum', carvings hidden from all but the eyes of the canons and choristers who sat or leaned upon them – the misericords (illus. 47). The name is thought to have derived from the idea of a 'mercy-seat' that provided some support for the older and infirm monks and canons during the long hours of services. When in the up position a misericord provided a ledge to lean back on, and when down, a proper seat. 'Hidden from the eye of mischief', in the words of Edward Prior, one of the earliest historians of English medieval sculpture, its art was on the underside in more ways than one. In the small field not visible when the seat is in use, the woodcarver had a chance to develop the marginal repertory found in manuscripts into three-dimensional woodcarvings.¹²³ But the compositions need not always have been derived from manuscripts. At Rouen Cathedral, for example, there is a marvellous set of misericords – ordered in 1467 by Cardinal Guillaume D'Estou-

teville -- that was copied from the babewyns of the Portail des Libraires.¹²⁴ This suggests that nearly two hundred years after the monstrous carvings in stone had been made, they were still valued by artists and patrons as a repertory of imaginative and respectably riotous babewynerie.

The variety of subject-matter, the freshness and grainy earthiness of the carving and the intimate scale of misericords have attracted countless popular and scholarly treatments (we all have our favourites). But what is often not emphasized enough is the relative position of this art and its meaning, as regards the low subject-matter. A number of French examples have a distinctly 'popular' aspect, depicting riddles, pastimes and folk tales in a dynamic and often derogatory style. Here in the very centre of the sacred space, the marginal world erupts. Why this became a fashion, and why it was allowed, has to be related to the way in which these carvings were literally debased and made subservient to those 'above' them. The peasants labouring in the fields, the foolish merchant who carries his horse across a stream, the fox preaching to the geese -- all are blotted out by the bottoms of the clergy. Sometimes this is actually reflected in the carver's design, as at Saumur, where a figure is pinned with his nose reaching up to the choir-stall seat -- literally the posterior of the sitter (illus. 47).

The censorship of the 'low' realism of these scenes by the portly canons' behinds during the divine services was the



47 Sniffing the bottom
Misericord,
Church of St Pierre,
Saumur

obliteration of one social group by another. The ribald subject-matter was clearly visible only to the clerical élite, since laypeople, even in small churches, were not allowed to enter the sanctuary. This might explain the popularity, especially in England, of misericords showing scenes from popular romances, such as *Tristan and Isolde*, and other courtly subjects -- not for the elevation of these themes, but literally to squash them. Although some misericords do display religious subjects, such as the Judgement of Solomon at Worcester and Noah's Ark at Ely, these are not the central Christological subjects, but scenes that allow, like the Mystery plays, anecdotal details and the depiction of social manners. Especially popular were the antics of Reynard the Fox and other animal fables, but also subjects of human labour that included scenes of self-reference showing carvers at work.¹²⁵ Three misericords from a single set now in London are especially interesting since they show the development of marginal images within this 'marginal genre' itself, using the 'ears' of the central bracket. Alongside scenes of the harvest and human labour are monstrous grylli and cloth-draped monsters with beak-heads picking the grain (illus. 48). These have been described as representations of the monstrous races of the East, when, in fact, they would have been visible in many fourteenth-century villages at harvest time. They are clearly depictions of men in the mumming and hobbyhorse costumes used in folk rituals.¹²⁶

Just as the misericords, while representing a wide social panoply, put people in their place in the human hierarchy, the cathedrals, as image-complexes, positioned people in relation to God and the Judgement. This does not mean that we must view all the hilarious or disturbing inversions of misericords, gargoyles and other three-dimensional marginal forms I have briefly discussed here as the crude image of a predetermined 'official' ideology. The lay carvers who created these animated figures gave them eyes that glint with vivacity, and pert poses that are lacking in the simulacres of sanctity that stand rigid beside them. When an English Cistercian complains about the 'licence' given to artists by 'those who supervise such matters', it suggests that ecclesiastical patrons left the non-essential parts of programmes to the imaginations of their makers, as was the case with the illumination of religious manuscripts.¹²⁷



48 Work and play:
harvesters and
babewyns.
Miscellaneous from a
church in King's
Lynn, Norfolk,
now in the Victoria
& Albert Museum,
London

A century ago, Ruskin, who overstressed this 'freedom' of the medieval craftsman, described and greatly admired the carvings of the Portail des Libraires. As the culmination of French Gothic, they exemplified what the great English critic called 'thoughtfulness or fancy', in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). Ruskin's obsessive gaze was focused on a carved detail that was not in the centre of a quatrefoil, one of the minute worm-men squeezed into the lower right margin of the frame, then less worn-away by pollution: 'the fellow is vexed and puzzled in his malice, and his hand is pressed hard on his cheek bone, and the flesh of the cheek is wrinkled under the eye by the pressure'.¹²⁸ Ruskin's nineteenth-century naturalist's eye could observe the minutest emotional inflexion of humanity, even in a Gothic monster. It is a pity that today we have parcelled these off into a category of the grotesque, and cannot admire their deformity with the same sensitivity. Ruskin was also acute in seeing these sculptures as the embodiment of 'thoughtfulness'. What he did not appreciate, however, was how far from the rational naturalism of his own age were those ever-rampant and constantly creative representations of the medieval imagination.