On Cloisters

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Speaking of the Romanesque sculptures for which late medieval European cloisters would become famous, the monastic revitalizer and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux became incensed, demanding: “In the cloister, under the eyes of the brethren who read there, what profit is there in those ridiculous monsters, in that marvelous and deformed beauty, in that beautiful deformity?” Bernard’s discomfort with the creative and evocative nature of the cloister and the apparently contradictory nature—deformed beauty / beautiful deformity—of what it produced perfectly distills the cloister’s ability to capture and even harness the imagination. The cloister is an enclosed space, but a porous one, acting a nexus between between inside and outside, and between this world and the next. It invites experimentation, because it is protected, but it also inevitably pushes up against limitations, because it is confined. It is, on a theoretical level, queer, in its ability to occupy multiple categories and yet not adhere to any. Hybridity characterizes the cloister, and this fluidity—this flexibility—is ironically what has allowed it to survive for so long in a solid, tangible architecture.

The medieval cloister was specifically meant to be a place where the human and the divine could interact. It sought to recreate the conditions of the Garden of Eden, inhabited

by the first people with its technically terrestrial location that however provided an opportunity for direct contact with God, and recalling that privileged moment in Christian history before all was lost. The creative potential that it harbored was in alignment with the same archetypal productivity of the earthly paradise: things were naturally “born” within it, as it pulsed with the inspiring energy of the supreme Creator. Members of the religious orders who lived within the monastery came to the cloister to pray, but also to sing, to paint, to sculpt, to compose poetry, to record history. The sacred and the profane and the rare and the quotidian have, in this way, always coexisted in the cloister.

Indeed, if the medieval cloister was meant first and foremost to be a space for quiet self-reflection and communication with God, its productivity was nonetheless channeled into strategic use. The cloister acted as an outdoor space that could host subsistence gardening and where physical activity could take place. Growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs required labor, and allowed the monastic community to feed itself; the garden and orchard also permitted the production of pharmaceuticals and remedies, often destined for consumers beyond the monastery. This abundance was in accordance with the spiritual possibilities of the cloister: like the Garden of Eden, the cloister was there to *provide*, in the most essential sense of the word, and—crucially—to sustain the community.

The cloister remains a strong symbol of community cohesion and a space that vibrates with expressive possibility. Its ability to be a boundary even as it transcends chronological and geographical boundaries only further confirms how alluring but, as Bernard of Clairvaux saw it, slightly threatening the cloister can be, deformed by the beauty of what it creates and beautiful in the deformity of what it generates.

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