

## **28: THE WHEEL**

In a quiet and rustic though fairly famous church in my neighbourhood there is a window supposed to represent an Angel on a Bicycle. It does definitely and indisputably represent a nude youth sitting on a wheel; but there is enough complication in the wheel and sanctity (I suppose) in the youth to warrant this working description. It is a thing of florid Renaissance outline, and belongs to the highly pagan period which introduced all sorts of objects into ornament: personally I can believe in the bicycle more than in the angel. Men, they say, are now imitating angels; in their flying-machines, that is: not in any other respect that I have heard of. So perhaps the angel on the bicycle (if he is an angel and if it is a bicycle) was avenging himself by imitating man. If so, he showed that high order of intellect which is attributed to angels in the mediaeval books, though not always (perhaps) in the mediaeval pictures.

For wheels are the mark of a man quite as much as wings are the mark of an angel. Wheels are the things that are as old as mankind and yet are strictly peculiar to man, that are prehistoric but not pre-human.

A distinguished psychologist, who is well acquainted with physiology, has told me that parts of himself are certainly levers, while other parts are probably pulleys, but that after feeling himself carefully all over, he cannot find a wheel anywhere. The wheel, as a mode of movement, is a purely human thing. On the ancient escutcheon of Adam (which, like much of the rest of his costume, has not yet been discovered) the heraldic emblem was a wheel--passant. As a mode of progress, I say, it is unique. Many modern philosophers, like my friend before mentioned, are ready to find links between man and beast, and to show that man has been in all things the blind slave of his mother earth. Some, of a very different kind, are even eager to show it; especially if it can be twisted to the discredit of religion. But even the most eager scientists have often admitted in my hearing that they would be surprised if some kind of cow approached them moving solemnly on four wheels. Wings, fins, flappers, claws, hoofs, webs, trotters, with all these the fantastic families of the earth come against us and close around us, fluttering and flapping and rustling and galloping and lumbering and thundering; but there is no sound of wheels.

I remember dimly, if, indeed, I remember aright, that in some of those dark prophetic pages of Scripture, that seem of cloudy purple and dusky gold, there is a passage in which the seer beholds a violent dream of wheels. Perhaps this was indeed the symbolic declaration of the spiritual supremacy of man. Whatever the birds may do above or the fishes beneath his ship, man is the only thing to steer;

the only thing to be conceived as steering. He may make the birds his friends, if he can. He may make the fishes his gods, if he chooses. But most certainly he will not believe a bird at the masthead; and it is hardly likely that he will even permit a fish at the helm. He is, as Swinburne says, helmsman and chief: he is literally the Man at the Wheel.

The wheel is an animal that is always standing on its head; only "it does it so rapidly that no philosopher has ever found out which is its head." Or if the phrase be felt as more exact, it is an animal that is always turning head over heels and progressing by this principle. Some fish, I think, turn head over heels (supposing them, for the sake of argument, to have heels); I have a dog who nearly did it; and I did it once myself when I was very small. It was an accident, and, as delightful novelist, Mr. De Morgan, would say, it never can happen again. Since then no one has accused me of being upside down except mentally: and I rather think that there is something to be said for that; especially as typified by the rotary symbol. A wheel is the sublime paradox; one part of it is always going forward and the other part always going back. Now this, as it happens, is highly similar to the proper condition of any human soul or any political state. Every sane soul or state looks at once backwards and forwards; and even goes backwards to come on.

For those interested in revolt (as I am) I only say meekly that one cannot have a Revolution without revolving. The wheel, being a logical thing, has reference to what is behind as well as what is before. It has (as every society should have) a part that perpetually leaps helplessly at the sky and a part that perpetually bows down its head into the dust. Why should people be so scornful of us who stand on our heads? Bowing down one's head in the dust is a very good thing, the humble beginning of all happiness. When we have bowed our heads in the dust for a little time the happiness comes; and then (leaving our heads' in the humble and reverent position) we kick up our heels behind in the air. That is the true origin of standing on one's head; and the ultimate defence of paradox. The wheel humbles itself to be exalted; only it does it a little quicker than I do.