

Rites and Symbols

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ALL the constituent elements of a rite have necessarily a symbolic sense, while on the other hand a symbol itself in its commonest acceptation, as a support for meditation, is destined essentially to give results which are exactly comparable to the results of rites. Let us add that when it is a matter of truly traditional rites and symbols (and ones that are not so do not deserve the name at all, but are really only counterfeits or even parodies), their origins in either case are equally "non-human"; thus the general impossibility of assigning them any definite author or inventor is not due to ignorance as profane historians may suppose,¹ but it is a natural consequence of these origins, which can only be questioned by people who are wholly unaware of the true nature of tradition and of everything that is integrally bound up with it, as both rites and symbols clearly are.

If the fundamental identity of rites and symbols is more closely examined, it may be noted in the first place that a symbol, understood as a graphic figuration as it is most commonly, is only as it were the fixation of a ritual gesture.² In fact it often happens that the actual tracing of a symbol to be regular must be made under conditions which give it all the characteristics of a true rite; a very clear example of this in a low domain, that of magic (which is none the less a traditional science), is provided in the preparation of talismanic figures; and on the plane which more immediately concerns us the tracing of "yantras" in the Hindu tradition is no less striking an example.³

But this is not all, for the above-mentioned conception of the symbol is really much too narrow: there are not only figurative or visual symbols, there are also auditory symbols; this division into two fundamental categories which in the Hindu doctrine are those of the "yantra" and the "mantra" has already been pointed out elsewhere.⁴ Their respective predominance is characteristic of the two kinds of rites, which relate in the beginning to the traditions of sedentary peoples in the case of visual symbols and to those of nomadic peoples in the case of auditory ones; of course it will be understood that between the two no absolute separation can be made (hence the word "predominance"), every combination being possible as a result of the multiple adaptations which have come about with the passage of time and given rise to the various traditional forms which are known to us today. These considerations clearly show the bond that exists in a perfectly general way between rites and symbols; but we may add that in the case of "mantras" this bond is to be more immediately seen: in fact while the visual symbol, once traced, remains or may remain in a permanent state (which is why we have spoken of a fixed gesture), the auditory symbol on the other hand only becomes manifest in the actual performance of the rite. This difference however is attenuated when a correspondence is established between visual and auditory symbols, as in writing, which represents a true fixation of sound (not of sound itself as such of course, but of a permanent possibility of reproducing it); and it need hardly be recalled in this connection that every writing, at least in origin, is essentially a symbolic figuration. The same is true of speech itself whose symbolic character is no less inherent in its very nature: it is

quite clear that a word, whatever it may be, can never be anything but a symbol of the idea that it is intended to express. Thus every language, be it spoken or written, is truly a body of symbols, and it is precisely for this reason that in spite of all the "naturalistic" theories invented to explain it, language can never be either a more or less artificial human creation or a mere product of man's individual faculties.⁵

Amongst visual symbols themselves there is also an example of "instantaneity" which is fairly comparable to that of sound symbols: this is the case of symbols which are not traced permanently but only employed as signs in initiatory rites (notably the "signs of recognition" which we have spoken about in our previous articles)⁶ and in more general religious rites (the "sign of the cross" is a typical example known to all); here the symbol is truly one with the ritual gesture itself.⁷ In any case a "graphic" symbol is, we repeat, itself the fixation of a gesture or a movement (the actual movement or series of movements which has to be made to trace it) and in the case of sound symbols one also may say that the movement of the vocal organs which is necessary to produce them (whether it be a matter of uttering ordinary words or musical sounds) is as much a gesture as are all the other kinds of bodily movements, from which it can never be entirely isolated.⁸

Thus the notion of the gesture, in its widest acceptance (which indeed is better in accord with the real meaning of the word than the more restricted acceptance allowed by current usage), brings back all these various cases to unity and allows us to discern in it their common principle, and this fact has a deep significance in the metaphysical domain which we cannot enlarge upon at present.

It will now be easily understood that every rite is literally made up of a body of symbols; and these include not only the objects used or the figures represented, but also the gestures effected and the words pronounced (the latter according to what we have said being really only a particular case of the former)—in short, all the elements of the rite without exception; and these elements thus have the value of symbols by their very nature and not in virtue of any superadded meaning which might have become attached to them from outward circumstances without being really inherent in them. Again, it might be said that rites are symbols "put into action", that every ritual gesture is a symbol "acted"; this is only another way of saying the same thing, but putting rather more specially in evidence the characteristic of a rite that like every action it is something which is necessarily performed in time,⁹ while the symbol as such may be considered from a timeless standpoint. In this sense it is possible to speak of a certain preeminence of symbols over rites; but rites and symbols fundamentally are only two aspects of a single reality, and this is none other than the "correspondence" which binds together all the degrees of universal Existence in such a way that by its means our human state can enter into communication with the higher states of being.

¹ If for want of a better solution they are not driven to look on them as the product of a sort of "collective consciousness" which if it even existed would in any case be quite incapable of producing things of a transcendent order such as these.

In this connection what we have said on the subject of so-called folklore may be noted, in our article on The Holy Grail (see this journal, Winter 1969, pp. 2-3).

² These considerations relate directly to what we have called the "theory of gestures" which we have several times had occasion to allude to, but without its having been possible to treat of it up to the present.

³ The "tracing board" of the Lodge in ancient Masonry, which indeed formed a true "yantra", may be likened to it. The rites concerned with the construction of monuments for traditional ends might also be cited as examples here, for monuments of this sort in themselves have necessarily a symbolical character.

⁴ See the chapter on "Cain and Abel" in *The Reign of Quantity*.

⁵ It goes without saying that the distinction of "sacred tongues" and "profane tongues" only arises secondarily; with languages as with the arts and sciences, their profanity is only the result of a degeneration, which may arise earlier and more easily in the case of languages on account of their more current and more general use. See *La Science des Lettres in Symboles Fondamentaux de la Science Sacrée*, ch. VI).

⁶ Utterances which serve a similar purpose, passwords for example, fall naturally into the category of sound symbols.

⁷ A sort of intermediary case is that of the symbolical figures which are traced at the beginning of a rite or preparatory to it, and effaced as soon as it is ended; such is the case of many "yantras", and used once to be the same with the "tracing board" of the Lodge in Masonry. The practice does not represent a mere precaution against profane curiosity, which as an explanation is always much too simple; it should be looked on first and foremost as an immediate consequence of the intimate bond uniting symbols and rites, in such a way that the former have no cause for visible subsistence apart from the latter.

⁸ Note especially in this connection the part played in rites by the gestures called in the Hindu tradition "mudrās", which form a veritable language of movements and attitudes; the "handclasps" used as "means of recognition" in initiatory organizations in the West as well as in the East are really only a particular case of "mudrās".

⁹ In Sanscrit the word "karma" whose first meaning is that of "action" in general is also used in a "technical" sense to mean "ritual action" in particular; what it then directly expresses is this same characteristic of the rite that we are noting here.