

Word and Symbol

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We have previously had occasion to speak of symbolic form in the transmission of doctrinal teachings of a traditional order. We return to this subject in order to provide further explanation and to show more clearly the different points of view from which it can be seen.

First of all, symbolism appears to be quite specially adapted to the needs of human nature, which is not a purely intellectual nature, but which requires a sensory base from which to rise to higher levels. One must take the human compound as it is, at once one and multiple in its real complexity; this is what tends to be forgotten, ever since Descartes claimed to establish a radical and absolute separation between soul and body. For a pure intelligence, assuredly, no exterior form, no expression is required in order to understand the truth, or even to communicate to other pure intelligences what it has understood insofar as it is communicable; but it is not so for man. Basically, every expression, every formulation, whatever it may be, is a symbol of the thought which it translates outwardly; in this sense, language itself is nothing other than symbolism. There can be no opposition, therefore, between the employment of words and that of figurative symbols; these two modes of expression should rather be complementary to each other (moreover, they may in fact be combined, for primitively writing is ideographic and in some cases, as in China, it has always kept this character). In a general manner, the form of language is analytic, “discursive” as is human reason whose own instrument it is and whose *modus operandi* it follows and reproduces as exactly as possible. On the contrary, symbolism strictly speaking is essentially synthetic and thereby intuitive in some manner, which makes it more suitable than language to serve as a support for “intellectual intuition” which is higher than reason, and which must not be confused with that inferior intuition to which various contemporary philosophers make appeal. If it is not sufficient merely to note a difference between language and symbolism, and it is actually necessary to speak of superiority, this superiority, whatever some may claim, belongs to synthetic symbolism which truly opens up the possibility of unlimited concepts; while language, with its more definite and fixed import, always sets more or less narrow limits for the understanding.

Let no one therefore say that symbolism is suited to the understanding of the common man only; it is rather the contrary that is true. Or better still, symbolism is suited equally to all, because it helps each one to understand the truth which it represents, more or less completely, more or less profoundly, according to the nature of each person’s own intellectual possibilities. It

is thus that the highest truths, which would not be communicable or transmissible by any other means, can be communicated up to a certain point when they are (if one may speak thus) incorporated in symbols, which will no doubt hide them for many, but which will manifest them in all their splendor to the eyes of those who know how to see.

Does this amount to saying that the use of symbols is a necessity? One has to make a distinction here: in itself and absolutely speaking, no outward form is necessary; all are equally contingent and accidental in relation to that which they express or represent. Thus, according to the teachings of the Hindus, any figure, for example a statue which symbolizes this or that aspect of the Divinity, must be considered only as a “support”, a reference point for meditation. It is therefore simply an aid and nothing more. A Vedic text makes a comparison in this regard which perfectly clarifies the role of symbols and of outward forms in general: these forms are like the horse which permits a man to accomplish a journey more rapidly and with much less trouble than if he was obliged to make it only by his own resources. No doubt, if this man did not have a horse at his disposal he could in spite of all reach his goal, but with how much more difficulty! If he could avail himself of a horse it would indeed be a mistake to refuse it on the pretext that it is more worthy of him not to have recourse to any aid. Do not the detractors of symbolism act precisely in this way? And even though the journey is long and difficult, it may never be absolutely impossible to make it on foot; nevertheless, there may be truly a practical impossibility of reaching the goal by walking. It is thus with rites and symbols: they are not necessary in an absolute sense; but they are as it were indispensable by a necessity of convenience or expediency, given the conditions of human nature.

But it is not sufficient to consider symbolism only from the human angle, as we have done so far; it is proper, in order to appreciate its full scope, to consider it also from the divine side, if one may express oneself thus. Indeed, if one accepts that symbolism has its basis in the very nature of beings and of things, that it is in perfect conformity with the laws of this nature, and if one reflects that natural laws are in sum only an expression and as it were an exteriorization of the Divine Will, does this not justify the affirmation that symbolism is “non-human” in origin as the Hindus say; or, in other words, that its principle is beyond and higher than humanity?

In connection with symbolism, one may rightly recall the first words of the Gospel according to St John: “In the beginning was the Word”. The Word, the Logos, is simultaneously Thought and Word: in itself, It is the Divine Intellect, which is the “place of possibilities” [*locum possibilium*]; in relation to us, It is manifested or is expressed by Creation, in which are realized in actual existence certain of these same possibilities which, as essences, are contained in It from all eternity. Creation is the work of the Word; it is also, and by that very fact, Its manifestation, Its outward affirmation; and this is why the world is like a divine language for those who know how to understand it: *Coeli enarrant gloriam Dei* (Ps 19:2). The philosopher Berkeley was not wrong, therefore, when he said that the world is “the language that the infinite Spirit speaks to finite spirits”; but he was wrong to believe that this language is only a collection of arbitrary

signs, for in reality there is nothing arbitrary even in human language, every signification at its origin necessarily having its basis in some natural conformity or harmony between the sign and the signified. It is because Adam had received from God the knowledge of the nature of all living beings that he was able to give them their names (Genesis 2:19-20). And all the ancient traditions are in agreement that the true name of a being is one with its nature or its very essence.

If the Logos is Thought in its inward aspect and Word in its outward aspect, and if the world is the effect of the divine Word uttered at the beginning of time, then nature in its entirety can be taken as a symbol of supernatural reality. Everything that exists, whatever its mode, having its principle in the Divine Intellect, translates or represents this principle in its own manner and according to its order of existence. It is thus that, from one order to another, all things are linked and matched together so that they cooperate towards the universal and total harmony, which is like a reflection of the divine Unity itself. This correspondence is the true basis of symbolism and this is why the laws of an inferior domain can always be taken to symbolize realities of a superior order, wherein lies their profound truth, which is at once their principle and their end. Let us call attention to the error of the modern “naturalistic” interpretations of ancient traditional doctrines, interpretations which purely and simply reverse the hierarchy of relationships between the different orders of reality. For example, symbols or myths have never had the role of representing the movement of the stars; rather, the truth is that one often finds in the symbol figures or diagrams which are inspired by that movement but intended to express analogically something altogether different, because the laws of the movement of the heavenly bodies express physically the metaphysical principles on which they depend. The inferior can symbolize the superior, but the inverse is impossible. Moreover, if the symbol was not itself nearer the realm of sense than that which it represents, how could it fulfill the function for which it is intended? In nature, the sensible can symbolize the supra-sensible; the natural order in its entirety can in its turn be a symbol of the divine order; and, on the other hand, if one considers man more particularly, is it not legitimate to say that he also is a symbol by the very fact that he is “created in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27)? Let us add that nature receives its full significance only if it is seen to furnish us a means for raising ourselves to the knowledge of divine truths, which is precisely the essential role which we see in symbolism.¹

These considerations could be developed almost endlessly; but we prefer to leave to each one the responsibility of making this development by an effort of personal reflection, for nothing could be more profitable. Like the symbols which are their subject, these notes must be only a

1. Perhaps it would be useful to note that this point of view, according to which nature is considered as a symbol of the supernatural, is in no way new and that on the contrary it was widely accepted in the Medieval period. It was notably that of the Franciscan school, and in particular of St Bonaventure. We also note that analogy, in the Thomistic sense of the word, which permits one to rise from the knowledge of creatures to that of God is nothing but a symbolic mode of expression based on the correspondence between the natural and the supernatural orders.

point of departure for meditation. Furthermore, words can render only very imperfectly what is in question; nevertheless, there is still an aspect of the subject, and not the least important, that we shall try to make clear or at least provide a glimpse of, by a brief reference to it.

We have said that the Divine Word expresses itself in Creation, and this is comparable analogically, *mutatis mutandis*, to thought being expressed in forms (there is no longer need here to distinguish between language and symbols properly speaking) which at once veil and manifest it. The primordial Revelation also which is, like Creation, a work of the Word, incorporates itself so to speak, in symbols which are transmitted from age to age from the origin of humanity. And this process, too, is analogous in its own order to that of Creation itself. On the other hand, can one not see, in this incorporation into symbols of the “non-human” tradition, a kind of anticipated image, a kind of “prefiguration”, of the Incarnation of the Word? And does not this also enable one, in a certain measure, to perceive the mysterious rapport existing between the Creation and the Incarnation which is its consummation?

We will end by a last remark relative to the importance of the universal symbol of the Heart and more particularly the form which it takes in the Christian tradition, that of the Sacred Heart. If symbolism in its essence conforms strictly to the “divine plan”, and if the Sacred Heart is the centre of the beginning, both really and symbolically, this symbol of the Heart, by itself or by its equivalents, must occupy in all the doctrines issuing more or less directly from the primordial tradition, a properly central place. It is this which we will try to show in certain studies which follow.