

The Traditional Doctrine of Symbol

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God guides towards His Light whoever He wants.
God gives symbols for men. God knows everything.

Surah 24: *Light*

God made this world in the image of the world above; thus, all which is found above has its analogy below...and everything constitutes a unity.

Zohar

Worship me in the symbols and images which remind thee of me.

Srimad Bhagavatam, xi.v.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known.

1 Corinthians, xiii. 12

That which is below is as that which is above, and that which is above is as that which is below.

The Emerald Tablet

The Divine Language

According to the understanding of the Traditions¹ the idea of “symbol” refers to a ‘sensible entity that directs the understanding from the physical towards the supra-physical levels of reality’². This understanding has been treated variously to different levels of intricacy throughout the writings of the *sophia perennis*.³ The current paper attempts nothing more than the organization and reiteration of these various elucidations within the context of a defined whole.

¹ The use of the term “Tradition” follows Dr. Adrain Snodgrass (*Architecture, Time and Eternity Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings vol. 1*, New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990): ‘The term “Tradition”, from latin *tradare*, “to give over”, here designates a transmission from one generation to another of doctrines concerning a direct, intuitive, knowledge, free from the accidents and limitations of particularities. Tradition in this sense is deemed to trace back in an unbroken “chain” (*shelsheth* in Hebrew, *silsilah* in Arabic, and *paramparam* in Sanskrit) to a revealed source’ (p.1, n.1).

² Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, p.2.

³ The *sophia perennis* refers to the teachings of the Traditions. In a more limited sense this also refers to the writings of the so called “traditionalists”, preeminently represented by René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. On “traditionalism” see K. Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000.

The symbol is the immanent expression of the Divine. Through participation in both the sensible and the metaphysical orders of ontological Existence the symbol acts as the vehicle by which the human may be lead back to the Divine. The symbol operates through the relationship of the intelligence and the Intellect.⁴ The unfolding or unveiling of Reality through a progression of symbolic initiations acts like so many rungs on a ladder leading “upwards” to the Divine. In this way the symbol is anagogic: from the Greek *anago* (“to lead up to”), as in leading the understanding up to a metaphysical meaning.⁵

Metaphysic is that which resides beyond the physical. It is the archetypal⁶ informant and referent of physical existence. Whitall Perry remarks,

Metaphysic presents as a first principle the oneness, unity, or non-duality of Being, and this principle has as its direct corollary the relativity of all states of existence apart from Pure Being. Relativity means interdependence, and this implies a casual sequence linking together the indefinity of created states. Symbolism is the language which renders intelligible, often with geometric formality and precision, this causal sequence.⁷

Between the metaphysical and the physical realms there is the same difference as between the “intelligible” and the “sensible” worlds of the Platonic doctrine of Forms.⁸ Adrian Snodgrass observes the Forms as,

...universal, absolute, separate, simple, eternal, immutable, intelligible, independent of the discursive mind and of the sensible phenomena which are their copies. [They] do not change; they are, therefore, outside time: they are eternal. Time is coeval with the cosmos; the coming into existence of the ordered world and the coming into being of time are simultaneous; but the Forms, being eternal, are prior to the manifestation of the world and antecedent to time.⁹

⁴ ‘The Intellect as seeker penetrates beyond discursive thinking. It goes looking about, seeking, casting its net here and there, acquiring and losing. But above this intellect the seeker is Intellect, which does not seek but rests in the unconditioned isness of its own divine Light’ (Meister Eckhart, cited in S. Davies, *Uncreated Light* The Traditional Doctrine of the Intellect in Dante and Blake, Bendigo: Dept. of Arts La Trobe Uni, 1997, p.13).

⁵ See A. Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, New York: South East Asia Program, 1985, p.3.

⁶ The term “archetype” refers to The Archetype: Principial Being. This point is noted to avoid confusion of this term with the lesser “archetypes” of Jungian psychological theory.

⁷ W. N. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.302.

⁸ See Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, Ch.2, pp.8-9.

⁹ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, p.11.

A distinction needs to be made between metaphysics, which has as its point of departure the state of certitude, and the philosophical proposition, which, according to a peculiar modern adaptation of the term philosophy, has as its point of departure the state of doubt. Frithjof Schuon remarks,

What essentially distinguishes the metaphysical from the philosophical proposition is that the former is symbolical and descriptive, in the sense that it makes use of symbols to describe or translate knowledge possessing a greater degree of certainty than any knowledge of a sensible order, whereas philosophy ...is never anything more than what it expresses. When philosophy uses reason to resolve a doubt, this proves precisely that its starting point is a doubt that it is striving to overcome, whereas we have seen that the starting point of a metaphysical formulation is always something essentially intellectually evident or certain, which is communicated, to those able to receive it by symbolical or dialectical means designed to awaken in them the latent knowledge that they bear unconsciously and, it may even be said, eternally within them.¹⁰

The symbol partakes of both the Transcendent and the Immanent, both the Divine Unity and the diversity of Its realized or actualized expression.¹¹ This participation in both levels of Existence allows the symbol to fulfill its function as the intermediary—the mode of communication—between the Divine and the human. As Schuon reminds us, ‘The language of the sacred Scriptures [the language of symbolism] is divine, but at the same time it is necessarily the language of men; it is made for men and could be divine only in an indirect manner.’¹² At the same time it can not be stressed enough that the symbol is not arbitrary. Seyyed Nasr: ‘The symbol is not based on man-made conventions, it is an aspect of the ontological reality of things and as such is independent of man’s perception of it.’¹³ Regarding this error of arbitrariness, Schuon writes,

The symbolic language of the great traditions of mankind may indeed seem arduous and baffling to some minds, but it is nevertheless perfectly intelligible in the light of the orthodox commentaries; symbolism—this point must be stressed—is a real and rigorous science, and nothing can be more naïve than to suppose that its apparent naïvety springs from an immature and “prelogical” mentality. This science, which can properly be described as “sacred,” quite plainly does not have to adjust itself to the modern experimental approach; the realm of revelation, of symbolism, of pure and direct intellection, stands in fact above both the physical and psychological realms, and consequently it lies beyond the scope of so-called scientific methods.¹⁴

¹⁰ F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, p.xxix-xxx.

¹¹ ‘The Forms are Unity in diversity and diversity in Unity’ (Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.5.6).

¹² F. Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1990, p.26.

¹³ S. H. Nasr., *Sufi Essays*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1972, p.88.

¹⁴ F. Schuon, ‘No Activity without Truth’: J. Needleman (ed), *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore:

The symbol is infused with the radiance of the divine Light.¹⁵ St. Bonaventura: ‘The whole world is but a glass, full of lights representing the divine wisdom.’¹⁶ This shines both through and in the symbol. As Mircea Eliade says,

Symbolism adds a new value to an object or to an action without however disturbing their own proper and immediate values. In applying itself to an object or an action, symbolism renders it “open”. Symbolic thought makes the immediate reality “shine,” but without diminishing it: in its own perspective the Universe is not closed, no object is isolated in its own existentialness; everything holds together in a closed system of correspondences and assimilations.¹⁷

In the words of Coleridge, a symbol is characterized above all by ‘the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity of which it is representative.’¹⁸



The Adequacy of Symbols

The referent of the symbol is the metaphysical Form, ‘not to be known by the senses or the cognitive mind, but only by the immediate and intuitive knowledge, a non-differentiated state of awareness in which the knower, the known and the act of knowing are inseparably fused and non-distinct.’¹⁹ The symbol participates in its referent and likewise facilitates participation with the Form.²⁰ Snodgrass remarks that

Penguin, 1974, p.29.

¹⁵ The image of light expresses the illumination of Being from the darkness of Chaos, where Being is identical with the Intellect ‘God in Himself is the Light of all creaturely knowledge’ (Meister Eckhart, quoted by Davies, *Uncreated Light*, 1997; see further *ibid*, Ch.1).

¹⁶ *In Hexaem.*, II. 27, per Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.309.

¹⁷ M. Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, New York: Continuum, 1992, p.6.

¹⁸ As quoted by Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, p.44, following Roszak, *Where the Waste Land Ends*, 1972.

¹⁹ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, p.2. In the *Bṛhadâraṇyaka Upaniṣad* this knowledge is so utterly without objectification as to imply that it is not known: ‘Although he does not know, nevertheless he knows; he does not know but there is no loss on the knower’s part, since he is indestructible; it is just that there is no second thing other than and distinct from himself that he might know’ (*Bṛhadâraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.3.30). For Erigena this is the “ignorance” that “surpasses all knowledge”: ‘God does not know what He himself is, because He is not any what; this ignorance surpasses all knowledge...’ (Erigena, cited in Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, 1990, p.17, n.48).

²⁰ Lény-Bruhl says of symbols, ‘very often it is not their purpose to “represent” their prototype to the

this participation ‘effects a re-cognition of the referent which, when this is metaphysical rather than physical, is a re-collection or re-remembering in the Platonic sense of *anamnesia*.’²¹ “Re-remembering” is a process of knowing leading to absolute knowledge; “a process of becoming”²²; of “awakening”, following Buddhist terminology; or again, a process of “identification”.²³ Nevertheless this is a *process*, a point that recalls the distinction between “becoming” and “Being”. As Paul Tillich notes, ‘participation is not identity; they [symbols] are not themselves *the Holy*.’²⁴

Insomuch as the symbol participates in the human domain it is limited as such. Nevertheless, as Titus Burckhardt observes, ‘the limitation inherent in the symbol cannot lower Him Who is symbolized: on the contrary, it is precisely in virtue of His perfection—or His infinity—that He is reflected at every possible level of existence by “signs” that are always unique.’²⁵

The symbol differs from a “sign” *per se* in that the symbol partakes of its referent, whereas, in contrast, for a sign the signifier and the signified are necessarily and by definition distinct. This is due to the fact that they are at the same level of reality, ‘the domain of individual experience of particulars’.²⁶ Accordingly, Snodgrass observes, ‘By this definition the “symbols” of semiology, psycho-analysis, symbolist art, structural anthropology and current post-modernist theories of architecture are

eye, but to facilitate a participation’ (Bruhl, *L'Expérience mystique*, pp.174 & 180 cit. A. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers vol.2 'Metaphysics'* (ed.) Roger Lipsey, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p296).

²¹ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, 1990, p.45. On the notion of “re-remembering” Whitall Perry remarks, ‘Just as “in the beginning”, or *in divinis*, there had to be a “God-slaying” to “dismember” and thus liberate the possibilities dormant in the Divine Substance if there were to be any world or worlds, so now there has to be a slaying of the Outer Man by means of a Sacrifice (“making sacred”) that can *re-member*—in the sense of Platonic “recollection” (cp. St. Luke xxii.19; ‘do this in remembrance of Me’)—and restore him to his deiform Prototype’ (‘The Revival of Interest in Tradition’, in R. Fernando (ed.), *The Unanimous Tradition 'Essays on the essential unity of all religions'*, Colombo: The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991, pp.13-4).

²² See Smith, ‘Objectivity and the Humane Sciences’ in Oxtoby (ed.), *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

²³ Interpretation is an active assimilation concurrent with the realization of the symbol. As Eliade says, ‘creative hermeneutics *changes* man; it is more than mere instruction, it is a spiritual technique susceptible of modifying the quality of existence itself’ (M. Eliade, *The Quest History and Meaning in Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969, p.62).

²⁴ Tillich, ‘Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God’ (1955) in Rowe & Wainwright (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, New York, 1973, p.483.

²⁵ T. Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, Wellingborough: The Aquarian Press, 1976, p.46.

²⁶ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, p.45.

“signs”, since their referents are knowable by the senses or conceivable by the mind’.²⁷

The warrant of a symbol’s adequacy is ‘its efficiency in producing in a qualified and receptive person an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, that is to say a condition of true, intellectual knowledge’.²⁸ As Snodgrass says,

In one sense all things that exist—images, words, language, physical and mental phenomena—are symbols of the supra-empirical levels of reality. Every existent thing is the “reflection” of an archetypal Form. ... In a more specific and restricted sense, however, there is also a deliberate and calculated symbolism, one that crystallizes the doctrinal teachings of a tradition in the form of a prescribed figurative or spatial representation. From this arises the convention of confining the term “symbol” to objects or images which pertain directly to doctrinal formulations, and in which the symbolic content is clearly and explicitly manifest. ... These latter symbols, possessed of greater transparency than the usual run of sensible entities, are characterized by “adequacy” [“ad-equate”, a “making equal to”], by an efficacy in producing in a qualified and receptive person an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, which is to say a condition of true, intellectual knowledge. They are capable of provoking a recollection of a supra-mundane paradigm and, by that fact, are imbued with the sacred.²⁹

The adequate or sacred symbol is deemed to have been “given”; it is revealed to the tradition from a non-human source.³⁰ Note that ‘adequation is not equality’,³¹ which is to recall that ‘participation is not identity’. The adequate symbol is ‘true, analogical, accurate, canonical, hieratic, anagogic and arche-typal.’³² The hierarchy of adequacy, so to speak, does not necessarily imply that any one symbol is more “perfect” than another, for each will be perfect in respect to its own function. Paul Tillich observes that, ‘Every symbol has a special function which is just *it* and cannot be replaced by more or less adequate symbols.’³³ Lama Govinda remarks, ‘it is the nature of a symbol to be as manifold as the life from which it grew, and yet to retain its character, its organic unity within the diversity of its aspects.’³⁴ Again this highlights that, unlike signs, symbols are not arbitrary.

²⁷ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, p.45; also *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.3.

²⁸ Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, 1990, pp.49.

²⁹ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, pp.2-3.

³⁰ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.3.

³¹ See Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, pp.48.

³² Snodgrass, *Architecture, Time and Eternity* vol.1, 1990, pp.49, following Livingstone, *The Traditional Theory of Literature*, 1962.

³³ Tillich, *Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God* (1955), 1973, p.482.

³⁴ Lama A. Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1969, p.51.

However, this does not then mean that the form of a symbol will precede the “need” for it. René Guénon remarks: ‘symbolism seems to us to be quite specially adapted to the needs of human nature, which is not exclusively intellectual but which needs a sensory basis from which to rise to higher levels.’³⁵ The symbol must only be considered as a “support”. Thus the Sufi teaching: ‘When the door has been opened throw away the key.’ This raises the question of the “necessity” of the symbol as a means back to the Divine. On this point Guénon says, ‘as such and in an absolute way, no outward form is necessary; all are equally contingent and accidental in relation to that which they express or represent.’³⁶



The Symbolic Web

The symbol is multivalent, which is to say that it contains and expresses multiple meanings simultaneously. These meanings are derived from the ultimate “diversity in Unity” of the metaphysical referent of the symbol. They are intrinsic and integral, and not contrived by human convention. As Guénon observes, ‘every real symbol bears its multiple meanings within itself, and is so from its very origin; for it is not constituted as such in virtue of human convention but in virtue of the law of correspondence which links all the worlds together.’³⁷ He continues to defend this multiplicity of meaning against those who deny its integrity: ‘If some see these meanings while others do not, or see them only partially, they are none the less really there: it is the “intellectual horizon” of each person that makes all the difference. Symbolism is an exact science and not a daydream in which individual fantasies can have a free run.’³⁸

The multivalent nature of the symbol precludes a reductionist methodology.³⁹ As Eliade remarks, ‘If we retain only one of its significations, in declaring it the only “fundamental” or “first” or “original” signification, we risk not grasping the true

³⁵ R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.13.

³⁶ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.14.

³⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.29.

³⁸ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.29.

³⁹ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.8.

message of the symbol.’⁴⁰ Snodgrass stresses this point: ‘An exegesis that does justice to the fullness of the symbol in both its horizontal and vertical dimensions will leave its meaning “open” and not confine it within the limiting configuration of a closed hypothesis’. Again, Eliade: ‘We compare or contrast two expressions of a symbol not in order to reduce them to a single, pre-existing expression, but in order to discover the process whereby a structure is likely to assume enriched meanings.’⁴¹

This enrichment of meanings, which is “inward looking” and unifying, should not be confused with an empirical or quantitative awareness of a multiple of corresponding symbols, which, by itself, is “outward looking” and indefinite. The meaning of any symbol is integral with that symbol; the corresponding symbols act as “reinforcements”. Each analogous symbol is just that, which is to say that they are analogous but not identical for this would mean that they were in fact not separate but the same symbol. At the same time the “network of homologous symbols”, as Snodgrass calls it, does itself reveal the essential principle of Unity in diversity.⁴² The enrichment of a symbol through its correspondences is achieved by both reinforcement and by the revealing of the particular symbol in the unified network of homologies. Each of these lead back to an understanding of the Principle, of which they are respectively reflections on their particular levels.

The symbol is multivalent both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal valence of a symbol expresses its homologies on the plane of Being of which that symbol exists.⁴³ Snodgrass remarks,

The symbol ... has a plurality of meanings on the horizontal level. Every symbol forms part of a schema of interlocking referents; it forms part of a *pattern* of concordant interrelationships. It does not stand in isolation but interconnects with other symbols, which fit together to form a mutually reinforcing web of meaning. A deeper understanding of a symbol is gained by studying the grid or net formed by its symbolic homologues. The pattern of meaning that emerges from the juxtaposition of cognate symbols does not exhaust the significance of the symbol, which, as we have seen, is ultimately beyond words, but it

⁴⁰ Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, 1992, p.5

⁴¹ M. Eliade, ‘Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism’, from M. Eliade & J. M. Kitagawa, *The History of Religion*, 1959, pp.86-107.

⁴² Snodgrass notes this network as symbolized, in the Hindu tradition, by *Inda’s Net* (*Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.6); cf. the net Hephaestus uses to entrap Aphrodite and Ares, the symbol of the spiders web, and the symbolism of weaving; see also, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, Intro.2.; Ch.12.4.c & d.; R. Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, London: Luzac & Co. Ltd, 1975, Ch.XIV.

⁴³ On the “geometry” of Being see Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, Chs.XI & XII.

reinforces its intimations, indicating a logical cohesion and integrity which in itself is an intimation of the all-persuasiveness of Principle.⁴⁴

The horizontal valence of the symbol is indefinitely extended in accord with the indefinitude of the horizontal planes of Being.⁴⁵

The vertical homologies guide the intellect “upwards” along the vertical pole of Being. It is this aspect of the symbol which can truly be called anagogical. The vertical valence proceeds “into” the metaphysical realm, which is to say that it originates beyond the finite or definable level of cosmo-ontological Existence. Hence, the vertical valence of the symbol is infinite.⁴⁶

On the horizontal plane the symbol is expressed through various modes. ‘The net of symbolic cognates’ writes Snodgrass, ‘is formed not only by visual and spatial symbols, but also by symbolic constructs expressed in other modes: *myth*, which is symbol expressed in a verbal or narrative form; *ritual*, which expresses the symbolic concepts by gestures and words; and *doctrine*, which expresses them conceptually.’⁴⁷ These modes are not exclusive. Ritual and doctrine may be found in myth, doctrine may be expressed through ritual, and the eternal Myth—the story of the Divine and the human—is “spoken” through participation in ritual and doctrine. Again, each mode is expressed through various forms. For example, the symbolic dialogue of mythology may be expressed both orally and visually. As Snodgrass observes, ‘what the architectural symbol is spatially the myth is verbally.’⁴⁸



The Universality of Symbols

The symbol’s essential derivation from the Principle means that expressions will appear universally. This universality may be more easily recognised the greater the

⁴⁴ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.5.

⁴⁵ See Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, p.58, as discussing a horizontal plane of Existence.

⁴⁶ See Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.8.

⁴⁷ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.6. Titus Burekhardt remarks, ‘To carry out a rite is not only to enact a symbol but also to participate, even if only virtually, in a certain mode of being, a mode which has an extra-human and universal extension’ (*An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, 1976, p.99). Again, Martin Lings says, ‘The symbolism of a rite is its very essence, without which it would lose its ritual quality.’ (*A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 1971, p.177).

⁴⁸ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.6.

adequacy of the symbol. For example, the symbolism of the “centre”, the “cross” and the “circle”, are found in nearly every tradition throughout the history of humankind. Each of these symbols may be regarded as pre-eminent in terms of adequacy. Snodgrass explains this universality, as evidenced through comparative juxtaposition of the Traditions:

The network of homologous symbols, myths, rituals and doctrines that can be delineated by a process of comparative juxtaposition is capable of indefinite extension. Since all symbols within a tradition are so many variant reflections of one and the same Principle, they are all interconnected by way of this common reference, so that the analysis of the pattern of homologies generated from a given symbol as datum, if taken far enough, will eventually extend out to include the symbolic forms of *all* traditions.⁴⁹

The universality of symbols is often met with the scholarly criticism of eclecticism. In answer to this accusation Guénon stresses the fundamental distinction between “synthesis” and “syncretism”.

Syncretism consists in assembling from the outside a number of more or less incongruous elements which, when regarded, can never be truly unified; in short, it is a kind of eclecticism, with all the fragmentariness and incoherence that this always implies. Syncretism, then, is something purely outward and superficial; the elements taken from every quarter and put together in this way can never amount to anything more than borrowings that are incapable of being effectively integrated into a doctrine worthy of the name.

Synthesis, on the other hand, is carried out essentially from within; by this we mean that it properly consists in envisaging things in the unity of their principle, in seeing how they are derived from and dependent on that principle, and thus uniting them, or rather becoming aware of their real unity, by virtue of a wholly inward bond, inherent in what is most profound in their nature.⁵⁰

This is to realize that, ‘there are symbols which are common to the most diverse and widely separated traditional forms, not as a result of “borrowings”, which in many

⁴⁹ Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, 1985, p.7.

⁵⁰ Guénon, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.x. ‘The concordances between all traditional forms may be said to represent genuine “synonymies”; that is how we regard them, and just as the explanation of certain things may be easier in one language than in another, so one of these forms may be better fitted than others for expounding certain truths and rendering them easier to understand. Hence in each case it is perfectly legitimate to make use of the form which seems the most suitable for the purpose in hand; there is no objection to passing from one form to another, provided one is really aware of their equivalence, which can only be the case if one views them in the light of their common principle. In this way no syncretism will arise; indeed the latter can only be a product of a “profane” outlook which is incompatible with the very idea of the “sacred science” to which these studies exclusively refer’ (ibid. pp.xi).

cases would be quite impossible, but because in reality they pertain to the Primordial Tradition from which these forms have issued either directly or indirectly.’⁵¹



The Cosmic Theophany

A point need be made concerning what Guénon deems ‘the error of modern “naturalistic” interpretations’ of symbolism, which, ‘purely and simply reverse the hierarchy of relationships between the different orders of reality’. Guénon writes:

Natural phenomena in general, and especially astronomical phenomena, are never looked upon by the traditional doctrines otherwise than as a simple means of expression, whereby they symbolize certain truths of a higher order; and if they do in fact symbolize such truths, it is because their laws are fundamentally nothing but the expression of these very truths, in a particular domain, a sort of translation of the corresponding principles, naturally adapted to the special conditions of the corporeal and human state. It can therefore be seen how great is the error of those who imagine they have discovered “naturalism” in these doctrines, or who believe that the doctrines in question are only intended to describe and explain phenomena just as a “profane” science might do, though in a different form; this is really to reverse the true relationship, by taking the symbol itself for what it represents, the sign for the thing or the idea signified.⁵²

Thus, the purpose of symbols and myths has never been—as often wrongly alleged—to represent the movement of the heavenly bodies, the truth being that they often do contain figures inspired by that movement and intended to express, analogically, something very different, because the laws of that movement are a physical translation of the metaphysical principles on which they depend. ... This holds good for historical facts no less than for anything else: they likewise conform to the law of correspondence just mentioned, and thereby, in their own mode, translate higher realities, of which they are, so to speak, a human expression.⁵³

In the Traditional view, virgin Nature is recognised as a symbol of the supernatural. It might be added that, “analogy” in the Thomistic sense of the word, which allows one to ascend 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.’⁵⁴

⁵¹ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.27.

⁵² R. Guénon, *Man and his becoming According To The Vedānta*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1981, p.154.

⁵³ Guénon, *Symbolism of the Cross*, 1975, pp.xii-xiii.

⁵⁴ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, p.16, n.5.

Nature, in its aspect as the cosmic environment, expresses a symbolic constitution that is both essential and effective: essential, as the Cosmos is none other than ‘one vast complex *Mythos*, or symbolic representation’;⁵⁵ and effective, as symbolism provides the structure and key for the return of the human to the Divine. This is to recognize Cosmic Existence as theophany, where this term, as Seyyed Nasr notes, has the literal meaning of “to show God” and ‘does not mean the incarnation of God in things but the reflection of the Divinity in the mirror of created forms.’⁵⁶ Nasr continues, ‘The cosmos is not only the theatre wherein are reflected the Divine Names and Qualities. It is also a crypt through which man must journey to reach the Reality beyond cosmic manifestation.’⁵⁷

To view the Cosmos as symbol is not to deny it its contingent reality nor the structure of its *physis*.⁵⁸ ‘To behold the cosmos as theophany’ as Nasr says, ‘is not to deny either the laws or the chain of cause and effect which pervade the cosmos but to view the cosmos and the forms it displays with such diversity and regularity as reflections of Divine Qualities and ontological categories rather than a veil which would hide the splendor of the face of the Beloved.’⁵⁹

Moreover, to view the events of sacred Scripture as symbols is not to deny them a phenomenal reality. ‘Sacred facts’ as Schuon remarks, ‘cannot fail to corroborate symbolism since symbolism is in the very nature of things: holy persons have risen visibly to the sky; blasphemers have been swallowed up by the earth. Symbolism is a concrete reality founded on real analogies.’⁶⁰



⁵⁵ Coleridge, *Essay XI*.

⁵⁶ S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981, p.215, n.6

⁵⁷ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 1981, p.200. ‘Having journeyed through and beyond the cosmos, man, who is then “twice born” and a “dead man walking” in the sense of being spiritually resurrected here and now, is able finally to contemplate the cosmos and its forms as theophany. He is able to see the forms of nature *in divinis* and to experience the Ultimate Reality not as transcendent and beyond but as here and now. It is here that the cosmos unveils its beauty ceasing to be only externalized fact or phenomenon but becoming immediate symbol, the reflection of the noumenon, the reflection which is not separated but essentially none other than the reality reflected’ (ibid. p.200).

⁵⁸ As Guénon observes, ‘The essential idea of the Latin word *natura*, just as of its Greek equivalent *physis*, is of ‘becoming’. Manifested nature is ‘what comes into existence’; the principles involved are ‘what brings into existence’ (*The Great Triad*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994, p.133, n.14).

⁵⁹ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 1981, p.197.

⁶⁰ F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.47.

The Laws of Analogy

The symbol is reflective of its referent, in accord with it being “made in the image of God”. This gives rise to what Guénon calls the “law of inverse analogy”: ‘Whatever is at the lowest level corresponds, by inverse analogy, to what is at the highest level’.⁶¹ Schuon expands upon this when he notes the two-fold nature of analogy:

If between one level of reality and another there is a parallel analogy in respect of positive content, there is on the other hand an inverse analogy in respect of relationship: for example, there is a parallel analogy between earthly and heavenly beauty, but there is an inverse analogy as regards their respective situations, in the sense that earthly beauty is “outward” and divine Beauty “inward”; or again, to illustrate this law by symbols: according to certain Sufic teachings, earthly trees are reflections of heavenly trees, and earthly women are reflections of heavenly women (parallel analogy); but heavenly trees have their roots above and heavenly women are naked (inverse analogy, what is “below” becoming “above”, and what is “inward” becoming “outward”).⁶²

This idea of inverse analogy must be seen in light of the relationship of the subject and its objectification so that it is recognised that the relationship between the divine Subject and its objectification, in the form of symbol, is not the same as that between analogous symbols. As Schuon remarks,

...the universal and fundamental inversion as between Subject and objectification is never done away with as a result of the inversions comprised within the objectification itself, for these are never produced under the same relationship and never under any relationship capable of nullifying that first inversion. Inversion *within* an inversion is therefore never inversion *of* the inversion, never, that is to say, a re-establishment of the “normal” relationship.⁶³

The inverse nature of symbol gives rise to a certain duplicity according to the perspective of the viewer. Thus a symbol can be both beneficent and maleficent; according to the ability of the viewer to perceive and engage the analogical aspect of

⁶¹ R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972, p.186, see Ch.XXV; also *Fundamental Symbols*, 1995, Chs.52 & 53; *The Great Triad*, 1994, Ch.7. This law follows the oft quoted Hermetic aphorism, “As Above So Below”, taken from Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: ‘It is true without lie, certain and most veritable, that what is below is like what is above and that what is above is like what is below, to perpetrate the miracles of one thing.’

⁶² F. Schuon, *Treasures of Buddhism*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1993, p.84, n.2; *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.106, n.1; *Language of the Self*, Indiana: World Wisdom Books, 1999, pp.35-6, where he refers to “direct” and “inverse” analogy.

⁶³ Schuon, *Language of the Self*, 1999, pp.24-5.

the symbol. Guénon recognizes this duplicity with respect to the act of manifestation itself. He writes,

On the one hand if this manifestation is simply taken by itself, without relating it to a much greater whole, the entire process from its beginning to its end is clearly a progressive “descent” or “degradation”, and this is what may be called its “maleficent” aspect; but, on the other hand, the same manifestation, when put back into the whole of which it is a part, produces results that have a truly “positive” result in universal existence; and its development must be carried right to the end, so as to include a development of the inferior possibilities of the “dark age”, in order that the “integration” of those results may become possible and may become the immediate principle of another cycle of manifestation; this is what constitutes its “beneficent” aspect.⁶⁴

In this context symbol is said to be “revealing” in nature, where this term carries the dual meaning of both to “remove the veil” and to “re-veil”.⁶⁵



Summary

To summarize: The symbol is the vehicle directing the understanding from the physical towards the supra-physical levels of reality; from the human to the Divine. The symbol has as its referent the realm of metaphysical Forms. The symbol participates in its referent. The symbol is multivalent having a multiplicity of meanings that do not diminish but instead enrich each other. The horizontal valence of the symbol is indefinite; the vertical valence is infinite. The symbol interconnects with its homologues creating a mutually reinforcing web of meaning. The symbol operates analogically and anagogically in both horizontal and vertical valences. The symbol operates according to the laws of analogy: “parallel” analogy, in respect of content; and “inverse” analogy, in respect of relationship. Symbolism operates through complementary modes: myth, ritual and doctrine. In respect to expression in diversity the symbol may not be reduced to a single fundamental meaning. The symbol is open. In respect to its metaphysical archetype the symbol expresses Principial Unity. The symbol is revealed and adequate. It is exact, having none of the arbitrariness of a sign. The symbol is essential and effective. It is nonetheless contingent on its need and in respect to the Absolute. The symbol effects remembrance. It is the language that connects the Divine and the human.

⁶⁴ Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, 1972, p.334.

⁶⁵ R. Guénon, *The Lord of the World*, Yorkshire: Coombe Springs Press, 1983, p.19, n.5.