

Symbols

by

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Symbols¹ and signs, whether verbal, musical, dramatic or plastic, are means of communication. The references of symbols are to ideas and those of signs to things. One and the same term may be symbol or sign according to its context: the cross, for example, is a symbol when it represents the structure of the universe, but a sign when it stands for crossroads. Symbols and signs may be either natural (true, by innate propriety) or conventional (arbitrary and accidental), traditional or private. With the language of signs, employed indicatively in profane language and in realistic and abstracted art, we shall have no further concern in the present connection. By “abstracted art” we mean such modern art as willfully avoids recognizable representation, as distinguished from “principlial art”, the naturally symbolic language of tradition.

The language of traditional art—scripture, epic, folklore, ritual, and all the related crafts—is symbolic; and being a language of natural symbols, neither of private invention nor established by conciliar agreement or mere custom, is a universal language. The symbol is the material embodiment, in sound, shape, color or gesture as the case may be, of the imitable form of an idea to be communicated, which imitable form is the formal cause of the work of art itself. It is for the sake of the idea, and not for its own sake, that the symbol exists: an actual form must be either symbolic—of its reference—or merely an unintelligible shape to be liked or disliked according to taste. The greater part of modern aesthetics assumes (as the words “aesthetic” and “empathy” imply) that art consists or should consist entirely of such unintelligible shapes, and that the appreciation of art consists or should consist in appropriate emotional reactions. It is further assumed that whatever is of permanent value in traditional works of art is of the same kind, and altogether independent of their iconography and meaning. We have, indeed, a right to say that we *choose* to consider only the aesthetic surfaces of the ancient, oriental, or popular arts; but if we do this, we must not at the same time deceive ourselves so as to suppose that the history of art, meaning by “history” an explanation in terms of the four causes, can be known or written from any such a limited point of view. In order to understand composition, for example, i.e. the

¹ A derivative of *sumballo* (Greek) especially in the senses “to correlate”, “to treat things different as though they were similar”, and (passive) “to correspond”, or “tally”.

sequence of a dance or the arrangement of masses in a cathedral or icon, we must understand the *logical* relation of the parts: just as in order to understand a sentence, it is not enough to admire the mellifluous sounds, but necessary to be acquainted with the meanings of separate words and the logic of their combinations. The mere “lover of art” is not much better than a magpie, which also decorates its nest with whatever most pleases its fancy, and is contented with a purely “aesthetic” experience. So far from this, it must be recognized that although in modern works of art there may be nothing, or nothing more than the artist’s private person, behind the aesthetic surfaces, the theory in accordance with which works of traditional art were produced and enjoyed takes it for granted that the appeal to beauty is not merely to the senses, but through the senses to the intellect: here “Beauty has to do with cognition”; and what is to be known and understood is an “immaterial idea” (Hermes), a “picture that is not in the colors” (*Lankāvatāra Sūtra*), “the doctrine that conceals itself behind the veil of the strange verses” (Dante), “the archetype of the image, and not the image itself” (St. Basil). “It is by their ideas that we judge of what things ought to be like” (St. Augustine).

It is evident that symbols and concepts—works of art are things *conceived*, as St. Thomas says, *per verbum in intellectu*—can serve no purpose for those who have not yet, in the Platonic sense, “forgotten”. Neither do Zeus nor the stars, as Plotinus says, remember or even learn; “memory is for those that have forgotten”, that is to say, for us, whose “life is a sleep and a forgetting”. The need of symbols, and of symbolic rites, arises only when man is expelled from the Garden of Eden; as means by which a man can be reminded at later stages of his descent from the intellectual and contemplative to the physical and practical levels of reference. We assuredly have “forgotten” far more than those who first had need of symbols, and far more than they need to infer the immortal by its mortal analogies; and nothing could be greater proof of this than our own claims to be superior to all ritual operations, and to be able to approach the truth directly. It was as signposts of the Way, or as a trace of the Hidden Light, pursued by hunters of a super-sensual quarry, that the motifs of traditional art, which have become *our* “ornaments”, were originally employed. In these abstract forms, the farther one traces them backward, or finds them still extant in popular “superstition”, agricultural rites, and the motifs of folk-art, the more one recognizes in them a polar balance of perceptible shape and imperceptible information; but, as Andrae says (*Die ionische Säule*, Schlusswort), they have been more and more voided of content on their way down to us, more and more denatured with the progress of “civilization”, so as to become what we call “art forms”, as if it had been an aesthetic need, like that of our magpie, that had brought them into being. When meaning and purpose have been forgotten, or are remembered only by initiates, the symbol retains only those decorative values that *we* associate with “art”. More than this, we deny that the art form can ever have had any other than a decorative quality; and before long we begin to take it for granted that the art form must have originated in an “observation of nature”, to criticize it accordingly (“That was before they knew anything about anatomy”, or “understood perspective”) in terms of progress, and to supply its deficiencies, as did the Hellenistic Greeks with the lotus palmette when they made an elegant

acanthus of it, or the Renaissance when it imposed an ideal of “truth to nature” upon an older art of formal typology. We interpret myth and epic from the same point of view, seeing in the miracles and the *Deus ex machina* only a more or less awkward attempt on the part of the poet to enhance the presentation of the facts; we ask for “history”, and endeavor to extract an historical nucleus by the apparently simple and really naive process of eliminating all marvels, never realizing that the myth is a whole, of which the wonders are as much an integral part as are the supposed facts; overlooking that all these marvels have a strict significance altogether independent of their possibility or impossibility as historical events.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

If a man is initiated by a human guru, he will not achieve anything if he regards his guru as a mere man. The guru should be regarded as the direct manifestation of God. Only then can the disciple have faith in the mantra given by the guru. Once a man has faith he achieves all. The sudra Ekalavya learnt archery in the forest before a clay image of Drona. He worshipped the image as the living Drona; that by itself enabled him to attain mastery in archery.

Sri Ramakrishna