

## The Language of Symbols

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[Page 1] IN attempting to write on symbolism, I speedily discovered that in selecting one of the most beautiful and one of the most suggestive departments of Theosophical research, I had also selected one of the most difficult, one of the most extensive, and one of the most elusive. For while the language of symbols is a language which we all of us employ in our daily life, however unconsciously, it is also that language which has been pre-eminently utilised for purposes of concealment. And yet the language which has been used for concealing occult truths has also been used for preserving them — preserving them for the use of those who can raise the veil in which they have been shrouded, who can learn the language in which they have been recorded, and who can take unto themselves the knowledge which they have won.

It would indeed be hard to overestimate the importance of symbolism and its study. For a symbol to be a symbol it must faithfully represent that which it is intended to portray — it must be a real picture with a very real message for him who hath eyes to see what it would teach. And our occult literature is rich in symbolism, the records of antiquity are rich in symbolism. We find it around us on every side. It speaks to us from out the forgotten ages of India, from its temples, its mountain sides, its rock-hewn caverns. From Egypt how rich a harvest we reap, from wherever men have reached out after the unknown, from wherever men have felt and learned the secrets of themselves and of the Universe, which they dared not, or could not, express in words. Nor is symbolism the language of the occult in the far past alone. Occultism has not died, nor has it slumbered at any time, nor in any country, since the great Masters of antiquity set athrill the wires which were meant to vibrate throughout the ages. The Masters of Wisdom have not at any time cherished the East to the exclusion of the West.

Occult knowledge is not the heritage of the East nor of the West, but of all humanity, and in this our research into the mystery of the ages and into the language in which it is recorded, we shall not labour in vain if we look also into the West, into this Europe in which we live, for it too has had its wise men, who were the servants of Masters, and they too have told the world-old story in the world-old language of symbols. The star which rises in the East passes also into the western heavens, nor does its beauty wane in the western sky. If we are unable to see its splendour, we may at most confess that the light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not. And thus the Occultism which is in the West has [Page 2] also its wealth of symbolism, which conceals from the unworthy and which teaches to the worthy those occult truths which were and which are and which will be evermore.

A study of symbols implies also a study of emblems, for the latter is a combination of the former. As Kenneth Mackenzie says in his *Royal Masonic Cyclopedia*,

"an emblem comprises a larger series of thoughts than a symbol, which may be said rather to illustrate some single, special idea. An emblem is a picture or sign representing principles, or a series of principles, recognisable by those who have received certain instructions".

The same authority goes on to say —

"All esoteric societies have made use of emblems and symbols, such as the Pythagorean Society, the Eleusinian, the Hermetic Brethren of Egypt, the Rosicrucians, and the Freemasons. Many of these emblems it is not proper to divulge to the general eye, and a very minute difference may make the emblem or symbol differ widely in its meaning. The magical sigillae, being founded on certain principles of numbers, partake of this character and although monstrous or ridiculous in the eyes of the uninstructed, convey a whole body of doctrine to those who have been trained to recognise them."

Now let us see if we can arrive, to any extent at all, at the logical basis which underlies a symbol. A symbol, then, as we have seen, is "a visible picture or signs representing an idea". But *why* should any visible sign represent an idea ? Ideas we know, and signs we know but why should there be any connection between the two other than an arbitrary connection, imposed for the convenience and by the necessities of men ? Let us then at once admit that very many forms which we call symbolic are purely arbitrary.

We see a certain form, and that form calls up certain ideas *because* we have mutually agreed that such forms shall represent such ideas. Such forms appear to me to be not *strictly* symbols at all. As a perfect illustration of the purely arbitrary or false symbol, let us take the forms used in any system of shorthand. Here we have a system which is in no way based upon any logical connection between the form and the idea. The system here is purely arbitrary, and not, as I conceive it, a true symbol at all. What this true connection is between form and idea which constitutes a pure symbol, we will presently try to ascertain. Let me now seek for an illustration of a symbol which, having a pure origin, has, in the minds of men, become dissociated from its true meaning. We cannot select a better illustration than that of the Cross. Every student of Theosophy knows the occult meaning of this symbol. To such an one, this particular form calls up some, at any rate, of the ideas which properly belong to it, but this is not so universally at the present, still less so has it been in the immediate past. To the Crusader, it became the symbol of hatred of those [Page 3] who were unworthily in possession of the holiest spot on earth; to the Saracens it was the symbol of the hordes of white invaders who swept over the countries of the East; to the Inquisitor it was the symbol of a jealous god who required at his hands the extermination of the heretic and the unbeliever; to the Jew it was the sign of an impiously claimed Messiah-ship, and today, of what is it the symbol ? It is the sign of a body of creed and dogma which, its supporters tell us, is destined to subdue the world and to exalt the nations of the West, as the pioneers and the teachers of humanity. To so many ideas then, and to how many others, has this simple symbol been made to correspond. The soldiers of Constantine fought under its shadow as under the wing of the living God, it has roused whole nations to madness, before it millions of knees have pressed the ground, in its name the world has run red with blood, and by its power the soul of the saint has arisen even unto the footstool of God. If such is then the power of a symbol diverted, what must be the potency of the true symbol which is based upon the laws of being.

We have already seen that a symbol is the picture of an idea, and we have already asked ourselves, in

what way it is possible to represent an idea pictorially, and what we really mean by saying that any form can logically correspond with an idea, and whether there can be any such correspondence other than an arbitrary and a convenient one. The reply is that there may be such a correspondence, logical and scientific, in no way arbitrary, and very often in no way convenient.

We are doubtless all acquainted with the occult dogma of the unity of the Universe, which means that the infinity of differentiations which we see around us, are not independent differentiations, but are mutually dependent one upon another, that on their various planes, they are emanations one from another, the same force, proceeding from the source of all, moulding matter, through infinite combinations, into the plan of the divine ideal conception. There is no atom in the Universe which does not reflect the whole; there is no plane, or sub-plane, which has not been emanated from above, and which does not in turn emanate its correspondence, and from this arises the great occult teaching of the law of correspondence — this reflection by every part, of every part — this correspondence of everything below with something above. Thus we ourselves are pictures of the whole Universe, having that within us which corresponds to everything external to us. Man, septenary in his nature, corresponds to every other septenary in the Universe; every law which we learn of the visible Universe around us is the key and the explanation of some corresponding law in the invisible Universe; every law of the Universe unfolds a law of our own being.

A symbol is then the pictorial representation of an idea, that is to say it is the correspondence on the plane of form to an idea on the plane of [Page 4] ideas. It is an idea concreted into a form. There can exist no idea which has not its corresponding form, no idea which has not its corresponding colour, no idea which has not its corresponding sound. Every colour, every sound, every form, every idea represents all the others and implies all the others to him who is able to understand them truly, *because* sound and colour and form and idea are logically and, scientifically connected. Let me try and show that this is actually the case. We are probably all familiar with certain experiments which have recently been tried as to the optical effect of music on certain sensitives. It has been found that every note of music or every combination of notes produces on these sensitives the impression of a colour, and there are indeed very few who will not find that sounds do indeed produce a conception of colour. Here then, we find the plane of sound seeking out, as it were, its own correspondences on the plane of colour, and producing a conception of such colour. Now let us endeavour to find a still more comprehensive illustration.

Music produces mental ideas in all of us. Some music makes us sad, some makes us joyful, some is sensuous in its effects, and some is the reverse. Now, imagine that we have so arranged a drum-head, or other suitable surface, on which we have scattered fine sand, that it shall receive the vibrations from an orchestra or any musical instrument. We shall find that if we perform the experiment carefully, the sand assumes certain forms, grouping itself into shapes. A still more pronounced effect may be obtained by drawing a violin bow across the rim of the drum. Here then we have a distinct correspondence between form and sound. And now to go a step further, let us suppose that the sound which has produced these forms is of such a nature as to produce a mental idea, say an idea of solemnity, of melancholy, or of joyousness. Here then we have a mental idea corresponding to a form and a sound. And now in order to get the final correspondence let us suppose that the person in whom the mental idea is produced by the music, is one of those numerous sensitives to whom a colour is suggested by a sound. We then have a mental idea and its correspondence with a sound, a colour and a form; in other words, we have produced a true symbol of the mental idea in question, although of course a *sound* does

not enter into a pictorial representation.

Now, I think I have made apparent my own conception of the nature of a true and scientific symbol. The illustrations I have used are necessarily rough ones, but I think they accurately show that this correspondence between the various kingdoms of Nature does actually exist, and it requires no great penetration to perceive the extraordinary importance of symbolism, and the uses to which it may be put. I will refer again to that point later on. [Page 5]

In far away forgotten ages when the gods ruled over men, and spiritual insight had not been closed, the correspondences between ideas and forms were the natural and obvious methods to be followed, and here, I believe, were the origins of writing. If we turn to the *Sepher Yetzirah or the Kabalistic Book of Formation* we shall there find that each letter in the Hebrew alphabet corresponds to a mental conception, corresponding also to a number; it is the pictorial symbol of the metaphysical meaning and significance of that number, which is therefore allied to the mental conception which the letter represents. This same system may be applied to the Sanskrit alphabet, and possibly with a still greater accuracy, but I use the Hebrew as being more familiar. Every Alphabet has without doubt suffered to a greater or less extent from the universal departure from and forgetfulness of original types; but I have in my own mind no sort of doubt that originally every letter was a strictly accurate pictorial symbol of a simple idea. A word composed of single letters would then become an emblem, as composed of a number of symbols, and the meaning of such letters and such words would not depend upon an arbitrary significance, but would be obvious and manifest to every eye.

And thus we are able to some extent to understand why, as Kenneth Mackenzie says, certain symbols and emblems belonging to the ancient occult societies were not permitted to be shown to the uninitiated, because they did actually in themselves constitute an initiation, inasmuch as they were the expression in the world of form, of occult secrets which it was not lawful to divulge. Note what Mme. Blavatsky has said in *The Secret Doctrine*, that certain teachings were conveyed only at initiation.

"And that every student had to record them in corresponding symbols, drawn out of his own mind, and examined later by his Master, before they were finally accepted. Thus was created in time the Chinese alphabet, as, before that, the hieratic symbols were fixed upon in old Egypt. In the Chinese language, which is only a little less ancient than the Egyptian alphabet of Thoth, every word has its corresponding symbol, conveying the word needed in a pictorial form."

Explaining thus the origin of symbology, the authoress continues: —

"It becomes easy to understand how Nature herself could have taught primeval mankind, even without the help of its primeval instructors, the first principles of a numerical and geometrical symbol language. Hence one finds numbers and figures used as an expression and a record of thought in every archaic symbolical Scripture. They are ever the same, with only certain variations growing out of the first figures. Thus the evolution and correlation of the mysteries of Kosmos, of its growth and development, were first recorded in geometrical charges of shape."

Ideas and states of consciousness, corresponding then, as they do, with sound, colour, and form, it must

be fairly inferable that it is only normal consciousness that can be accurately expressed by these means. There [Page 6] are states of consciousness stretching from the normal away up to the ideal and spiritual; there are colours and sounds which fail to impress themselves upon our sensuous organisms. Arguing from the known to the unknown, we may fairly assume that abnormal states of consciousness correspond with these higher colours and sounds in the same way as normal consciousness corresponds to the sounds, colours and forms cognised by us upon this plane; with these however, we cannot now very well deal, as we cannot construct or deal with a symbol expressing any higher state of consciousness than that to which we can ourselves attain except in a speculative and hypothetical way. Symbols which profess to do this are attempts at approximation and as such have their own value.

What is then the method of study to be adopted in relation to symbols and towards emblems ? Is it not evident that the more clearly we understand the correspondences between the departments of Nature, the more readily shall we be able to understand the significance of our symbols, and the material for such study is nearer to our hands than might perhaps be imagined. We are living in a world of form and colour. The material universe around appears to us by form and colour, but not by the objects of material sensation is our consciousness in any way bounded, for every complex form, every colour and combination of colour is an open book to him who can read the language in which that wondrous book is written. Why has the lily its own form and colour, and the colour and form of the rose, why are they different ? Because the forces which have produced the two are different forces, manifesting differently upon this plane and, by the circumstances of that manifestation, disclosing and revealing their own nature to all who will look, and upon this plane we have manifestation in infinite complexity, but the forces which thus manifest have not originated upon this plane. We have form and colour of every complexity, because the manifesting forces are complex, but they have not originated on this plane, but manifesting here, they bear us lessons from them to us, unmanifested. "As above, so below". There is no simple flower of the hedge, which by colour and form and scent may not enable us, by the power of its symbology, to pass away from this material plane, and to know and to feel something of the Titan forces which have moulded the worlds and have, made them what they are, for these same forces have moulded the flower, and there is no characteristic of that flower which is not, in very truth, the impress and the signature of a cosmic force. Hence a great amount of teaching may then be hidden in the eastern lotus or in the red rose, for have they not, in common with all that exists, a lineage back into the ages, upward to the very parent of all.

The knowledge of symbology is the knowledge of cosmic law. Great principles may be taught, but the details must be worked out, and he for [Page 7] whom the world of symbolism is thrown open will find that though he lives upon the physical and is surrounded by it, the spiritual world is around him and within him. His consciousness is in it, and the wisdom of the gods is his heritage.

There is, then, no lack of the material for any research, nor of the enlightenment which is necessary. If the world in which we live is to us a material world only, it is because we look on it with material eyes. It is an unreal world, an illusive world, a world of Maya, we are told by one who knows not the mysteries of Maya. It is indeed unreal, it is indeed Maya, *because* it is a symbolic world, but it is none the less a true and beautiful and real symbol of that which is above, of that which is eternal. Our environment is what we will to make it. Our world is a symbol of the Universe upon every plane. We are free to look at it from whatever aspect we will. To him whose consciousness rises ever upward, all which he sees is spiritual symbology; he lives in a spiritual atmosphere; there is no whisper of the trees, no form which meets his vision which does not transport him upward and away from the symbol, ever onward into the real and the

eternal. This is, then, the study of symbolism — to lay hold of the form and of the appearance, that thereby we may raise ourselves to that which causes both.

It is in the processes of Nature, reflecting hereby downward from plane to plane, that we find the most perfect symbols, complex though they are, caused by the united operations of many laws. Man confines usually his symbology to geometry and colours, pictorial representations at any rate, and everything may thus be expressed accurately and logically up to those planes where form is no more. How then may we study these symbols artificial and often approximate?

First and foremost by studying the inner meaning of numbers, and the workings of numbers on the material planes, or the laws which govern the periodicity of Nature. Every force has its corresponding number, and every pure force may be expressed by a geometric symbol, and every composite force by an emblem. You will remember that Pythagoras admitted no pupil to his occult school who was not conversant with geometry and with music. Madame Blavatsky has said somewhere that Nature geometrizes in all her operations.

An emblem then, to him who can read it wisely, may not only represent natural forces, but also the way in which they may be manipulated. Man is the microcosm of the macrocosm. He contains within himself every force which is to be found outside of himself. Any symbol which represents a fact or a force in Nature is also a symbol of man, for man is the universe, viewed, as it were, in a camera obscura, and thus is it that in every occult school, there are symbols which must not be seen except by [Page 8] the initiated, symbols which illustrate the secret workings of forces, symbols which represent the great forces in the universe and in man himself. Before passing on to the final remarks I have to make, let me once more emphasize my own conviction that the study of symbology is the most fruitful method of learning the "Secret Doctrine of the Ages"; pursued in the right way, it is the most effective means of raising consciousness away from the illusive into the spiritual, because the material thereby ceases to restrain and to cramp the consciousness, it becomes *truly* unreal, truly Mayavic, a kaleidoscopic symbol which no longer darkens, but is itself a light which shines with ever-increasing radiance, illuminating the road to emancipation.

Religion is then truly symbology, or at any rate is comprehensive of symbology. The world has not yet reached that point at which it can dispense with a visible and concrete faith; for a long time yet it will worship that which is outside of itself. The world creates its own gods and bows down unto them and the world's gods are the world's half-grown ideals. What then is it that the world needs as a religion? It needs a system which shall answer the cravings of mankind, which shall supply a nourishment from the time when the human soul gropes after the unknown, until it steps out of the shadows into the light, and I believe that to fill this need — to anything approaching a general extent — we shall have to invoke the aid of symbology. Verbal teaching, however logical it may be, however *true* it may be, will attract the few; but it will leave the many out in the cold. When we look around at the religious thought and the anti-religious thought of today, what do we find? We find that the waves of religious revival which began at the Reformation as a reaction against the mental tyranny and the senseless formalism of Rome, has reached its height, and has long been on the ebb. And mark what that Reformation was. It was an abandonment of the method which sought to enforce dogma by an appeal to the senses, and for this it substituted an equally cruel dogma without that effectual support. Had it abandoned the sensuous method for a religious arbitration of pure reason it would have been a worthy effort and one deserving of all respect — although it would have failed. But while it emancipated the mind of man from one tyranny, it

was but to hand it over to another, and to another which knew not how to preserve its sway, which knew not how to picture what it fain would teach. And so today, the faith which would be simple, the faith which its adherents proudly boast can be comprised in one Biblical text, has lost its hold upon mankind and is tossed hither and thither upon the receding tide.

And those who have made its cause their own are full of perplexity [Page 9] and equally full of expedients. They ask themselves why it is that what they are pleased to call "religion" is losing its hold upon the people, why it is that the churches are empty and the preachers preach to empty pews,. Full they are indeed of expedients and of explanations, but their cause must ever dwindle and their hold upon popular affection wane, until they see and acknowledge that religion is *not* simple, that it is vast and reaches from earth unto heaven, and that it cannot be told in words but by symbols only, that it cannot be received through the ears alone, and spiritual lessons will reach the inner man more readily and more certainly through the former than through the latter.

And if we examine the one faith which today is endeavouring, however blindly, to express itself by symbology — I mean the Catholic, we find an increasing power, instead of a diminishing. We see here that creed and authority, altogether unable to stand alone, may yet somewhat resist the disintegrating force of today if they be strengthened by a symbolism, spectacular and aural, which whispers to every man some faint suggestions of possible individual evolution, of the unspeakable mysteries which surround him and which appeal to him from his cradle to his grave.

Popular religion must be spectacular and symbolical if it is ever to regain its hold in the West. Look back into the past, learn what we can of the old mystery plays, the great religious dramas of the ancient world, Here every spectator found what he wanted and what he needed, whatever the point of his own evolution. Here he saw dramatised the great forces of nature, the history of the world, the influence of the heavenly bodies; and although he was taught no creed and no dogma, he was taught how to wonder, he was made to feel that the visible world around him was but the cloak and the symbol of that which lay beyond out of sight.

If today were to see a revival of the mystic drama, it would be rewarded with a success past all anticipation — mystic drama on a large, if simple scale, rich with an accurate symbology, adorned with extensive and faithful ritual. For these things themselves call forth the devotion and the faith of men — not because they are sensuous in the ordinary acceptation of the term — but because they can be made actually to correspond with the unseen realities, because they may be true symbols.

We shall not, and we cannot, pass away from this plane of consciousness until we have fulfilled that purpose which brought us here. We cannot turn away with earth's lessons unlearned and the problems of matter unsolved. The path of progress lies not in making of the material Universe our adversary, barring the path to spiritual wisdom. Our environment is not the concealer, but the illuminator.