

MAN THE SYMBOLIZER

The opening and closing dates of this convention are memorable dates for me. Today, June 18, is the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, and with a heart full of grateful love and joy I celebrate in part by offering this address as a sort of new song, a song for Him who rides upon the clouds. June 15 is a less memorable date, but it has a more intimate connection with what I shall attempt to do here today. Seven years ago on that date I was writing page 144 of the typescript of a book to be entitled *The Christian Sacrament*. About three-fourths of the way down the page I stopped. I was writing about the sacrament as symbol, and suddenly I felt as if I held a handful of dust, scholastic dust. The old definitions and distinctions, and the pedagogical illustrations, seemed utterly inadequate, and I wondered what others had to say about symbols and symbolism. Taking the challenge of my own further question, I began a quest which has not ended.

Next year, I hope, I shall write a book, *Man the Symbolizer*. When I told David Tracy about my plans as we lunched together last fall, he invited me to come here and share my project with you. For his generous invitation, and for his hospitality and yours, I am deeply grateful.

Where shall I begin, and how should I proceed? I cannot write next year's book today. And even if I could, I could not share it with you in forty-five minutes. It seems best to begin with a consideration of the full reality of human experience, and take some steps together along the way of discovery. As an introduction, I should like to remind you of one great man's experience, and of a recurrent theme in his writings. The man is St. Augustine. The experience and the recurrent theme is jubilation. *Jubilum* is a cry of wonder and of joy, and *jubilare*, to cry out with wonder, love, and joy in the presence of the ineffable. Like many others who experienced the sense of God's presence, St. Augustine is paradoxical in his response. For a moment he is speechless. Then he bursts forth in a torrent of words. And few men have spoken or written more of the ineffable God. In the broad sense of symbol, jubilation is a symbol, as are all of St. Augustine's words. So too, in the presence of the same God, are David's dance, and both the poems and the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Reserving for the moment my effort at definition, I should say from the outset that I take symbol in the broadest sense. With good reason, I think, Cassirer took symbol in a broad sense, encompassing "... the totality of those phenomena in which the sensuous is in

any way filled with meaning, in which a sensuous content, while preserving the mode of its existence and facticity, represents a particularization and embodiment, a manifestation and incarnation of meaning. . . .¹ Similarly Langer takes symbol as an instrument of thought:² a symbol is used to articulate ideas of something we wish to think about, and until we have a fairly adequate symbolism we cannot think about it.³ In particular, the artistic symbol negotiates insight;⁴ the work of art is the bearer of an idea.⁵

Dealing with symbols in different ways, from different philosophical positions, Cassirer, Langer, and Ricoeur have been concerned principally with the cognitive function of symbols. Profiting from their contributions, I have been driven by persistent further questions to consider a broader range of functions, and to formulate a broader definition of symbol. In my own reflection I have been stimulated by the work of Merleau-Ponty. Going beyond any treatment of the merely cognitive function of symbols, and beyond any mere existential phenomenology, I am working at a basic philosophical and theological anthropology. I am not concerned with cataloguing or classifying symbols, nor with tracing patterns of structures of symbols, for example, in comparative religion, or in the realms of the imaginary or of dreams. Interested in all of these, I am attempting to answer further deeper questions of how and why man symbolizes. These questions drive one to reflect upon the structure of man's experience, of his basic mode of being.

So much for an introduction, a brief reference to other known positions, and an indication of my project. Let us consider briefly the concrete reality of human experience. Unable to take it "whole," we can reflect on some of its aspects, taken one by one in the only manner possible for the linear projection of human discourse. Like any discourse, indeed like any symbolic form, our account will be abstractive. Its purpose, however, is to attend continually to the full reality of human experience, to consider any aspect or function in relation to all the others, to hold as far as possible to the basic unity of the whole.

Before I begin to sketch this portion of my work, let me make a simple avowal: this is the darkest area of all, and here my own

¹E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 vols., trans. by R. Manheim (New Haven & London: Yale University Press [Yale Paperbound], 1953, 1955, 1957), vol. III, p. 93.

²S. K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 2nd ed. (New York: The New American Library [Mentor Book], c. 1951), p. 70.

³*Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), p. 28.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 47.

thought is still tentative: no more, no less. It is the area lying between transcendental phenomenologies and all variations of empiricism, the dark, ambiguous realm probed by Merleau-Ponty, by Ricoeur where he has been most personal and boldest, and by the relatively unknown Cencillo. Analogies are offered by the works of Polanyi and of Goldstein, especially regarding the mysteries of living things less perfect and less complicated than man. The way runs through critiques of many modern and contemporary psychologies. The technical and philosophical terminology is a semantic jungle. But the prize is worth the search: a deeper understanding of the mystery of how man *is* in his world, in the many worlds which lie within the range of his creative power. When I say "how man is," I take "is" in the most active, most pregnant, most fully existential sense. When I say "in his world or worlds," I refer to man involved by his human bodily being in the physical world, in his own distinctive vital world, and in the whole range of properly human, intersubjective worlds. He is involved from the outset, in his vaguest, most implicit primordial experience, and through all the explicit acts of positing consciousness: cognitive, volitive, emotive, motor.

Let us begin with a concrete experience. May 9, 1977: This morning, when finally I resolved to get up, and sleep did not intervene again to prevent my carrying out that resolve, I moved for a few moments about my dimly-lighted room. Then I went to the window, opened the double window and the great outer shutters, and opened again on a new day's variation on a familiar scene. I did not, could not, take it in "whole," all at once in all details. There were successive fleeting glimpses of the lovely Colonna garden, of a spottily-clouded sky, of terraces below in the foreground; the feel of cool air on my face and the smell of its freshness; the sound of lively songs of many birds; the feeling of new life within me, of joy and eagerness; the urge to plunge into a full day; the grasp of the sense of my situation in my world. I closed the windows, and as I turned again to the scene within the room from the window area, I knew how I would begin to write this section of my paper. A few steps and I had rounded my desk and snatched a sheet of old page proofs and a ballpoint, to scribble hasty rough notes, looking up at the hour: 5:52. That is enough for a start, for the account would never end, and I could never recapture all the explicit details, much less all the varying backgrounds.

Reflecting on that brief portion of my morning's experience, I should concentrate for now on two aspects of the whole. One is the concrete unity and continuity of a manifold experience: cognitive,

emotive, volitive, motor. The cognitive elements of the experience were many and continually shifting: in a perceptual field which was visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, with a stream of memories and images, stirred by what I perceived and in turn affecting my perception. Through them all ran a stream of feelings, a vague pleasant grasp of my situation in my world of this day, a determination to get about living it fully, and motor impulse and action. First, then, man's concrete experience is a marvelous blend of ever-moving, ever-shifting, interplaying operations, in unending process, in unity and continuity.

The second aspect of concrete experience is its constant, analogous structure, the structure of figure and background. I say "constant, analogous" because this structure may be found in all elements of human experience in a variety of modes proper to each. The most familiar instance is that of the figure-background structure of the visual perceptual field. As I looked out the window, I was vaguely aware of the whole visual perceptual field, but I could not take it in whole. The eye is naturally a roving eye, flitting about continually, at times seeming hardly to settle its gaze upon any object. But it does settle momentarily, and then rove again. Every time it settles, it fixes its gaze upon an object, a figure, a whole with its physiognomy. Every figure is set against a background, and when the eye shifts, that figure slips into the background, as another figure is fixed front center.

I have indicated two aspects of concrete experience. Let me suggest a number of laws, permanent characteristics of human experience, constant and analogous.

First, the *structure of figure and background*, or object and background, or object and horizon, to which I have referred.

Second, a certain analogous *spatiality* which marks all human experience, even the most intellectual: man is always probing a field, and however far he rises above the world of everyday experience, it is from that experience that he starts, with an insight into his situation and his world. However purely he refines his scientific or philosophic symbols, they leave a tell-tale wake which betrays their intuitive origins.

Third, *movement*: we are by being in movement continually in all our modes of being. In all our being we are mutable, plastic, in process.

Fourth, *temporality*, in all the modes of human operation, in the very movement of reason, with its succession of steps of inquiry, discovery, formulation, further question. And every man holds the pattern of his own temporality, the setting in which he

understands his present reality and his prospects. He holds that pattern by memory.

Fifth, *intersubjectivity*. As I looked out the window, much of what first caught my gaze was formed by man; and had a man appeared in the scene, he would have been a figure against the background. Our first experience is that of the presence of another person, and happy the man or woman who began life with a sense of the loving presence of a mother, of a face and a voice and an embrace which as a whole expressed tender love. Persons are most precious in our world, and we live most fully, most richly, when we share most fully with persons. It is in the intersubjective world and worlds, purely human and transcendent, that all the higher ranges of human operation and the truly human dimensions of all human beings are experienced and can be understood.

Sixth, the general law of *continuity*: continuity within every mode of human operation, and continuity of all the modes in the whole of human living. This is one of the keys to the understanding of man the symbolizer. It is a massive, all-embracing continuity, which extends beyond the range of man's conscious experience, to include at least these: (a) the fully-conscious and the subliminal; (b) the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious; (c) acts as intentional and as conscious; (d) focal and marginal awareness; (e) conscious acts and non-conscious vital acts which ground, condition, and qualify conscious acts; (f) conscious acts and their whole underpinning by all that makes the human body be what it is in the total higher organization of man's being.

Seventh, *perspectivism*: every man lives his total experience from a unique point of view. He lives in a world which is unique, for all his relationships have one term which is his alone. When he reflects on himself and others, he knows that his world is not theirs, that the "world" offers itself diversely to every person.

Eighth, the *personal a priori*: there is a manifold human a priori, grounding the possibility of, and qualifying, all human experience. The *basic human a priori* is man's human nature, grounding his proper mode of operating at all levels. Every man has a particular social and cultural a priori, a function of the society, the culture, the history in which he lives. Finally, every man has his own unique personal a priori, a function of all that he has ever been, conditioning all his experience, and in turn continually conditioned by all his experience.

Ninth, notwithstanding all the rest, there is a *constancy* and a *potential steadiness of understanding and of will*. The very laws of his human mode of being are constant, commanding as they do all

manners of process; and all of his infinitely varying patterns are variations on a theme. He can be steady in understanding, in truth, in love. He can grow in understanding and wisdom, in conviction, love, commitment. He is not the victim of his mutability, his lability; for, though in all his being he is bodily, temporal, labile, he is also intelligent and willing. He can be both supple and firm, both solidly grounded and sublime.

These, then, seem to me to be some of the laws of human being. Still another feature of human experience is the distinction between what can be called primordial or implicit experience and all of the explicit operations of what some have called positing consciousness. Within primordial experience itself there is the original threefold basic intentionality which is the matrix of all explicit acts, and the triple bond which holds man to the full reality of his concrete primordial experience. What is primordial experience? It is the whole of our immediate experience of the world and of ourselves which has not yet become the explicit object of any intentionality. It is the whole of the background, the marginal, the "horizontal," which is never fixed as object, never figures in explicit imagination or memory, but is part of our total experience which can figure later, whether in dream or in unexpected images or memories whose origin seems so mysterious. Primordial experience is the great uncontained flow of our basic experience of the world and of ourselves, or rather the whirling, surging, blending flow of many streams which fuse into one. It is the stuff of all symbols. Its fulness explains the marvelous range and variety of symbols, and the variety of their adequacy and efficacy.

Within that whole there is a threefold basic intentionality. First, primordial perception, the vast, vague, implicit sensible awareness of the world and of ourselves. Second, an all-pervading, vague, implicit intellectual intentionality which is twofold: a vague grasp of relationships and drive to grasp them more firmly, and a massive existential affirmation of the world, holding us to the task of understanding and of explicit affirmation. Third, the response of love of all which is vaguely sensed to be good in the world, the love which makes man cling to life, and makes him desire to understand the good and embrace and hold it more firmly.

What is the importance of our primordial experience? It holds us in contact with the whole of our world, the one great world within which we move and experience in this physical and interpersonal universe, embracing the many little worlds in which we live in particular constellations. Some phenomenologists speak of the world as the horizon of horizons, setting the limits of intramun-

dane experience. "Beyond" is the realm of the transcendent. I should prefer to say that we may penetrate the realm of the transcendent within this world, probing to find the deeper mystery of the world.

Rather than the figure of horizon of horizons, I suggest the sphere of total possible experience. Every one of us is at the center of his sphere, from which lines of intentionality may run out in all directions, in all the modes of human intentionality, into the world of persons and things, within the universe of God and the whole of his creation. Thanks to the continual interplay of man and his world, and of all of man's operations, perception, memory, imagination, emotions, thought, volition, movement, there is an infinity of possible relationships to be grasped, an infinity of ways of experiencing the world.

So much for the concrete unity of human experience. Now I ask you to load your bicycles on the plane, and we shall fly over two vast areas which would be interesting to explore, but which we cannot visit in this short trip. I simply point out the areas and their importance. The first is that of the range of symbols. The second, that of their functions.

Some take "symbol" in the broad sense, and for them the range of symbols includes at least these: (1) at the level of sense: perceptions, memories, imaginings; they may be pre-conceptual, concomitant with insight and conception, and consequent upon conception; (2) all symbols which involve insight and conceptualization, whether discursive or non-discursive, presentational, metaphorical: all forms of language from primitive speech to scientific and philosophical language and mathematical symbol; gestures; all art works; myth and religious symbols; (3) in a unique shadow realm, dreams. I agree in taking "symbol" in a sense which fits all of these variations analogously.

With regard to the functions of symbols, every symbol in its own way has some cognitive function. It is a representation, presenting a part which is integrated into a whole, and which somehow stands for the whole. Some theoreticians limit symbols practically to a cognitive function. Moreover, some are concerned mostly with man's creation of symbols. I do not agree with limiting symbols to their cognitive functions, nor with a nearly exclusive concern with the making of symbols.

For the present I say simply this. I can make a good case for the multiplicity of functions of symbols, and for the need of a consideration which goes beyond the making of symbols. Supposing that both positions can be held, how should I define "symbol"?

In the brief time remaining I shall propose a definition and a commentary which will indicate something of what is involved in understanding man the symbolizer.

What, then, is a symbol? *It is an image which terminates a human operation and communicates the imaged reality.*

A symbol is an *image*: a likeness, which may be sensibly perceptible, or both sensibly perceptible and intelligible, or purely intelligible, that is: a likeness of intelligible form or relationship. The image is a likeness, an imperfect likeness, not a full replica of the imaged reality. It catches and holds enough of the relationships which characterize the reality, enough to make it a likeness, a semblance. It stands for the whole of the imaged reality. It stands for and represents the whole human experience, implicit and explicit, of a reality which is itself inseparable from the world in which it is.

Every symbol involves some sensuous element, which varies according to the kind of image. In perception, memory, and imagination the sensuous element is interior, part of the mystery of man's bodily being. In gesture the sensuous element is the visibly perceptible formed movement of man's body. In speech it is the subtlest of all external sensuous media, formed vocal sound. In written symbols it is the visibly perceptible marks of letters, musical notation, mathematical symbols, architectural plans. In some art works it is some other sensibly perceptible element: the audibly perceptible patterned sound and silence of music; the visibly perceptible surface shape of solid matter in sculpture. Thus, for example, the artist exploits the resources of his interior imagery, especially of his imagination, and fashions his work according to those images. But the image which he creates is not of the "stuff" of imagination: it is brought forth, projected, given an independent status and existence outside the artist, to be contemplated by him or others. The art work is a formed matter or external sensuous medium, which has a sensibly perceptible resemblance both to the images of the imagination and to the reality which was the object of the artist's original experience. The artist's gift is not only that of vivid imagination, keen feeling, and insight into the pattern of human feeling, but also and especially the power to create an image, to project a likeness of what he has beheld in imagination. In discursive symbols, as men advance in science and philosophy and mathematics, their symbols retain less and less of the sensuous, but even in mathematics there is always at least an imaginable symbol. Various in mathematics, in the sciences, and in metaphysics, the likeness is that of similarity of intelligible relationships.

A symbol is an image *which terminates a human operation*. By human operation I mean a complex event, principally within human conscious life, in which a person is somehow the agent in response to his world, and by which his manner of being in the world/worlds is modified, and correlatively the world itself is modified. It is a complex event, involving in various blends and varying degrees of intensity all of man's modes of being: cognitive, volitive, emotive, motor. It is an event which, in all its complexity, comes to term only in an image. Let us consider how this is so, regarding the various modes of human operation, or the various components of the whole.

First, the *cognitive* component, including perception, memory, and imagination; conception and judgment. Perception, memory, and imagination terminate in a sensibly perceptible likeness: one can compare the appearance of the image and of the thing imaged. Conception not only is preceded and accompanied by an image, a phantasm, but also is realized only in an image. In art, the artist realizes his conception, elaborates his insight into the structure of human feeling, only in the projected art work. The work is the concept. In language and the range of discursive symbolic forms there is no imageless thought, no conception which is not realized in language or scientific symbol, in which there is a likeness of structure of articulate sound, or corresponding written characters, or special symbols, and the intelligible structure of the thing known. Finally, there is no judgment which is not realized in the equivalent of a proposition, which by its structure affords a likeness of the intelligible structure of the subject and predicate, and of the known existence of the subject as grasped.

In this whole notion of image there is no question of picture-thinking, or of knowledge by replica. Any terminology in theories of knowledge which suggests picture-thinking must be purified. The concept is the term of the process of working out a grasped intelligible relationship. It is the more or less inadequate answer to the question *what?* or *what kind of?* Though man aims at the knowledge of essence, he never arrives at a full knowledge of the essence of any existing thing. Judgment is an affirmation or denial that things are in the relationships expressed, or that they are simply. Even in sensuous, sensibly perceptible likeness the image is not the full reproduction of the reality imaged: it always involves selection, abstraction, presentation of the part for the whole.

As for the *emotive* component of human operation, an act of feeling comes to term, to its full flowering as an act, in the external action, which thus is not only an image of insight and conception of

feeling, but also the consummation of the act of feeling. Similarly with regard to the *volitive* component, the act of the will comes to term in the only way in which it can in an intersubjective world, in an image which realizes the thrust of will. *Motor* action evidently terminates only in an externally realized image of the inner thrust of man's motive power.

The image, in all its roles, terminating a manifold human operation, is an imperfect likeness, not a replica of the full reality: neither the full reality of man's inner thrust, nor the full reality of the world which he intends. The full reality escapes, eludes capture. All human operation, in all its modes, has the figure-background structure. In all his realization, expression, manifestation, man is forever inadequate.

All human operation is symbolizing. It is not just an emanation, the unfolding of a blind force, of an *élan vital*. Whatever its dominant mode may be, every human act has an intellectual core, vague and implicit though it be. All human activity, as figure against background, is a thrust toward realization of some portion of man's world. The kiss is a symbol, an image of the drive of one's whole being, a drive which can never be realized in a single full actuation of one's whole potential for love. Love is condensed in significant form in this gesture, which is a full act of love permeated by an understanding of the mystery of the union of lover and beloved.

Symbolizing itself is symbolic of all human endeavor: ever limited, never achieving full actuation in any single realization, imaging in every act the relatively infinite drive of man's very nature, to carve out *his* "world," create *his* "world," within the world, in space and time, in an infinite maze of relationships with others in the many worlds in which he is, most of all in the worlds of intersubjectivity. Above all it is in the presence of the transcendent that man's sense of inadequacy is heightened. All symbolizing is somehow like the cry of jubilation, at once cognitive, volitive, emotive, and motor, mingling frustration with ecstasy in the presence of a reality which is overwhelming.

A symbol is an image which terminates a human operation and communicates the imaged reality. No theory of symbol or of symbolizing man can disregard with impunity the world in which man is most fully: the intersubjective world. To that we now turn. First, a few words about *the imaged reality*.

One could say that the imaged reality is twofold. Immediately it is the full personal experience of the symbolizer, with its endless succession of figures against backgrounds, in all the modes of his

human being. Mediatly it is the full reality of the world, the worlds, which is the correlative of his experience.

The symbol *communicates*, or if you will, mediates communication, sharing, between the symbolizer and his fellow man or men in an intersubjective world. I simply note in passing two realms of symbolizing which may seem to elude the theoretician's net, one at the crest of human experience of the transcendent: mystical experience and its shadow, mystical writing; the other in the depths: dream symbolism. They only seem to elude, but I cannot deal with them here and now.

The intersubjective world is the womb and cradle, the school and field of action, of symbolizing man. Symbols are created by man, not born with him. They are created by men who share a world, who together strive to cope, who follow their own hunches and hints from the actions, the glances, the manifest intentions of others. Symbols are created in the intersubjective world and function in it. They serve as links of living men, their mutual life-lines, carrying the air, the light, the warmth of the world in which men truly live, the world of meaning, where meaning is intending and the intended, knowing and the known, loving and the loved, desiring and the desired, fearing and the feared.

Symbols are made and re-made, created and re-cycled, daily. Some languish and die, when the reality which they imaged, the living inner reality of man, the living bond between men, the world which they made together and shared—when all this languishes or dies. Some symbols live long and gather vitality and fulness, for they image a truly living human reality, and in the living interplay of men both the creator and the user of symbols enrich the world of meaning.

The distinction is often drawn between living, original speech, and dead, constituted language. It is true that the poet, the writer, the artist, stands out from the multitude, and in his finest moments creates. But are the rest of us, without the same creative talent, destined to shuffle the dead remains of what really lived only for a moment in the act of the great man's creation? No. There can be a continuing life and vitality, a continuing appropriation and re-creating, in the life of symbolizing man. One who truly appreciates a poem or any great symbol, rises to a moment when the symbol lives for him, and serves to formulate an insight and a feeling, a total experience, which is full, living, true, and which may surpass the quality of the insight and feeling and total experience of the original artist. As meaning is communicated, it is transformed. A poem, a psalm, a prophetic word, a word of St. Paul, a liturgical

prayer, may mean something new and something richer than the reality imaged by the one who first spoke the word. The richer the life, the richer the symbolism.

How are symbols enriched and re-vitalized? In a dialectical process. We can enrich our liturgy by enriching our lives, for our liturgy images our life. We can enrich our lives by living our liturgy. Symbols of love are living symbols for those who truly love. Symbols of faith are living symbols when a living faith struggles to tell both God and men that we believe and trust and entrust ourselves to him.

Let me close with an example of a symbol which reveals the sublimity and the limits of symbolizing man. In Psalm 35 we pray: "... O LORD, who is like you? . . ." One day I asked myself what it would be like to replace the capitalized "LORD" with the name it has replaced. But in what form? If God, speaking of himself, said that his name is "I AM," and the sacred writers, writing about him 6,000 times, wrote it as "HE IS," then when I address him, the name is "YOU ARE"! It is a simple, two-syllable linguistic symbol. How it transforms that prayer! "O, YOU ARE! who is like you?" "You are!" It is a massive affirmation of the fulness of being of the Beloved. All else that I can say of him or to him merely retails the wonders of that name. It is a massive affirmation, full of wonder, love, joy. It expresses the full thrust of symbolizing man, who would burst the bonds of language, who tends toward a knowledge and love which will not terminate in any image fashioned by man. He stretches for a moment and yearns to fly—and still is standing on his toes.

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