

RESPONSE TO WILLIAM VAN ROO

I am sure that you are aware how difficult it is to respond to such a comprehensive vision concerning symbol as the one which Professor Van Roo has presented to us. Instead of outlining an all-encompassing, critical interpretation of his paper, which it will surely deserve in its final form as a book, I have decided to note two major areas of agreement, and then to make some methodological remarks concerning the definition of symbol and the place of symbol and sacrament in theological method.

One of Van Roo's major arguments may seem a truism to some, but its substance has not always been taken seriously by philosophers and theologians. It asserts the fundamentally image-laden character of human existence. Human temporality is always spatial, essentially dependent upon images (even pictures) in its presencing. Indeed, although I prefer to name those spatial moments "linguistic" (both gestures and speech), Van Roo and I would clearly agree that each temporal moment is a presence of past actualizations and of further possibles (whether of "possible experience" in his formulation, or of a "yet-to-be-spoken-discourse" in my own). This is not uncontroversial since, as Van Roo insists, these spatial moments also inform scientific languages as well. So Mary Hesse can maintain that the "hard" sciences are integrally dependent upon image/model for continuing insight; and Paul Ricoeur can maintain that philosophy and theology require image as a basic internal component.¹ Such a position, of course, seems to require a re-definition of classical metaphysics, or at least its reinterpretation. In religious interpretation and theology, one must learn to redescribe what is frequently claimed to be the non-languageable/non-spatial religious experience of mysticism. As Van Roo states, dreams and mysticism only seem to escape the spatial character of temporality.

Secondly, I agree with Van Roo's insistence that the anthropology outlined must be accounted for on all levels: biological, somato-psychological, social, cognitive-epistemological and ontological. This must be so, if one is to take seriously one's own argument about the spatiality of the temporal; but it must be taken

¹For Mary Hesse's recent comments, see *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (London: Macmillan, 1974), esp. pp. 197-222, and her earlier *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970). For Ricoeur, see the introduction and conclusion of *Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 3-18, 347ff. and his "Herméneutique des symboles et réflexion philosophique," (I and II), in *Le Conflit des Interprétations, essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 283-329, or his "Philosophy and Religious Language," *The Journal of Religion* 54 (January, 1974), 71-85.

even more seriously by the theologian who claims that theological and religious languages speak not just about a solipsistic internal world of religion, but about the world—that religious symbols, not just religious concepts, make comments upon, address themselves to, and claim to transform a public and social discourse.² Indeed, symbols are the place in which all these values (motor, psychosomatic, mind-brain, etc.) are articulated, or perhaps better formulated, the place in which such values appear. One must question whether even theologians are converted by or to concepts. The shift in voice in the previous sentence from the passive to the active is also important, since it indicates my first real problem with Van Roo's paper. I shall face that problem through some methodological remarks.

In his paper, Professor Van Roo assumes that there is a center of symbol-making activity—an identity in which and from which symbols emanate—a subject who creates symbols. One marks the entry of the language of imagination and aesthetics. But in the definition which we are given of symbol ("an image which terminates a human operation and communicates the imaged reality"), I suspect that there are two operative notions of creativity—and that they are not altogether integrated, perhaps betraying residual elements of their origins.

The problem is not so much with the first portion of the definition ("an image which terminates a human operation") although some might have problems with the overtones of "extroversion" in such a phrase; but rather with the second part ("communicates the imaged reality"). For the perennial question is *how?* and *what* is being communicated? and *to whom?*

The first set of descriptive phrases used in this connection derives from Suzanne Langer's largely neo-Kantian frame of interpretation. There remains in her work a notion that there is some prior mental, conceptual, sometimes simply ideal ("commanding

²For arguments that foundational theology proceeds in a realm of public warrants, see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975). I would argue, as will become clear later in the paper, that one must have a "comparative symbolics," taking seriously the introduction of all linguistic praxis into foundations. It precedes a conceptual systematics, and is fundamentally interdisciplinary, discerning the way in which symbol-systems have in fact interacted or do at present interact at various cultural or cross-cultural junctures. Such a fundamentally dialectical operation must occur in the theologian as well, thus addressing the question of the inclusion of the present religious praxis of the interpreter in the operative moments of the discipline. Just as "self-appropriation" occurs in philosophy as an integral moment, so too in theology, the "basic trust" of the theologian in his symbols must not be excluded in the exercise of theological method. However, such faith in the symbols of one's religious discourse is not an uncritical predisposition, but a dialectically mediated experience and thematization.

form") "within," which is then executed "without," outside the creator.³ Values conceived internally are articulated in the visible—the passive voice. The created object is an instrument of a concept or idea; the spatiality of the moment seems sometimes, though not always, secondary to an a-spatial temporality.

On the other hand, if one sees symbol through the eyes of Merleau-Ponty, both figure and ground are simultaneous in perception, execution, and re-perception.⁴ The one is only discovered in the other. In the figure, both figure and ground appear. The created object is not an instrument of the already constituting or constituted subject; the object is a moment of self-constitution and its presence. Only in the object perceived (the intentionality of world) can the subject achieve itself or appear—an active voice. These can produce two quite different notions of creativity and subject-object relation and interpretation. It seems to me that the notion originating in Merleau-Ponty takes more seriously the spatiality of the temporal, a judgment which would need to be argued at length elsewhere.

There seem to be two reasons for this splicing together of notions of symbol: the first is due to the fact that Langer's investigations of the creation of art-symbols are more extensive, and thus in some ways more useful for speaking about creativity and the voluntary relation between subject and object. The second is methodological and derives from the origin of Van Roo's project, stated in the opening lines of his paper. He wishes to establish an anthropology which frames and understands the Christian Sacrament.⁵ And interestingly enough, the neo-Kantian categories

³Although Susanne Langer wishes to distinguish herself from both Kant and neo-Kantian philosophy, and in a certain sense does just that by her emphasis on symbol, nonetheless the epistemological basis of her position remains largely Kantian in my opinion. See Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: a Theory of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), esp. pp. 26, 27, 372, 389. See also her *Philosophy in a New Key: a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969). For William Van Roo's descriptive exposition of Cassirer and Langer, see "Symbol according to Cassirer and Langer," *Gregorianum* 53 (1972), 487-530, 615-73. Van Roo criticizes Langer's theory of art symbol as "severely abstract" in an article entitled "Symbol in Art and Sacrament," in *Studia Anselmiana: Symbolisme et Théologie, Sacramentum 2* (Roma: Editrice Anselmiana, 1974), p. 167.

Considering the fact that one of the major philosophers studying symbol is a woman, I should have preferred that the text of Van Roo's paper register attention to its exclusively male gender references, so that the experience of women might be more clearly included in the discussion of symbol.

⁴See especially, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. by Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 42, 54-5, 83; and his *Visible and Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 35-49, 95-104.

⁵See the article cited in fn. 3 of this paper for a broader analogy traced by Van Roo. There are several other attempts to accomplish the same analogy, some

of Langer offer a clearer link than the phenomenological ones of Merleau-Ponty. Why is this so? I shall indicate only the barest outline of a response.

One of Van Roo's primary emphases in his notion of symbol is its "inter-subjective" context. And in spite of Langer's avowal that the "work" is in the end autonomous of its "author," the description of creativity which she offers speaks of "schemata," "forms," concepts, ideas—all of which reside in and define an epistemological subject.⁶ For Christian sacraments, one needs a clearly defined subject. In the final analysis, sacraments are prayer—and prayer is directed discourse—not the language of commentary in the third person (he, she, it, they), but a first (I, we) and second (You) person language. It is not only a language directed to other members within the same social frame but it maintains that it is a language which addresses God. Indeed, it seems that all third person language (narrative, parable, etc.) was originally born within the language of directed discourse.⁷ If one wishes to define symbol in this context, then, it is clear that all language *about* God was first of all, language directed *to* God.⁸ Moreover, religious symbols claim that in their working, God directs himself to human beings. They claim a reciprocal dative of presence. This discussion in my opinion, places prayer and the sacraments at the very center of the arguments about the nature of foundational theology.⁹

The question of intersubjectivity, therefore, which Professor Van Roo stresses as a component in the nature of symbol must be recognized both as a direct reflection upon Christian sacraments,

undergoing the same criticism as the paper under consideration here. See, for example, J. A. Appleyard, "How does a Sacrament 'Cause by Signifying'?" *Science et Esprit* 23 (1971), 167-99 and J. R. Barth, "Symbol as Sacrament in Coleridge's Thought," *Studies in Romanticism* 11 (Fall, 1972), 320-31.

⁶See Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 394.

⁷There is, of course, some dissent from this position about the relation of ritual and myth: see for example, G. S. Kirk, *Myth Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 8-31.

⁸William James quotes Sabatier with approval: "It is prayer that distinguishes the religious phenomenon from such similar and neighboring phenomena as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment." And James continues: "The genuineness of religion is thus indissolubly bound up with the question whether the prayerful consciousness be or be not deceitful." *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Collier, 1961), pp. 361-2.

⁹It strikes this author that such an assertion is simply to take all forms of religious language as data for reflection and explication. It also recognizes that gestures as well as speech (the praxis of the community, therefore) deserve inclusion at the foundational level of theology. They are not simply an application of doctrine or an instrument of some interior and a-spatial temporality.

and a correction of types of post-Kantian aesthetics and/or hermeneutics which neglect or dismiss the question of the subject-maker of symbols or the subject-participant in symbols.¹⁰ Thus, although I do not prefer the heavily neo-Kantian formulations of creativity which are Susanne Langer's, the use of her thought in this context raises an important hermeneutic and methodological issue. Can the examination of symbol or of sacrament do without a language which directly accounts for and thematizes subjectivity and inter-subjectivity?

There are two historical notes to this discussion: (1) much of the submergence of the subject in criticism, literary, aesthetic and philosophical is a residue of philosophical issues precipitated by and seemingly unresolved in Kant's *Critiques*, and the question must be faced where it emerged—in the "transcendental unity of apperception";¹¹ and (2) many of the issues which we now discuss were previously treated in the early post-Kantian context, frequently in explicitly theological contexts, for example, by Coleridge on imagination and perception in the English-language world, and by Schelling on the function of myth and poesy in religion in the German-language world.¹²

Van Roo's paper therefore raises some substantive theological issues: (1) one must re-think the concrete and integral relation between images and concepts, symbols and theories in ontology and theological method; (2) one ought to face the fact that the language of symbol, if it is to be successful, must not hastily engraft

¹⁰For example, in the recently published lectures of 1973, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), Paul Ricoeur stresses the "event"-transience of the speaker-discourse relation (pp. 12-3). The Ego as determinative of meaning in utterance becomes the self as determined in discourse (pp. 89-95). The relation between the two is unclear. Although I am no more interested than Ricoeur in re-asserting a "psychologizing hermeneutic" (p. 23), I would argue that the theory of interpretation, denunciated in the text, a theory which does not account for this relationship, cannot be applied too well to the language of sacraments and prayer in religious discourse. The discussion of rhetoric in *La Métaphore Vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), pp. 13-86, 173-220, mines the same vein. The theory's usefulness in philosophy of aesthetics must also be questioned.

¹¹Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by N. K. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), pp. 135-61(A/B), 155, 168ff., 109ff., 237, 369ff., 376-7.

¹²Much of Coleridge's speculation remains unpublished; for two excellent studies, see Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (London: Clarendon Press, 1969) and Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion. The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), and the more limited investigation of J. R. Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). On Schelling, see Xavier Tilliette, *Schelling: Une Philosophie en devenir*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1970).

itself to branches of post-Kantian or neo-Kantian aesthetics without some further investigation; (3) one should re-include the spatiality of conversion, namely the sacraments, in the discussion of the nature of foundational theology, thus taking seriously the second person language of prayer as a primal religious language; and (4) if the process is truly dialectical, one will, in turn accomplish two things: (a) one will address the significant criticism of a Jacques Derrida, for example, on the very nature of language itself and the relation between speaker and sign;¹³ and (b) one may be able to redefine the nature of aesthetics, without lapsing into the seemingly subjectivist failures of "romantic" hermeneutics.¹⁴ After all, as Coleridge once maintained, "it is by Symbols alone that we can acquire intellectual knowledge of the Divine."¹⁵

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¹³See both his *Speech and Phenomena and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. by D. B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and "la mythologie blanche. la métaphore dans le texte philosophique," reprinted in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), pp. 247-324.

¹⁴See the critique and reconstruction of H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 153-92, 345-447.

¹⁵Unpublished Huntingdon Library MS. HM 17299, fol. 85 (1825-26).