

SYMBOLS AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

In speaking of the value of symbols, I shall not go into the vexed problem of verbal symbols, but shall consider only symbols such as can be represented in sculpture or painting, visible forms; and in speaking of their value as historical data, I shall be concerned entirely with intellectual history, the history of ideas, of religion, *Geistesgeschichte* in general. Symbols can of course help in other ways. To find the recognized symbols of a special religion in an unexpected part of the world, such as Jewish symbols in Central China of a thousand years ago, at once suggests, indeed indicates, a contact between China and the Near East which must be taken seriously. Symbols on coins discovered in ancient sites similarly play an important part in identifying routes of trade. In these cases symbols become like heraldry, means of identification. My concern is much deeper, however, namely to ask whether the symbols of the past have much to tell us about the thoughts and ways of the people who used them.

Any historian who deals with the thinking, the motives, the religious attitudes of past ages must learn to think with those ages in their own terms, rather than in the thought forms of his own time. This is a common counsel of perfection which

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we never achieve, but it is astonishing to see how many historians discuss the thoughts and motives of the past, or of the Far East, in purely modern, western categories. So great a classicist as Paul Shorey wrote that Plato was essentially a Utilitarian of the J. S. Mill type, and that even Plato's idea of the good must be explained in Utilitarian terms. Shorey, obviously, was a Utilitarian. Of course, Plato has been all things to all men as they have projected themselves into the rich variety of Plato's suggestions. Professor Sheldon, the famous metaphysician of Yale, told me that when he read Plato he did not care at all whether he correctly understood what Plato was trying to say. He read Plato to see what he would find suggested for his (Sheldon's) own problems in philosophy. To reconstruct Plato himself was for Sheldon what philosophers like to call "mere history," and for that he had no use whatever. Now this is a perfectly honest and proper way to use books from the past; but the historian cannot use it and call himself a historian. I need not labor the point, but it demands fresh enunciation when we come to the use of symbols in past ages (or in most parts of the world today), because our Western civilization has to do a great deal of adapting to consider them. Those in the West who still have use for religious symbols, such as those in the various Catholic churches, refuse to consider their own symbols in any sense on a level with the symbols of, say, Dionysus as used by ancient Greeks or Romans. One woman, highly intelligent, and an accomplished scholar, returning from India, said that it had given her a strange feeling to be in an idolatrous country. She had heard and studied all her life about such things, but to see people actually worshiping idols was something new to her. I remarked that I had had no such feeling, because to see an Indian bowing before Shiva, or a Siamese before the Buddha, had seemed very much like a Catholic praying before an image of the Virgin or a Crucifix. The good woman was indeed shocked at the remark, because she herself prayed before a Crucifix. Learned as she is, I should not take very seriously her evaluation of historical symbols, for she showed that she would quite unawares explain away any real value in all symbols but her own.

The modern Westerner who does not use images in worship,

perhaps who thinks he does not worship at all and scorns those who do, escapes, or falsifies, the data just as badly in another way: by insisting that the whole efflorescence of symbols in the ancient world must have had as little meaning to the ancients as they, or any symbols, have for him now, and must have been purely decorative. The more often a symbol appears on sarcophagi—for example, such a symbol as a cupid, putto, shell, Winged Victory, or wreath—the more confidently the modern “realist” feels that the symbol could have meant nothing at all. This in spite of the fact that he is surrounded by the phenomenon that the symbols used today with the deepest feeling, such as the cross, are precisely the ones which devotees repeat most often. Frequency hardly cancels the symbolic value of ikons for members of the Eastern Catholic churches, or of the swastika for Germans, or, recently, of the six point star for Jews.

Again, most scholars in the West will find symbols, either in the past or in contemporary religions, a strange and unintelligible language because they themselves think and express meaning in a language of words, not forms. Freud and Jung taught us how deeply the language of forms which presents itself in our dreams still operates within us. But it has become the language of the unconscious mind, and consciously we think we have not grasped or formulated an idea until we can put it into either the language of words, or, still better, of mathematics. Moslems, Protestants, and Jews alike have striven to banish the language of forms from their lives, and to associate their deepest emotions with words like God, democracy, justice, mercy, salvation, or with names like Jesus, Mohammed, or Moses. That these words take us into greater precision of thought than an image of Buddha does a Buddhist, or than an image of the Great Mother did an ancient Syrian, can be seriously doubted, though the verbalist would win any argument on the matter since the argument would have to be verbal. Most Christians agree that worship takes one nearer to God than does theological formulation, and the Hindu tersely says that the only true philosophy is silence. But I am talking to and about scholars, talking their verbal language, and I must say directly that those people will never understand symbols

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to whom only words have meaning. It is scholarly commonplace that a man cannot get very far in understanding Russian history unless he knows the Russian language to the point that he sensitively registers what Suzanne Langer would call the penumbic connotation of Russian words. Quite as obviously one cannot understand a people who expressed their greatest hopes and fears in symbols, unless one learns to respond to the symbols as did those who used them. The point is that as such a knowledge of Russian will open up a new continent for the historian, so will such a knowledge of symbols. This does not mean that the historian in his private life will not continue to prefer English to Russian, that he will want to live the life of a Russian of any degree or period. He may well continue, and I hope he will, a loyal American. But with a Russian page before him, he will slip into another gear, share a new *Denkweise*. Similarly you may wish, as I do, to continue to live in your verbally structured civilization, and find no place in your own sanctuary for an image of Dionysus or of Shiva. But when the image is before you, it must make sense to you that the devotee felt as he did before it, you must share his response to it as the Russian scholar has learned to respond to Russian phrases; else the image, like Russian sources, will have no meaning for you, and you cannot use images as historical sources.

The continent symbols will open up is a dangerous and troubled one, the truly dark continent. We still use the language of symbols in our dreams because in symbols we can express to ourselves hopes, ideals, malevolences, crimes, the murder of our parents, wives, and children, things unthinkable, preposterous, to our persons as we like to think of ourselves. If at bottom our own psyches are not parts of the psyche of the Universal Tremendum, as Jung teaches, at best our psyches have depths of passions which have as little morality as a tornado. We are, down there, not only destructive demons, but terrified and helpless little children. Upon these depths our training, our own courage to be, imposes restraints, drops coverings. But the depths are still all there, and our words do little to express them. We may talk about terror or anxiety, for example discuss its causes and mechanism, the relation of

adrenalin to it, and the rest. But the words have little place when, in a hideous nightmare, or some awful situation, the terror actually transfixes us. Terror is extra-verbal, sub-verbal, supra-verbal, a-verbal: the word has little relevancy in the experience. It only helps us abstract the thing so that we can analyze it. The symbol, on the contrary, presents the thing itself.

One of the favorite symbols for the medieval Church was that of Christ enthroned, an abbreviation of the full scene with the damned at his left, the saved at the right. In the early middle ages the figure was normally put as a great mosaic in the semidome of the apse, where, as one entered the church, it struck like a blow. You may study the history of this symbol for its details as it went on to its apex in Michelangelo's "Last Judgment," but that is the history of art. As a datum in general human history, however, we can only begin to appraise it when we ourselves understand, and feel, all the connotations of that scene for those who for a millennium worshiped beneath it. The picture tells us that however little law or justice people in the early middle ages actually practised, they never lost their dream of it as being the horrible reality which would ultimately catch up with them. This ultimate reality could, however, be changed from horror into hope by the ministration of the church. The damned on one side, depicted or implied, represented the horror, the saved on the other inspired the hope, while in the inscrutable face between them, which looked down as a depersonalized and yet personalized abstraction, the terror and the hope came to live in tolerable balance, and in it the ultimate order, so little seen on earth, became real. A man need not become a Catholic or even a Christian, to appreciate this, any more, I repeat, than he has to become a Russian to learn the Russian language. But one of the most revealing data of medieval history is ours only when the symbol can speak directly to us, makes us also feel hope and terror, and share the medieval vision of the supremacy of the Supreme. Historical imagination? Historical projection? Historical empathy? Call it what you will: we are not stopping with words. We are looking at the symbol, trying to recapture its value for medieval man, and with it to capture much of medieval man himself. In analyzing the symbol,

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we go as far beyond the experience of most devotees who burn candles or incense sticks before their images as grammarians analyzing a language go beyond the conscious experience of most people who speak the language. As learners we may have to begin with a grammar and lexicon, but we have little competence in the language until these pedantic approaches disappear beneath the level of consciousness, and, like those who have spoken the language from childhood, we respond directly to the dative and aorist, and feel at once the rich impact of the words, and their case or tense or modal forms. We must rise above the explanations of the words and forms, or go beneath them, to the direct value of those words and forms themselves.

Exactly this distinction applies to any real understanding of symbols. The best definition I know of a symbol is still that of Ovid: *Crede mihi, plus est, quam quod videatur, imago.* "Believe me, a symbol is more than what you see." Take the American flag. Historians may retell the old story of Betsy Ross, or they may have a more accurate account of its origin. They may tell of the thirteen stripes for the original colonies, the star for each state. They may be able to distinguish the dates and controversies which attended the addition of each star. Excellent: But this would not explain why, if I took a little flag from my pocket and blew my nose on it before an audience, most of them would be shocked and indignant. I would definitely have violated something. What would I have violated? Surely the explanation of the form's origin which the historian had given would stand as before, and it would be useless for me to protest that I had simply blown my nose on a cloth with some color on it. For the flag represents, indeed mysteriously embodies, the dream of unity and purpose and idealism of millions of people; and this is its value, as contrasted with all explanations, that it immediately presents, embodies, a whole continent of meaning, and as such is actually much more than anything we can describe, or analyze, or verbalize. We treat a flag with respect not for its design, color, or history, but for its fourth dimension in emotional association, its value, and one of its chief values is precisely that it is not a verbal formula of Americanism, which we would

debate, but America itself, in which all schools of interpretation blend. We may use the flag for decoration, but not lightly. Few of us would hang a series of flags for window curtains: the impact would be too heavy. We do drape it in a public hall, or even a church, for there the impact of its value is precisely what we want. The photograph of the group of moraturi setting up the flag at Iwo Jima has become one of the great holy pictures of all time.

We feel the values not merely of our own symbols, but of any live symbols so long as they are alive, feel them whether for admiration or detestation. The red flag of Russia with its bold hammer and sickle is really very handsome, but could be used in no house or hall in America merely for decoration. The same would be true of an American flag in Russia. A Catholic could never put an image of the Buddha in his church, or a Jew a crucifix on the Torah shrine of his synagogue. We may hang African masks or fetishes on our walls as curiosities, but to borrow a live symbol from a civilization or religion which really impinges on our own always means to register the symbol's value. In doing so we may have all sorts of new explanations, or no explanations. I certainly have no new explanation of the Buddha, and am not a Buddhist, but his image on the mantel of my living room I find wonderfully relaxing, soothing, as I would find a six-armed dancing Shiva exciting.

A symbol may actually have no explanation at all, as is the case with a horseshoe or four-leaf clover; it simply brings us good luck, has a value. The explanation, that is, need have relatively little importance: to be a symbol a form must have an impact, explained or unexplained, beyond what it literally represents, indeed beyond what we can adequately verbalize. Always the cross moves us as expositions of its meaning can never do, moves us whether for emotional acceptance or rejection. One may aesthetically admire a cruciform cathedral, but one could not wear a cross unless one meant business by it.

At once, however, I may seem to have gone too far. We are dealing with public symbols, those accepted by whole civilizations. For the most part public symbols can be understood only in terms of their history and explanations. The figure of

Madonna and Child, for example, certainly has historical association in the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus. The Eucharistic cup, the Holy Grail, similarly calls to mind a definite religious tradition, and a holy rite. Yet regarding the symbol simply as a reminder of the myth, story, or rite we may come to understand and feel some of its impact within a given civilization, if we stop there we lose much of its importance as an historical datum, much of its actual value as a symbol. The historian who uses symbols as data will have to go behind Christian civilization altogether to see whether either of these was an invention or innovation of Christianity, and, if not, what peoples used them before the Christians, and with what meaning.

We see at once that in the Greco-Roman civilization, where Christianity developed, the notion of a divine child, son of a god, or of God, by a human or divine mother, appears everywhere. It especially developed in Egypt, where one of the characteristics of deity was that he was the bull of his own mother, had begotten himself on the mother, so that father and son were interchangeable. Horus, in later Egypt, was only Osiris in a more approachable, endearing form. Every Pharaoh was the suppositious child of his human father: really the God Ra had begotten him, with the result that the child was also Ra. We then notice that the mother holding the child is one of the common ancient representations in Egyptian tombs, and that the early Christians are actually known to have changed the name on the statue of Isis holding Horus to make it Mary and Christ, while they kept for her the blue robe or cape which she had worn as the Egyptian Queen of Heaven. We look back now at the Christian mother-child image and see why it, rather than figures of God the Father, became the favorite ikon of the church. God presents himself in the Mother-Son, for we see in it what the people of Egypt (but also others) especially wanted in the centuries immediately before Christ, *theós emphanés*, God making himself manifest. Not only did the devotee want God thus manifest, but the convention fitted in with the Jewish prohibition against making images of God. The Christian image had the symbolic value of God, as it had had in Egypt centuries before, but

in explanation the Christian mother-child image fell short of this, and so the image aroused relatively little protest. It represented God manifest, while generally in Christian churches God himself remained the mysterious unrepresented one. The history of the symbol in terms of its value, we see, briefly as I have had to present it, has led us to a deeper understanding of the eastern and western Catholic who likes to say his prayers before it.

The cup similarly had a long pre-Christian history, for in it was the blood, the very stuff, of the divinity who was the Vine, Dionysus. This was the divine fluid, which went with the bread of Mother Earth, the Demeter or *Gbe* of Greek civilization, the Great Mother of the East. From time immemorial these have represented not only fertility of the crops and material food, but a way in which man could ritualistically get the greater life of divinity for his soul, and thereby hope, himself, to come into divine nature, immortality. Not without reason the celestial banquet with the god eating and drinking, especially drinking, or the deceased in the role of the god, is perhaps the commonest single device on Greco-Roman tombstones. Or the whole might be simplified when the soul in the form of a bird pecks at a bunch of grapes. Both forms, and many variants, went over to Christianity and are found everywhere on Christian tombs. The new Christian interpretations cannot conceal the age-old value which the persistence of the symbol attests. Christians represented Jesus as the *true* vine, the *true* door, the actual Logos, the *true* water or fluid of life, the *only* son of God, but all these, as words or as pictures, show that Christianity was proclaiming as its message not the abrogation of pagan hopes, but, as it claimed with Judaism, their fulfillment. How deeply the men of early times were aware of this they attest with startling clarity by their using the same symbols as their pagan neighbors, using them with essentially the same hopes and values.

I have spoken at this length about symbols used in Christianity not only because they are more generally familiar, but because for them we have also contemporary written documents, and their continuity in value can be satisfactorily demonstrated. But if the method I am suggesting is sound, we can now turn

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to fields where we have no documents at all, only the symbols, as was true, for example, of the Christians who made the paintings and lamps of the Christian catacombs. Actually we have almost no written records of the conversion of the Roman populace to Christianity after Constantine. The Church Fathers of the time often deplored the survivals of paganism among the common people, such as the continuation of commemorative feasts at the graves. But how extensive this practice was, how much it shows an unassimilated survival of pagan values, we do not know. The newly discovered Catacomb of the Via Latina, however, takes on new significance from our point of view. Here is a small catacomb, not to be compared with the great ones on the Appian Way, but with its walls almost entirely covered with paintings. Most of these present the familiar third and fourth century themes, Moses striking the Rock or crossing the Red Sea, Jonah, the three boys in the furnace, and the earlier formed scenes from the New Testament. But with them looks out Hercules in all his labors, and a woman on a couch with an asp, whom Father Ferrua thinks to be Cleopatra on her death bed, while I call her Ariadne. Either name is equally startling in a Christian catacomb, and her figure most of all. Were they orthodox, these early Christians who used the catacomb? If orthodoxy means what ordinary Christians did and believed, rather than what the still violently disputing Fathers thought they ought to do and believe, we must start with what man did do. And at once we start with such representations as those in this catacomb, along with which would go much I have seen in other catacombs. We start with this because this is what Christians of the period actually did. Further, since for people of all religions in the Roman period light symbolized life, all had little lamps in their tombs bearing symbols of their several faiths or saviors. I have been told that along with lamps having Christian emblems on them, masses of others have been found in Christian catacombs with such un-Christian motifs as a naked Venus, but that these had been taken out and destroyed as being no part of Christianity. The curators argued that lamps with pagan emblems must have been "intrusive objects," things left in the tombs by mistake. My attitude toward the lamps found in a Jewish

catacomb in Rome must be quite different: on five of them is the seven-branched candlestick, the Menorah, on the sixth is Venus. Now there is a chance that someone went into the catacomb and dropped this lamp, but much less chance than that some Jew wanted to be "safe both ways" (the phrase of one veteran of the last war about the cross and horseshoe on his identification bracelet). So the Jew had both Venus and a Menorah in his grave.

From a single lamp, a large conclusion is dangerous, to say the least. In using symbols as data for social history we must have a great deal of evidence. A single item can at best attest the attitude of a single individual. For more general inferences we need a mass of examples. This is why the loss of the mass of lamps from the Christian catacombs is so much to be deplored. And this is why the collected publication of the body of Jewish instances of borrowing pagan forms has presented such a startling problem. It has been known for three centuries that in a Jewish catacomb in Rome the goddess of Victory is shown crowning a naked young man, while in a neighboring room, another figure, probably a goddess, pours a pagan libation. This seemed just a strange curiosity in contrast with the attitudes of the rabbis of the day as they usually expressed themselves and have been traditionally interpreted. But when the mosaic floor of a synagogue was found in Tunisia with a highly complicated design of pagan motifs; when two, probably four, other synagogues were found in Palestine with the central figure that of Helios driving his chariot through the Zodiac; when other Palestinian synagogues showed us cupids, satyrs trampling grapes, and when a Palestinian burying ground has fragments of marble sarcophagi carved with pagan motifs, including that of Leda and the Swan; when the paintings of the synagogues of Dura on the Euphrates show not only the masks and felines of Dionysiac association, but, many times depicted, the head of the local fertility goddess; and when in the same synagogue biblical paintings show Victory on the Temple of Aaron, Ares and Victory supervising the Exodus from Egypt, which Moses leads brandishing the club of Hercules, while in another painting Moses is taken from the ark in the Nile by Aphrodite-Anahita and given for divine

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nursing to the Three Nymphs; at this point we may well begin to ask what is going on. To say that the Jews of the period became lax about representing animate beings, and so used forms freely for ornament, by no means accounts for the symbolic aptness of their selections.

If it is dangerous to generalize from symbolic data, as it is, to do so can be equally dangerous with written documents. Actually, as we have no written documents worth mentioning (tomb inscriptions usually tell us nothing) from the mass of Roman converts to Christianity, it is a large assumption that they were all thinking neatly with Ambrose and Augustine. Certainly such an assumption by no means justifies destroying evidence to the contrary. Similarly though we should never have dreamed from the rabbinic writings that Jews would thus have combined Judaism with pagan symbols, this hardly gives us ground for asserting that the designs must all have been purely decorative.

Just as little do the representations warrant our concluding that the Jews who made them had really abandoned Jewish loyalty, and were pagans at heart. The technique I am suggesting destroys such a dilemma when we recognize the major premise of this paper, that symbols often are borrowed for their value, without their old explanations. Actually the saving power of Hercules appears in a more pagan stage in the Via Latina, where his traditional labors are presented as such, than in the Jewish synagogue where it is asserted that Moses is the true Hercules by giving Moses the club for the great delivery from Egypt. Moses now has the values of both the Old Testament here and the pagan one; the Jewish explanation of that symbol would presumably have asserted not that Moses was the Jewish Hercules, since the person of Hercules has disappeared, but that any powers the pagans had hoped to find in Hercules were actually at man's disposal in Moses. In allegorizing the biblical text, Philo shows us very clearly that Jews were commonly making such adaptations; the pictures show it equally clearly in their own way.

To use such an approach to symbols becomes very tortuous and time consuming. Quick generalizations can be purely subjective. To the question "Couldn't it be that or that?" we

must always respond "Anything *could* be; the historian is seeking the indicative mood, what it probably, not possibly, *was*." To paraphrase Paul, all guesses are lawful, but all do not edify. Our own cleverness is often the worst enemy, for the most devastating occupational disease of the intelligentsia is that we come to consider cleverness the gauge of truth. Ingenuity of suggestion is indeed a poor substitute for studying a symbol's usage in the mass.

The continuity of symbols through the ages attests the continuity of human aspiration. The historian has for his eternal task to demonstrate the particular characteristics of a selected period within the continuous stream of human life; the particular as a moment in the universal. *Geistesgeschichte* has had great difficulty in determining the constants which make up the universal: we have had much more sense of the dissimilar characteristics of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Syria, Phoenicia, Greece, and Rome, than of the aspects they had in common with one another and with us. It is all untried, but I suggest that the continuity of symbols among these civilizations, and down to our own time, may, with extreme care, give us some of these continuities in what man lives by and for. At least they offer more promise than ingenious theories of historical cycles which we impose upon selected historical evidence. For however passionately subjective the value of a symbol was, the symbols of the past now exist as objective realities far more certainly than do our pretty schemes of the rise and fall of civilizations. The method here suggested for appraising symbols as data in history implies several steps: first, we must ascertain that a symbol was generally used in a society or group, was not a private symbol; second, that the symbol was alive at the time under consideration, which itself is too complicated a problem to be described here; we must then identify from the use of the symbol, and, if possible, from verbal allusions to it, what were its values and explanations; with traditional symbols, like the mother and child, we may go still deeper into the continuities of human nature in history. On this base the historian can actually share the emotions of past ages, not simply catalogue events or describe institutions.

Such a method has been so recently proposed that it has

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been tried very little in other fields than those in which I have myself worked. But it has begun to attract orientalists as a means for getting at the popular, subliterate life on which all civilizations until the modern West have been based. What did the mixture of religions really represent in China and Japan, a phenomenon so foreign to Christians, Moslems, and Jews? What was the life of the great mass of these peoples? Can we judge them from the writings of the classic philosophers of the country? As little, I should guess, as we can appraise the life of a Sicilian peasant by reading Thomas Aquinas. All we have from the great silent masses of humanity is their tools, huts, and symbols. We rarely know even what myths these simple people told one another. But into their symbols they projected their hearts and lives, and these symbols we still have. My suggestions of methodology may well have to be greatly modified, expanded, and sharpened. But religious symbols remain as the greatest unexplored body of historical data.