

The Symbolist Mind

by

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“When the inferior man hears about the Tao, he laughs at it; it would not be the Tao if he did not laugh at it.

(Lao Tzu)

According to a very prevalent error — one which has even become more or less “official” in the wake of evolutionism — all traditional symbols were originally understood in a strictly literal sense, and symbolism properly so called only developed as a result of an “intellectual awakening” which took place later or of a “progressive refinement” of the mind. This is an opinion that completely reverses the normal relationship of things, as do all analogous hypotheses arising from an evolutionist context. In reality, what later appears as a superadded meaning was already implicitly present, so that the “intellectualization” of symbols is the result, not of an intellectual progress, but on the contrary of a loss, by the majority, of primordial intelligence; it is thus on account of an increasingly defective understanding of symbols and in order to ward off the danger of “idolatry” and not at all to escape from a supposedly preexistent, but in fact nonexistent, idolatry, that tradition found itself obliged — at a certain “cyclical moment” and, for the sake of form, deriving inspiration if need be from foreign doctrines — to verbally explain symbols which at the origin — the “Divine Age” — were in themselves fully adequate to transmit metaphysical truths.

This error of believing that at the origin everything was “material” and “gross” — wrongly termed “concrete” — has even led some to deny at all cost that “primitive” peoples, notably the

North American Indians, have the idea of a Supreme God, and they have often sought to do this with the aid of arguments which prove exactly the contrary; what incomprehensions of this sort reveal more than anything — although this should be self-evident — is that scientific “specialization” alone — the knowledge of cranial shapes, languages, puberty rites, culinary methods, and so forth — does not amount to the intellectual qualification enabling one to penetrate ideas and symbols. One example among many others: because the ideas of the North American Indians are not understood — in the absence of the indispensable keys, which are also a part of science, to say the least — these ideas are deemed to be “vague”; or it is said that the “Mystery” of the Indian is not a “Spirit” — “which primitive man is incapable of conceiving, except thanks to the white man’s concept and research”¹ — without telling us either what is meant by “Spirit,” or why the “Mystery” in question is not one. What possible importance can the “concept of the white man” have for the Indian, and how can the ethnologists know what the Indian thinks apart from the “investigation of the white man”? Indian ideas are reproached for their “protean” character, which is deemed incompatible with the “more differentiated language of civilization.”² As if the terminology — or specialist jargon — of white men were a criterion of truth or of intellectual value, and as if, for the Indians, what was at stake were mere words, and not truths or experiences!³

¹ W. J. McGee, in *The Siouan Indians*, Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institute Bureau of Ethnology, *15th Annual Report*, 1897.

² *Ibid.*

³ One author attaches no importance to Indian declarations, made at the beginning of the 19th century, confirming the immemorial existence of the idea of a Supreme Spirit, and to prove that this idea is only an abstraction imported by white men, he quotes the following fact, dating from a time (1701) when the same Indians had as yet undergone no white influence: “In the course of the conversation (William) Penn asked one of the Lenape (Delaware) interpreters to explain to him the notion which the Natives had of God. The Indian was embarrassed, and sought in vain for words. Finally he drew a series of concentric circles on the ground, and, indicating their centre, said that this was the place where the Great Man was symbolically situated.” (Werner Muller, *Die Religionen der Waldindianer Nordamerikas*, Berlin, D. Reimer, 1956, the chapter entitled: “*Der Grosse Geist und die Kardinalpunkte.*”) One could not furnish a clearer proof of incomprehension than the argument based on this incident, namely that for the Delawares God was a drawing, thus something “concrete” and not an “abstraction”! In the same vein: “The spirit is something without space and without place; to translate *manitu* by this term is all the more improper in that even the most recent sources know the place of *manitu* to be the zenith or sky. That the Cree should seek *manitu* ‘somewhere above,’ or that the Menomini localize their *mach hawatuk* in the fourth atmosphere, or that the Fox place their *kechi manetoa* in the Milky Way — all this means only one thing, namely, that the supreme *manitu* has the same sensible character as the *manitus* of lesser importance” (*ibid.*). The one essential point is entirely missed, namely, why it is that this supreme *manitu* is situated in the sky and not in a cooking pot! When there is ignorance to this degree both as regards symbolism and the symbolist mentality, it would obviously be better not to concern oneself with symbolism at all.

The idea that, thanks to an “intellectual awakening” due to “evolution,” men finally realized the “grossness” of their tradition and that in order to remedy this, they ingeniously invented explanations that tend, arbitrarily, to lend the images a superior meaning — this idea runs counter not only to the intrinsic truth of the symbolism in question, but also to what is psychologically possible: for if the intellectual elite, or the collective sensibility, finally realized the “grossness” — and thus the falseness⁴ — of the myths, the normal reaction would have been to replace them with something better or more “refined,” but such a substitution has never taken place anywhere. The maintenance of the tradition can only be explained by its own immutable value, that is to say, by the element of “absoluteness” which it comprises by definition and which renders it inalterable in its essential form; to believe that men would be willing to maintain their tradition for other reasons is one of the most absurd or even most impertinent errors, for it is in fact to underestimate the human species. Neither do we accept the hypothesis of “pre-logical” thought⁵ because here again it is a question of symbolist thought, which, without ever being illogical, is rather supra-logical in that it transcends the limits of reason, and thus of mental constructions, doubts, conclusions, hypotheses.⁶

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It would be quite erroneous to believe that the symbolist mentality consists in selecting from the exterior world images on which to superimpose more or less farfetched meanings; this would be a pastime incompatible with wisdom; on the contrary, the symbolist vision of the cosmos is a priori a spontaneous perspective that bases itself on the essential nature — or the metaphysical transparency — of phenomena, rather than cutting these off from their prototypes. The man of rationalist formation, whose mind is anchored in the material as such, starts from experience and sees things in their existential isolation: water is for him — when he considers it aside from

⁴ For if they were not false, why reproach them for their “grossness”?

⁵ Likewise terms such as “prepolydemonism,” “polydemonism,” “anthropolatry,” “theanthropism,” etc. etc., indicate classifications which are as superficial as they are conjectural. Levy-Bruhl, who considers that “primitive mentality, as is well known, is above all concrete and not at all conceptual” and that “nothing is more foreign to it than the idea of a unique and universal God,” attributes to a “pre-logical” outlook the idea that “each plant...has its special creator.” Now Islam, which is certainly not “pre-logical,” teaches that each drop of rain is deposited by an angel; the idea of “guardian angel,” incidentally, is not unrelated to the perspective — entirely “logical” — which is in question here. We do not know whether for the Levy-Bruhl school the pygmies are “primitives,” but at all events the existence, on their part, of the idea of a Supreme God is not in doubt (cf. R. P. Trilles, *L’Ame du Pygmee d’Afrique*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1945).

⁶ It is worthwhile also to point out the abuse of the word “magic.” Authors who at every turn speak of “magical world-picture” (*magisches Weltbild*) are obviously ignorant of what it is all about, or rather have only a vague notion of the cosmic analogies which magic sets in motion.

poetry — a substance composed of oxygen and hydrogen, to which an allegorical significance can be attributed if one wishes, but without there being a necessary ontological connection between the material thing and the idea associated with it; the symbolist mind, on the contrary, is intuitive in a superior sense, reasoning and experience having for it the function of an occasional cause only and not of a foundation. The symbolist mind sees appearances in their connection with essences: in its manner of vision, water is primarily the sensible appearance of a principle-reality, a *kami* (Japanese) or a *manitu* (Algonquin) or a *wakan* (Sioux);⁷ this means that it sees things, not “superficially” only, but above all “in depth,” or that it perceives them in their “participative” or “unitive” dimension as well as in their “separative” dimension. When some ethnologist declares that “there is no *manitu* outside the world of appearances,” this simply means that he is unaware that for the symbolist mind appearances do not exist entirely on their own; he is thus unaware of the essential and is wasting his time in concerning himself with symbols. Moreover, this false “concretism” — or this tendency to reduce symbolism, no matter how improbably, to a kind of brute and unintelligible sensualism, indeed a kind of existentialism *avant la lettre* — far from coming closer to Nature or the origins, is in fact a typical reaction of “civilized” man — in the banal and absurd sense of the term; it is the reaction of a brain supersaturated with artificial constructions and sophistry.⁸

And this is important: on the one hand, we do not say that the symbolist thinks “principle” or “idea” when he sees water, fire or some other phenomenon of Nature; it is simply a question of our making the reader understand what the symbolist “sees,” inasmuch as “seeing” and “thinking” are for him synonymous;⁹ on the other hand, we do not maintain that every individual belonging to a collectivity of symbolist or contemplative mentality is himself fully conscious of all that the symbols mean, otherwise spontaneous symbolism would not be the prerogative of periods which may be qualified as “primordial,” and later commentaries would be without justification; the existence of these commentaries proves precisely a certain weakening by comparison with the “Golden Age,” whence the need for a more explicit doctrine capable of eliminating all sorts of latent errors. For the symbolist mentality, like everything of a collective character, is not immune to decadence: in the consciousness of a given individual or group it

⁷ As regards these Indian expressions, so needlessly the subject of controversy, we see no reason for not translating them as “spirit,” “mystery” or “sacred,” depending on the case. It is obviously unreasonable to suppose that these expressions have no meaning, that the Indians speak in order to say nothing, or that they adopt modes of expression without knowing why. That there is no complete equivalence between one language and another — or between one thought and another — is an entirely different question.

⁸ This is why — be it said in passing — we distrust facile claims to a “primitive purity” or to a “concreteness” that disdains “speculations,” hence all these anti-Scholastic reversion to the “simplicity of the Fathers”; for in such cases it is too often a question of mere incapacity, which, instead of admitting what it is, prefers to hide behind the illusion of a superior attitude.

⁹ The opposite is only true in a superior sense, which has no longer any connection with the sensible order. For the metaphysician, to think is to “see” principles or “ideas.”

may degenerate into a kind of “idolatry,”¹⁰ but then it ceases to be symbolist and becomes something else. To reproach the North American Indians or the Shintoists with having an idolatrous or zoolatrous attitude amounts in short to attributing to them an anti-symbolist mentality, which is contrary to the real facts; for the Indian, the bison is a “divinity” — or a “divine function” — but the very fact that he hunts it proves that he distinguishes clearly between the “real” entity and the “accidental” or “illusory” form.¹¹ Even supposing that in the case of a particular symbolist there is an element of “pantheism,” his error would be no greater than that of the “monotheist” for whom things are nothing but themselves, and for whom the symbolism is merely a superadded allegory; the whole question is to know which of the two errors is most opportune or the least harmful for a given mentality; consequently we can even go so far as to say that an idolatrous attitude on the part of a Hindu or a Far-Easterner will not have the same psychological import as on the part of a Semite or European.

Primordial man sees the “greater” in the “lesser”: the world of Nature, in fact, reflects Heaven, and conveys, in an existential language, a divine message that is at once multiple and unique. The moral result of this perspective of the “translucid” cosmos is a respectful and even devotional attitude towards virgin Nature, this sanctuary — the key to which has been lost to the West since the disappearance of the mythologies — which fortifies and inspires those of its children who have retained the sense of its mysteries, as Terra did for Antheia. Christianity, having had to react against a truly “pagan” spirit, in the Biblical sense of “idolatrous”, has at the same time caused to disappear — as always happens in such cases — values which did not deserve the reproach of “paganism”; having to oppose a philosophic and “flat” “naturalism” among the Mediterraneans, it eradicated at the same time, above all in the Nordics, a “naturism” of a spiritual character.¹² Modern technology is the result — quite indirect, no doubt — of a perspective which, having banished from Nature the gods and the genies, and having also by this

¹⁰ Likewise, a metaphysical doctrine can lose its characteristics by degenerating, through successive degrees of incomprehensions to the level of a purely logical — and thus fragmentary and sterile — system. Idolatry in the strict sense of the term is perhaps primarily a Semitic phenomenon; with the ancient Arabs it did not even have the excuse of deriving from a symbolism, for their idols frequently had purely human and empirical origins.

¹¹ Similarly, according to the testimony of a Sioux at the end of the 19th century: “The Red Man divided mind into two parts: the spiritual mind and the physical mind. The first is pure spirit, concerned only with the essence of things, and it was this he sought to strengthen by spiritual prayer, during which the body is subdued by fasting and hardships. In this type of prayer there was no beseeching of favor or help. All matters of personal or selfish concern, as success in hunting or warfare, relief from sickness, or the sparing of a beloved life, were definitely relegated to the plane of the lower or material mind, and all ceremonies, charms or incantations designed to secure a benefit or to avert a danger, were recognized as emanating from the physical self.” See Charles A. Eastman (Ohiyesa), *The Soul of the Indian*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1980.

¹² An echo of this, as it were, is to be found in the *Poverello* of Assisi.

very fact rendered it profane,¹³ has ended by allowing it to be “profaned” in the most brutal sense of the word. The Promethean Westerner — but not every Westerner — is affected by a kind of innate contempt for Nature: for him Nature is a property to be enjoyed or exploited,¹⁴ or even an enemy to be conquered; it is not a “property of the Gods” as in Bali, but a “raw material” doomed to industrial or sentimental exploitation, according to taste and circumstances.¹⁵ This dethronement of Nature, or this scission between man and the earth — a reflection of the scission between man and Heaven — has borne such bitter fruits that it should not be difficult to admit that, in these days, the timeless message of Nature constitutes a spiritual viaticum of the first importance. Some may object that the West has always had — especially in the 18th and 19th centuries — its returns to virgin Nature, but this is not what we mean, since we have no use for a

¹³ It must be said that the Greeks of the classical period, with their scientific empiricism, were the first to deprive Nature of her majesty, without, for all that, dethroning her in the popular consciousness. There were certainly Dodona and other sanctuaries under the open sky, but it must not be forgotten that the ancient temple is opposed to virgin Nature as order is opposed to chaos, or reason to dream. Obviously this is also true, to a certain extent and by the nature of things, of all human art, but the Greco-Roman mind is peculiar in being much more attached to the idea of “perfection” than to that of the “infinite”; “perfection” or “order” becomes the very content of its art, to the point of excluding from it all remembrance of the Essences. — Doubtless this partial truth ought to be complemented by another, this time positive in character: a friend once remarked, quite rightly, that the God of the Greeks, who is a “geometrician,” did not “create,” but “measured” the world, as light “measures” space. Thus the Greek temple, with its clarity, its straight lines, its precise rhythms, incarnates or rather “crystallizes” light, and in this respect it is opposed, not to Nature as such, but to the earth, thus to matter, weight, opacity; in other words, it does not merely constitute an abstract and limitative systematization, but also a revelation of the Intellect and a totality. The same remark could also be made about the Taj Mahal and other Islamic buildings of the kind, but with this difference, that in the latter cases luminosity is conceived in a less “mathematical” manner, and one which is also much nearer to the idea of the infinite.

¹⁴ For Christian theology, Nature’s only purpose seems to be to serve earthly man — one could ask of what service to him a particular pachyderm of the tropics or a sea monster is — so much so that the Heavenly Jerusalem, where man no longer has any physical needs, contains no animals or plants; contrary to Moslem symbolism, it is a paradise of crystal. The *jannāt* of Islam, it is true, are “made of pearl, ruby and emerald,” but they are nevertheless gardens containing trees, fruits, flowers, birds. There is no question here of criticizing any symbolism — that goes without saying — but only certain speculations which are derived from it: thus, it has been held that the soul of the animal exists only through matter, of which it is no more than the interior reflection; but this leaves unexplained, firstly the differences of form — qualitative and psychological — among the animals, and then the affective, and even contemplative, traits which they manifest. When the Bible says that man must rule over the animals, it seems to us that this does not imply that they are only there to serve him.

¹⁵ One readily talks about “conquering” the Matterhorn, Everest, Annapurna, the Indus, the moon, space, and so forth. In practice Nature is simply the opponent to be struck down: the world is divided into two camps, human beings and Nature. No doubt, there is a certain amount of truth in this, but everything depends on the meaning given to this opposition.

romantic and “deist,” or even atheistic “naturism.”¹⁶ It is not a question of projecting a supersaturated and disillusioned individualism into a desecrated Nature — this would be a worldliness like any other — but, on the contrary, of rediscovering in Nature, on the basis of the traditional outlook, the divine substance which is inherent in it; in other words, to “see God everywhere,” and to see nothing apart from His mysterious presence.

¹⁶ It is essential not to confuse symbolism and “naturism,” as we understand them, with the philosophic and literary movements which abusively lay claim to these terms. Nothing is further from Vedic, Shintoist or North American symbolism than the artistic naturalism of the Greco-Romans and their anecdotal interpretation of the myths.