

TRUTH and SYMBOL

from

VON DER WAHRHEIT

by

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The World of the Cyphers

Being is revealed through the symbol. The symbol is suspended when I grasp essential reality in it. If it becomes fixed and definite and turns into an object in the world, then it loses its essential reality. It collapses into a sign, into a signification, into a metaphor. There are such symbols in incalculable numbers which can be arranged according to multiple points of view. They constitute the world of cyphers which, as an object of consideration, bears the same relation to its origin as does the herbarium to living plants, or as does a collection of bones to live bodies. As soon as we talk about the symbols, we have completed this transformation. Only when in thinking we proceed from the symbols in them [the cyphers], are we dealing with the essential reality which speaks out of them. In detached talk about them, however, we prepare for the purer primary grasping of the content of the symbol, just as when in handling bones or straw we think of their origin. Then the encircling of the symbols itself becomes a way of approaching it.

Two forms of thinking which at the same time veil the essence of the symbols control such meditation about them: 1) Symbols are, as the world of cyphers, a *special domain of objects*, which is approached with questions

of order, source, transformation, and movement. 2) Symbols are *meanings* which are questioned as to their import, namely, as to what they mean.

A. *Source of the symbols.* A reading of the cyphers does not occur every time on the same level. It is not a matter-of-course procedure in which everyone simply accepts like every other person what the cypher says. It is rather with the upswing of man that the cyphers first become audible to him. They are not at all the simple thing which is at man's disposal at all times but they appear only in his transformation. They are that in which the whole man has a comprehensive understanding of what Being is. Therefore, cypher-reading is the primary requisite for authentic manhood. The cypher is always there, even though it may be primitive, flat, or distorted. Only he who recognizes the cyphers becomes man. At all times genuine reality for the essential man is in the cypher. But the cypher is also the final realization which at times comes forth for man out of his total and fundamental knowledge.

If we inquire about the source of the symbols, we obviously discover their original essence to be without source. It is not possible to get behind them. The question of their source is answered in a penetrating realization of their originality. What is to be investigated, however, is the forming of the symbols at their source.

The material of their appearance stems from the world of sensuous observations and of conceivabilities. But to lead the symbols back to this material is to misunderstand their essence and becomes a genetics which dissolves them.

The progress of their unfoldment can be observed in the intuitions of poets and artists and in the speculative thinking of philosophers. Their historical origin in the vision, in the rapture, in the revealing of essence [*Wesensschau*], in the transfiguration of reality on the part of great men—in Aeschylus, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt, in Plato, Plotinus, Anselm, Cusanus, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, and Hegel—can be demonstrated. Movements are seen passing from the sign to its unfoldment in the forms of art, from observing to thinking.

Thought is present in the symbol. The symbol is never without thought. It incites the thinking which, as in the discovery of the symbol, never reaches the end but always sees itself encompassed in the symbol. Thinking strives for the meaningful realization of the symbol's content. It falls into error through a finite determinateness of an interpretation of meaning. It teaches how to know the limits of a symbol and the necessity of changing the direction of listening. Thinking is led by rational logic from established definitions and tumbles into inescapable antinomies, or else it is led by the content of the primary symbolic experience and finds no end.

Whatever is attained from time to time in knowledge of the things in the world, not only destroys traditional symbols but makes new symbols possible. There took place simultaneously in Greece the development of philosophy and the elevating of mythical symbolism to its heights.

In connection with science and philosophy symbolism is progressively transformed from concreteness in super-

stitution to the fluttering play among phenomena. To be sure, this brings with it at the same time the danger of the dissolution of the symbols into the state of unattachedness, but also the highest possibility of a free grasping of essential reality from out of the unconditionality of Existenz.

To discover symbolism as profoundly, as truly, as inclusively as possible, to adopt it from the poetic viewpoint and grasp it in its own thinking, is the concern of philosophy. Thought itself becomes a symbol.

The philosophizing man reads the cypher-script of Being by bringing forth a new cypher-script of thought. Being becomes present in form, in original image, in idea, and in all the modes of transcending thought-movement. To make the language of the symbols clear is the highest achievement of philosophical thinking.

The original philosophical thought is a cypher. This is splendidly visible in pre-Socratic philosophy but it was unconscious from the standpoint of method. It remains the basic trait of every great philosophy. At all times, however, there also takes place in philosophical thinking the defection from the cypher to the pure concept. Thinking which grasps the essential reality of Being turns into mere thinking; philosophy turns into presumptive science. Out of the manifold meanings of the cyphers grow the single meanings of concepts. Out of the infinity of the cypher, unfolding in the illimitable relations of thinking, grows the limitedness of definite thought.

In the philosophical cypher there is a mysterious interweaving of what is logically separated. Therefore, there is for mere understanding something unclarified and

confusing in the philosophical cypher. All great philosophies seem to contain strange "errors," contradictions, and blurred borderlines, the disclosure of which, by making us aware of them, has the effect of causing the truth of the cypher to stand forth that much more purely. On the other hand, in merely fabricated philosophical thought-images, the showing up of these errors actually causes the dissolution of this attempt at thinking, which from the very outset is without content. There is, to be sure, no objective, rationally compelling criterion through which it would be possible to differentiate between the genuine unity of the cypher and the simultaneously logical and existential confusion of false philosophizing.

B. *Meaning of the symbols.* Thinking of the symbols through an "other" explains them genetically and dissolves them. Genuine symbols cannot be interpreted; what can be interpreted through an "other" ceases to be a symbol. On the other hand, the interpretation of symbols through their self-presentation penetrates into them but does not explain them. Such interpretation encircles and circumscribes, penetrates and illuminates. It becomes itself at once a part of the symbol. By interpreting, it participates in symbol-status. The symbol is not passed over by being understood, but is deepened and enhanced by being meditated upon.

The modes of interpretation are, therefore, to be tested as to their meaning, whether they destroy by explaining or whether they enhance by penetrating.

The explaining interpretation leads symbols back to confusions, transpositions, to error. While interpreting,

meaning of this total interpretation, can cancel up to the consummation of the meaning of essential reality rendered present in the symbol. This infinite interpretability, in the form of empirical interpreting in the direction of unconscious vitalistic events, becomes precisely the distinguishing mark of the non-verifiability of such interpretations in relation to empirical reality. Psychoanalytical interpretations on the whole turn into a grimace of cypher-script reading, as was suited to an era lacking faith. Instead of pointing to the essential reality of transcendent Being, psychic unconscious events are pointed to. Instead of illumination and faith, false explanation and superstition are achieved.

If I interpret the soul of Nature, of the elements, of the landscape, then I find no empirical meaning for expression (as in the expressions of the human soul), but even more no absence of essential reality but rather the presence of a being which appeals to us only in itself and through itself. It is the same with all cyphers. They do not permit interpretations in regard to an "other," but are the presentness of their content. I become aware of them in a consciousness of their suspension in respect to empirical reality. They speak through the very presence of an essential reality in their own language (whereby "language" is used metaphorically only by analogy with our language). Already in the "sign" as a symbol essential reality is rudimentarily and inherently implicit. In the unfolding of the symbol-content of the sign into a work of art, the symbol does, to be sure, become rich through consistent contemplation but in the fullness of spirit it becomes empirically less effective. The sign com-

it causes a freeing from the symbol and destroys it. This explanation points to the unconscious element of existence and dissolves in consciousness.

The penetrating interpretation, on the other hand, leads back to no "other." While interpreting it confirms the symbol; it liberates for the symbol. It points to the Transcendence of Being and expands the symbol.

Empirically verifiable interpretations are related either to meanings in the world, to the meaning of languages, of psychic expression, of the purposes desired by actions, of the meaning of man's intentions in what he has achieved, or also to phenomena of the body and the soul which inspire in connection with events, as though unconsciously something would be wanted, expressed, presented, or accomplished with them or through them.

Insofar as interpretations of the symbols are really verifiable, no genuine symbols are any longer in question, but rather either the first mentioned definite intrawordly relations of meaning, or illusions, dreams, or psycho-physical events. Interpretations which are genuine realizations have, on the contrary, no criterion of empirical verifiability but only the criteria of symbolic reality which is measured by itself.

The form of interpreting a meaning through an "other" sees itself before the symbols facing an infinite interpretability. This is appropriate as a movement of continual interpretation whenever this inappropriate form (interpreting by an "other") is used for rendering present the meaning of Being in the symbol. At the same time this movement through an orderly meaning-sequence in interpreting, with the cancellation of every particular

pels and puts everything upon me. The work of art is guidance through contemplation and by no means of its external form awakens and presents in definite, pregnant articulations what is lying in readiness within. On the outermost limits stand the elementary signs, from the primitive hieroglyphs of primitive man up to the sign posts at the frontiers and abysses of knowledge and of "God" simply as the name and sign which lacks all perceivable content.

The meaning of the symbols is that in them I encounter the essentially real. The fullness of reality is shown in them.

Whereas the idealist remains in himself in respect to all things and achieves the alleged absolute freedom to which, for example, Hegel's philosophy misleads him, but which at the end still leaves him actually without foundation, the man who understands symbols encounters essential reality in them. Their interpretation is reality itself. The question is how I experience it.

Reality always crystallizes itself in a definite manner as empirical realities in what is scientifically known. At this frontier it recedes into the ungraspable. It is arranged in levels of being, by being conceived, according to all categories, as contracting into the rigid bodies of a mechanism, into a substance, into an intellectual order, etc.

In contrast to this, reality itself is immediately present in the symbols. In them appearance and being are unseparated. Essential reality under the forms which it assumes in appearance, however, is not at all univocal. Rather there speaks to me out of it only what I can hear.

It is revealed to me according to my nature. Whatever I experience as fate and what and how I am able to love, that permits me to see reality. But it is not I who am the origin of mere representations in symbols, but rather reality is the source for what I experience in symbols. I am not able to hear reality in its totality and in its ultimate depth. It is more than I see and experience, but I experience it in the degree that I, on the basis of my Existenz, appropriate the symbols as my own.

In my consciousness of essential reality there takes place the decision as to whether I see in Being less than I am, or whether I sense in Being more than I am.

In the first instance I follow realism and materialism, positivism and idealism, which all agree in this one thing, that I see myself as something which, as the culmination of everything, has developed out of something earlier and lower, and which has grown out of something that was soulless, unfree, and, at first, indeed, even lifeless. This interpretation, however, founders on the fact that as it proceeds it provides no means for comprehending what man is capable of being, for comprehending his love, his thinking, or his knowing. This interpretation is ultimately reduced always to forms of naturalism, technicalism, or utilitarianism.

In the second instance, I surge up and beyond myself with the urge to yield to an "other," to reality itself. It is the movement of philosophizing which, bound to tradition and historical depth, finds its possible fulfillment in symbols. It is the Eros to which Being shows itself by simultaneously veiling and revealing itself in

performance. But the wealth of this objectivization misleads one into making it the object of detached aesthetic contemplation. It becomes the impetus for the enjoyment of random emotions, or of unlimited possibilities. The play is confused with essential reality. The attenuation in detachment permits the content of the symbols to dissolve.

4. *Slipping into conceptualization (dogmatic metaphysics)*: The thought contents of philosophy tend to make comprehensible that in the symbol which is essentially real. They lose their source when they have abandoned this reality in favor of rationally accessible knowledge. This again has many forms. In particular, Being is thought of as something cognizably real, as though it were an object of research, like things in the world. Then a construction of thoughts is regarded as the outline of this Being and is justified and proven without, however, the possibility of attaining in this way anything except cyphers. This dogmatic metaphysics is the descent from cypher-reading to presumed knowledge, by means of the intellect, of a Being which is inaccessible to the intellect. Furthermore, that which speaks in the cyphers is thought of as an obligation; so-called values and demands remain, a wealth of not only non-existing, but of unreal values.

Since the cypher which becomes conscious also contains a moment of thinking and since thought itself can also become a cypher, the possibility of slipping is always there. The turn-about from the pure world of the cypher into rationality and into empirical reality is, for that reason, more compelling than the true cyphers themselves.

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symbols. The interpretation of the symbols is the presence of the Being of reality.

C. *Slipping of the symbols*. In the belief in symbols there remains beyond all reflection an unreflectedness. Essential reality reveals itself only to our naïveté. This is restored again and again as long as we are still experiencing essential reality, even in the sublimest speculations of philosophy. The oneness of essential reality and intellectual certainty, of immediacy and reflection, of conditioned being and free responsibility, of force and suspension is lost in manifold ways. The slipping of the symbols is what is generally visible.

1. *Slipping into empirical reality (superstition)*: If in the symbol the corporeal or the tangible becomes the thing itself, then the symbol is lost in favor of the phenomenon in the world. An object has turned into a handle, a support in the world by the worldly. In the empirically real, essential reality has vanished.

2. *Slipping into non-reality (allegory)*: Reality is dissolved in mere interpreting. From signs and images, which are no longer anything but signs and images, the real is deduced. They are only mental allusions to it, not the objectivity of an original fundamental experience of the real.

3. *Slipping into detachment (aesthetic attitude)*: Objectivization in poetry and art, as long as they are seriously pursued, is a means of preparation for, of making possible, of recalling, or of the play of anticipation of the experience of Existenz. Involvement in this experience is shown in the choice, in the seriousness of the awakened and confirmed demands, in the character of the

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The dialectical and paradoxical twistings of transcending, one moment illuminating, and again effective in the right context, become empty and tiring with mere repetition. What was at first like a revelation turns into trite phrases. The objectivizations of the symbols step before concrete reality, in place of this reality, and are falsely applied as argumentations for the interpretation of reality and of what is practical and true in the world (a form of thinking which was almost predominant in the Middle Ages).

5. *Slipping to what is intentionally wanted (magic)*: In cypher-reading surrender is achieved. To will to achieve it, or to pursue certain ends with them as a means destroys them. The source cannot be forced; to want to produce it makes it fail. Artificial symbols are not symbols, but traps. If one operates with symbols in order to aim at effects in the world, delusions occur; there is no real magic. Cyphers are not at one's command, are not means to an end, and cannot be produced, but they are accepted, found, and unconsciously experienced. I cannot control them but can only be conquered by them.

D. *Classification of the symbols*. If we ask about the extent of the realm of the cyphers then the answer is: everything objective can be a cypher. Cyphers are not new objects, but are newly consummated objects. Whatever of Being occurs in the world, becomes the material of the symbols.

A realm of symbols comes about through the circumstance that particular objects become historically the bearers of symbol-contents. Through paying attention to

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their function as symbols it is possible to organize the concretized objectivity of the cyphers in their mere objectness with an accompanying loss in their content. Typologies of symbols are outlined. These classifications are possible according to several *points of view*, for example, according to forms and contents.

Firstly, cyphers can be arranged according to the *form* of the relation in interpretation. If the symbol and what is symbolized are thought of as split, then the question is raised as to the manner in which one is in the other.

In the world there prevails a universal image- and metaphor-status of things for one another. Our language is a world of metaphors. In the cypher-status, however, that which signifies the cypher is, in fact, not to be separated from it. If I speak of the cypher as an interpreting, then this interpreting is itself a metaphor; being-a-metaphor is a metaphor for the original phenomenon of the revelation of Being in the cypher.

Thus the all-embracing metaphor is: through the cypher I participate in Being; being in the form of cypher is itself participation in Being. Through the cypher a *participation* in Being takes place at varying degrees of proximity or distance. All being is bound up with Being in a graduated linking. Every level, even the lowest, is still a cypher, participates in Being, is acknowledged, and has a glimmer of beauty: *omne ens est bonum*. If I dwell in it, everything becomes a cypher, illuminated by the ray of light out of the ground of Being, and every content becomes pale when this ray is extinguished. Then only the slag of matter-of-factness, of conceptuality, and of endless and indifferent determinations remains.

Being in the form of cypher reveals itself to love (as also in the beauty of mathematical thought-structures, of the mathematically constructed cosmos, and of living forms).

In participation, the mode of the relationship may be expressed in manifold additional metaphors. The metaphor is modified: the cypher contains in itself *being-as-a-sign* (the sign, and what is encountered in the sign, are essentially different, without similarity, without comparability, a mere referral) and *perceptible* [*anschaulich*] *being-as-a-symbol* (this perception bears a relationship to content). For thought, an *analogy* exists between the objective content and the actual Being (for example, between the empirical reality of the world and the essential reality of Transcendence, between the infinitude in the world and the infinity of the essentially real, or between all finite being and Being in itself: *analogia entis*). In the cypher lies a transcendental *model* (pattern, primal image) to which what is perceptible or conceptual corresponds more or less.

Secondly, cyphers can be classified according to the contents of the interpreting:

(a) The mass of historically available symbols lies between the poles of *universal*, everywhere recurring types, and of historical forms. The former may be classified as the typical basic symbols; the latter have to be elucidated as single steps in the process of the manifestation of Being. The universal gives a foundation and structure; the historically particular is what actually takes hold. The universal shows the abstract images, the historical, so to speak, the embodied form.

(b) Cyphers are either given in empirical realities or

are created as fabrications of man. What is given is the symbolism of all empirical being, the cypher-script of things themselves. What is created are the conceptions, ideals, and works—the cyphers of man with which the original cyphers are interpreted. The given would lead to the typology of all empirical being as a potential for cypher-status; what is created would lead to the typology of explicit symbols.

(c) Cyphers are created in the *perceptible imagery of myths* and in *conceptual speculations*. The former narrate and communicate in images; the latter move in the sequence of thought-consummation.

(d) Cyphers are *abstract* in their general structure and acquire *living form* in personal encounter—the former, for example, as the eternal feminine or as the Divine Mother, the latter in the particular historical mother and wife for this particular man; the former, the general spirit of Christ, the latter, Francis of Assisi for his disciples.

(e) Cyphers are empirical realities thrown into relief which make it evident within the whole that this is how it is; or they are *world images* in which the whole is apprehended; or they are *ideals* which hover, as it were, over empirical realities (like the *civitas dei* over the *civitas terrena*, or like the ideal of the saint, the hero, or the wise man over the ordinary man); or they are the *structures of Being* brought into relief in consciousness through the categories. Whenever the symbol-character becomes manifest, a circle is closed: out of mere presentness speaks the hidden essence; the hidden essence makes the presentness comprehensible.

An example of this is the Trinity. God becomes the Trinity with metaphors drawn from the world of experience, but the Trinity is also thought of as the basis of these phenomena in the world. The metaphor of the Trinity of God is the dialectical three steps which are to be found in all Being, especially in our inner life and intellectual development. These phenomena are, however, rather to be interpreted in reverse as the mirror and the likeness of the Trinity so that Augustine's *de trinitate dei* is perhaps just as much a knowledge of God as a knowledge of the soul. But this circle does not dissolve this whole as a delusion but is itself the cypher of Being which is just as lost in an objectivization into a presumed knowledge of God as in a reduction into empirically experienced triplicities. Other circles also arise between empirical reality and the language of Being, between the world image and knowledge, between the ideal and the reality of being-man.

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*The Ascent to the Reading of
the Cypher-Script*

Philosophizing is an initiation into the consciousness of Being. This initiation is accomplished first in the totality of philosophizing, not through a single thought. It takes place through the inner action which is accomplished by thinking, not by thinking as such.

The initiation achieves its fulfillment in the symbols which have become effective. To hear their language requires more than the methods of thinking. The impressiveness, depth, and force of the symbols is made manifest to that inner action achieved in the totality. In them philosophizing achieves the clarity and breadth from which it started as from a barely conscious seed. This hearing of the symbols is the first precedent and incomprehensible experience out of which philosophical thinking arises and towards which it strives.

This initiation takes place in leaps of clarification. That which becomes clear to me seems then to be that which I have actually always known. I remember the eternal in the form of an apparently new insight. The fulfillment of philosophy can at moments seem to participate in the knowledge of the creation.