

Symbols of transcendence: how religious and fantastic symbols approach the ineffability of God

JOELLE DAVID

The transcendence of a God who exceeds human mediums of representation cannot be documented by the propositional statements of scientific abstractions. It must be gestured at by the language of religious and aesthetic symbols. In this article, I examine the symbol of the Eucharist as discussed by sixteenth-century theologian and pioneer of Protestant thought, Martin Luther, alongside the fantasy symbols of the nineteenth century novel Phantastes by George MacDonald. Through this comparison, I hope to explore how the foundational discourse about the religious symbol has far-reaching implications on the broader cultural view of symbols, so much so that its influence continues to be felt in the fantasy symbolism of nineteenth century literature, which bears strikingly similar features to its precursor.

How can a transcendent God – who exceeds human perception and comprehension – be experienced and grasped by the human mind? How can one represent the ineffability of God without confining it to the limitations of human systems of representation? In this article, I explore how, in the practice of religion, symbols are adopted as mediators between God and humans. Specifically, I examine a symbol that plays a prominent role in Christian liturgy and in the worshipper's experience of God: the Eucharist. Following the Protestant Reformation, much debate surrounded the nature of this symbol of bread and its relationship to the body of Christ which it signified. Behind these discussions lie larger questions about the nature of symbols and how they relate to the transcendent truths to which they attempt to gesture. I thus examine Martin Luther's *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper* (1528), which stands at the foundational moment of Protestant belief, and represents some of its most enduring concerns about the relationship between physical symbol and its spiritual meaning. Is the bread an 'empty vehicle' of meaning that is dispensable once its meaning is received, or does it have a significance in its own right? Does the religious symbol function in the same way as a mathematical one, whose relationship with its signified is purely arbitrary, or does its form contribute its own quality to the way its meaning is experienced? These discussions fed into the larger cultural shift which accompanied the developments in natural philosophy and the increasingly humanistic views towards nature that were brought about by the Enlightenment. As people started to question the view of the cosmos as a sacramental Book of Nature, in which every plant and rock symbolised a higher spiritual truth described by the Book of Scripture, the relationship between the transcendent and its symbolic manifestations in the world of the flesh remained an issue of much concern.

These changing views towards the nature of symbols thus reached beyond the sphere of religion to make their influence felt in other forms of culture such as literature and art. They continued to do so for centuries to come. In mid-Victorian Britain, where Puritan beliefs held strong sway, the search for symbolic representations of the transcendent continued to be a preoccupation. This was especially manifested by fantasy literature, which concerned itself primarily with alternate worlds which transcend the rules of reality and thus made it a most suitable medium for exploring this theme. One such example is George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858), whose use of fantastic symbolism exemplifies many of the features that Luther suggests are crucial to the way that a religious symbol gestures towards the transcendent. By examining these two artefacts together, I attempt to explore the influence of Protestant theology (as laid out by its original foundational text) on the way that symbols were conceptualised in nineteenth-century literature.

Martin Luther's *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper* (1528) examines the religious symbol of the Eucharist.¹ This was written in response to a raging debate between Protestant and Catholic faith systems as to whether the Eucharist is the actual body itself, or simply a representation of it. At the heart of this debate is what Dorothy Lee terms 'the difference in the conception of symbol as representing or participating'.² The nature of religious symbolism is thus a question of great significance, and Luther's *Confession* addresses this by proposing a few qualities that define a religious symbol. Firstly, the sign is indispensable to the experience of the signified. In the Eucharist, the bread serves as a concrete and relatable representation of Christ's giving of his body in sacrificial offering, and it allows believers to participate imaginatively in this by imbibing, assimilating and receiving nourishment from that sacrifice. The bread is both symbol as well as symbolised, being both bread as well as Christ's body. Secondly, the negative element of this symbol is emphasised. The symbol foregrounds its own inadequacy to fully represent the truths of Christ which transcend physical and finite bounds.

The Word of God clearly explains the message conveyed by the Eucharist: that Jesus sacrificed his life that humankind might receive life. However, even though this truth is already conveyed propositionally, believers are still commanded to partake in the sacraments because the experience of the symbol itself is a crucial part of the meaning that believers are meant to internalise. This is through the personal experience of having all their senses engaged in handling and imbibing the elements. That is why Luther condemns Papists for preventing people from partaking of the elements. He argues that the believers' participation

¹ Martin Luther, 'The Confession and the Lord's Supper', in *Sermons of Martin Luther*
< http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/129luther_b18.htm > [accessed 1 February 2020].

² Dorothy Lee, 'Symbols and Values, an Initial Study', in *Freedom and Culture* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1987), pp. 79-92 (p. 80).

in these sacraments is central to their faith because it helps them to remember Christ: 'If we are all to remember the Lord in his Supper we must certainly be permitted to receive both elements, to eat the bread and to drink the cup'.³

Since the symbol is such an essential part of the meaning, the experience of eating the bread is almost inseparable from the understanding of Christ's body and sacrifice, and it is the chosen 'form' by which Christ has 'pictured' his message for our understanding. Luther explains it thus:

Christ has shown this to us not only by his own example and by his Word, but he has also pictured it to us in the form of the Sacrament of the Altar, namely, by means of the bread and the wine.

We believe that the true body and blood of Christ is under the bread and wine, even as it is.⁴

Some have interpreted this as a theology of consubstantiation, that the substance of the body and blood of Christ are present *alongside* the substance of the bread and wine, which remain present. While it is debateable whether 'under' refers to Christ's physical substance being present, what Luther does make clear is that the physical symbols are crucial to allowing the believer to fully conceive of and relate to the transcendent idea of Christ's bodily sacrifice, and are thus an indispensable part of the message.

Here we see one thing and believe another, which describes faith. For when we hear the Word and receive the Lord's Supper we have merely a word and an act, yet by it we embrace life and every treasure, even God Himself.⁵

By the tangible and perceptible (that which they 'see' and 'act' upon), Christians are required to use 'faith' to 'believe' in something of which they have not had any empirical experience: 'God Himself'. Sacraments such as the Eucharist are therefore 'intrinsic symbols of grace' which 'constitute the grace they signify precisely by signifying it'.⁶ This is because an essential part of God's grace lies precisely in His relationship with His people and His communication with them. The sacrament, which facilitates this relationship, thus goes beyond merely representing that grace, and participates in constituting that grace itself. The form of the religious symbol, then, is central to the splendour which it radiates forth:

We 'behold' the form; but, if we really behold it, it is not as a detached form, rather in its unity with the depths that make their appearance in it. We see form as the splendour, as the Glory of Being.⁷

There is a kind of unity which makes it impossible to divorce the form of a religious symbol from the transcendent spirit or 'glory', which shines forth from its depths.

³ Luther, 3.18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.10.

⁶ Annice C. Callahan, 'Karl Rahner's Theology of Symbol: Basis for his Theology of the Church and the Sacraments', *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 49 (1982), pp. 195-205 (p. 200).

⁷ Larry Chap Scott, 'The theological method of Hans Urs von Balthasar' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Fordham University, 1994), p. 178.

Moreover, another point that Luther makes abundantly clear is that even though the Eucharist is a mandatory and ordained vehicle for communicating the message, it is no more than a medium which plays a secondary and supportive role to the message. Luther argues that the symbols are inadequate vehicles which cannot fully capture that which they gesture towards, which is the completed work of Christ's dying on the cross: 'the cup, which pertains to the substance of the sacrament, and fasting, which is an accidental, carnal thing, of no weight at all'.⁸ He condemns the papists' doctrine of transubstantiation, which holds that when the priest performs the ritual, the bread transforms into the very body of Christ Himself, and He performs His sacrificial giving of His body again during this ritual. He explains that 'the papists err in attributing to the sacrament, that it justifies, *ex opere operato*, when the work is fulfilled'. Neither the priest's ritual nor the bread has any power in itself to perform the work of salvation, because these are mere objects which remind us of an act that has already been completed by Christ, 'prefiguring the true body and blood of Christ', and reminding us that 'Christ's body and blood were given and shed for us'.⁹

A religious symbol, for Luther, is necessarily inadequate. To bestow upon the ritual itself any power would be 'abominable idolatry', because it would be wrongly crediting glory to elements for playing a part in the work of salvation. Instead, it functions by declaring its powerlessness and its status as a mere conduit of grace. The taste of the wine on one's tongue and the feeling of the bread in one's palm are not fully representative of what that salvation tastes or feels like. They can do no more than point back to the event of Christ's death on the cross, and the abstract concept of Christ's giving of his life. Louis K. Dupré explains that whereas all types of symbols have a gap between representation and represented, 'the religious one emphasises that gap to accentuate how unrepresentable its signified is' so as to remind us that 'the signified remains forever beyond our reach'. No symbol, not even a cross symbol, is inherently 'religious', because they merely acquire these associations through tradition or a community's shared cultural ideas. Instead, 'what makes religious art is its tendency to display the inadequacy of the aesthetic form with respect to its transcendent content'.¹⁰ Thus, Luther's discussion of the Eucharist is representative of some of the most salient discourses surrounding religious symbols. That is the indispensability of their form to the reception of their meaning, as well as the self-conscious declaration of their inability to fully illustrate that which they attempt to represent.

⁸ Luther, 3.16

⁹ Martin Luther, 'St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians – of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper', *Martin Luther's Writings* <http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEWluther_c14.htm> [accessed 1 February 2020].

¹⁰ Louis K. Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 77-8.

Such concerns remained at the forefront of Victorian discussion about the way in which the transcendent was to be represented. Against an encroaching modernity, with its structures of empiricism and laws of rationality, much fascination arose towards the spiritual and the ineffable world that seemed to lie beyond the realm of urban existence. One genre that was extremely popular during this period was fantasy; with its language of symbols, its suspension of the laws of the real world and its exploration of alternate realities, it proved a medium well-suited to address these ideas of the transcendent. The symbols of fantasy literature thus played the role of religious sacraments, insofar as they granted imaginative participation in the transcendent. Notably, the two defining features of religious symbols which we have discussed above are fundamental to the fantastic symbol as well.

Just as the believer's participation in consuming the bread and drinking the wine is vital to their reception of God's transcendent character, so the reader's personal engagement in imaginatively journeying through fairyland is likewise central to their experience of the transcendent. Richard Viladesau explains that the 'intrinsically mystagogical and supra-rational dynamism of theology implies that in its exercise it must also have a "poetic" element'; one cannot know about God solely through 'scientific' propositions, but must imaginatively experience him as one would a work of art.¹¹ In the same way, the transcendent world that is symbolised by fairyland cannot be reduced to scientific documentation of what it is actually like, but must instead be gestured at by the richness of fairyland's landscape and the magic of its heroes and villains. George MacDonald's *Phantastes* depicts the journey of its protagonist Anodos into fairyland on the day he turns twenty-one. There, he encounters various characters and events which bear an uncanny resemblance to his own world and are, in many ways, more truthful than his own world. By encountering his demons (and angels), defamiliarized and presented in the new light of fairyland, he is able to learn many truths about them which he takes back to his own world so that he emerges a more enlightened man.

In this narrative, the interactions between the lands of the faerie and of the real symbolise the relationship between the material and the transcendent world. In Anodos' adventure into fairyland, he frequently encounters fictional narratives in the form of storybooks which mirror his own story, but present it in brighter light, so that he cannot help remarking: 'Why are all reflections lovelier than what we call the reality?'¹² In the fairy-tales, he reads of characters with wings who die to their world and are reborn into the human world with their wings incarnated as arms. When the book comes to an end, Anodos feels as if he has died and awakened from a dream to return to his own world. His own life follows the trajectory of the characters' lives, when he dies in fantasy land and is reborn into his real world now a mature man

¹¹ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 18.

¹² George MacDonald, *Phantastes* (London: Daldy, Isbister & Co, 1874), p. 112.

more ready to take on its realities. The experiences of Anodos are obvious parallels to the reader's own, because MacDonald declares from the outset that *Phantastes* is a work of fantasy which intends to take the reader on a journey. It also suggests that when the reader finishes the book and exits the world of *Phantastes*, the experience will be akin to awaking from a deep sleep of death and stepping out of a world populated by 'elves and other children of the night who wake when mortals dream, and find their common life in those wondrous hours that flow noiselessly over the moveless death-like forms of men.'¹³

Nonetheless, even when readers awake from the fictional worlds, they perhaps, like Anodos, continue to live within a dream world from which they have to awaken into the world of the transcendent:

From dreams of bliss shall men awake

One day, but not to weep:

The dreams remain; they only break

The mirror of the sleep.¹⁴

The reader's engagement with the transcendent, then, hinges upon his act of reading the fantasy and observing the interplay between his and the characters' worlds. Schlobin describes the fantasy's *modus operandi* as a kind of invitation to the reader to 'play the game' it has set up; it is a challenge to suspend one's own laws of logic and to take up the rules of this game. Just like the religious symbol whose meaning is intertwined with its form, the fantastic symbol invites the reader to participate in its game in order to experience the transcendent for himself.¹⁵ Just as the religious symbol emphasises its inability to represent fully its subject, so the fantasy novel illustrates how neither the real nor the fantasy world is able to capture fully the nature of the transcendent. The fantasy world comes closer to the transcendent in some ways, but often conceals more than it reveals – only speaking in vague shadows and hazy reflections of what the transcendent is like.

While the narrative sets itself up as a mirror of the reader's own world, and portrays Anodos' adventures as a parallel to the reader's own, it also self-consciously acknowledges the insufficiency of all reflections at ever fully representing their subject. Anodos is often unable to finish reading a tale as he is either interrupted or distracted; he often enters so fully into the narrative that he confuses it with his own reality, and also confesses that the limitation of language and of memory render him unable to describe his experiences:

In the fairy book, everything was just as it should be, though whether in words or something else,
I cannot tell [...] My representation of it must resemble a translation from a rich and powerful

¹³ Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁵ Roger C. Schlobin, *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 28.

language, capable of embodying the thoughts of a splendidly developed people, into the meagre and half-articulate speech of a savage tribe.¹⁶

Like the religious symbol which focusses on its negative element, the fantastic symbol also focusses on describing what the transcendent world is not like, rather than what it is like. Its symbols guide one towards the path, but take their leave at its opening, acknowledging that they can go no further. MacDonald describes his symbols as ‘substantial symbols’ that seek to embody their substance within their signifiers, comparing his symbols to mirrors that present a two-dimensional image of the human form, while also gesturing towards the person whose full character cannot be adequately contained within the frame of the mirror.¹⁷ Fantastic symbols provide their readers with an experience of the ineffable whilst also acknowledging that it will always lie beyond its pages, just as the fullness of Christ’s sacrifice lies beyond the bread.

Theology’s treatment of the symbol, as represented by Luther’s pioneering discourse on the operations of the religious sacrament in the sixteenth century, has enduring influence on the broader cultural views towards symbols and their capacity to signify ideas of the transcendent. These ideas continue to hold sway in the nineteenth century and may be observed not only in theology but in other forms of culture such as literature, especially fantasy literature. The fantastic symbol operates in similar ways to the religious symbol, adopting some of the qualities that Luther describes as key to symbol’s ability to gesture towards the transcendent.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Luther, Martin, ‘The Confession and the Lord’s Supper’, in *Sermons of Martin Luther*
<http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/129luther_b18.htm> [accessed 1 February 2020]

MacDonald, George, *Phantastes* (London: Daldy, Isbister & Co, 1874)

Secondary Sources

Bleecker, Timothy J., ‘The Christian romanticism of George MacDonald: A study of his thought and fiction’ (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Tufts University, 1990)

Callahan, Annice C., ‘Karl Rahner’s Theology of Symbol: Basis for his Theology of the Church and the Sacraments’, *The Irish Theological Quarterly*, 49 (1982), pp. 195-205.

¹⁶ MacDonald, p. 244.

¹⁷ Timothy J. Bleecker, ‘The Christian romanticism of George MacDonald: A study of his thought and fiction’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Tufts University, 1990), p. 105.

Lee, Dorothy, 'Symbols and Values, an Initial Study', in *Freedom and Culture* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1987), pp. 79-92.

Dupré, Louis K., *Symbols of the Sacred* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000)

Luther, Martin, 'St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians - of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper', *Martin Luther's Writings* <http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/NEWluther_c14.htm> [accessed 1 February 2020]

Schlobin, Roger C. *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982)

Scott, Larry Chap, 'The theological method of Hans Urs Von Balthasar' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Fordham University, 1994)

Viladesau, Richard, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 18