

# The Symbolic Nature of the Universe

BY JAMES MARCHAND

## 1. The symbolic nature of the universe

Alanus ab Insulis, *Patrologia Latina* 210:579:

Omnis mundi creatura	All of creation,
Quasi liber et pictura	Like a book and a picture,
Nobis est speculum.	Is a mirror for us.
Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis	Of our life, of our state;
Nostrae status, nostrae mortis	Of our death, of our fate
Fidele signaculum.	A faithful symbol.

Irenaeus: Nihil vacuum sive sine signo apud Deum “There is nothing empty or without meaning with God.”

John Scotus Eriugena, *Patrologia Latina* 122:289: Dupliciter ergo lux aeterna se ipsam mundo declarat, per Scripturam videlicet et creaturam “In two ways then the Eternal Light has revealed Itself to the world, by scripture as it were and creation.”

Julian of Toledo, *Patrologia Latina* 96:723 (echoing Paul): Universus enim mundus iste quasi quidam liber est, digito Dei scriptus, hoc est, virtute divina creatus; et singulae creature quasi figurae quaedam sunt, non humanae placito inventae, sed divino arbitrio institutae ad manifestanda, et quasi quadammodo significanda Dei invisibilia “For this whole world is sort of like a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power; and the various creations are sort of figures, not invented by human agreement, but set up by the Divine Will, and sort of to signify the invisible things of God.”

Nicholas of Lyra: Scriptura exterior est sensus litteralis, qui est patentior, quia per voces immediate significatur; Scriptura vero interior, est sensus mysticus, vel spiritualis, qui est latentior, quia per res significatas vocibus designatur “External scripture is the literal sense, which is more obvious, because it is signified immediately by the words; interior scripture, on the other hand, is the mystical or spiritual sense, which is harder to come by, because it is signified by the things signified by the words.”

## 2. The integumentum

Bonaventura, *Breviloquium* (1874 ed., 29): Ideo sub *cortice* litterae apertae occultatur mystica at profunda intelligentia “Thus under the bark of the open letter is hidden mystic and profound understanding.”

Berceo, *Milagros* (Solalinde ed., p. 5): Seniores e amigos, lo que dicho avemos, / Palabra es oscura, es ponerla queremos: / Tolgamos la *corteza*, al *meollo* entremos “Sirs and

friends, what we have said is a mystical saying, let us explain (note pun) it: Let us take away the bark, let us enter into the marrow.” A pithy saying.

### 3. The Book written by the finger of God

The usual picture of the world in the Middle Ages is that of a circle with a T in it, standing for Orbis Terrarum (when God wrote, He wrote Latin), with Asia at the top (whence our term orientation for straightening a map up (septentrionating it). In many pictures of Christ enthroned, his feet are resting on a circle in which the T is upside down (mundus inversus), because the earth is the *scabellum* of God (Matt. 5:35), signifying that all things are possible with God. See the list of *impossibilia* or *adynata* in O. Odenius, “Mundus Inversus,” *Arv* 10 (1954), 142-170. For a splendid example of the mundus being really inversus, see *The Rohan Master: A Book of Hours* (NY: Braziller, 1973), plate 63: The dying man, speaking Latin, talks straight up; God the Father, fatherly indeed, speaks French and talks upside down. Used on the jacket of Philippe Aries’ *The Hour of Our Death*, but I stray.

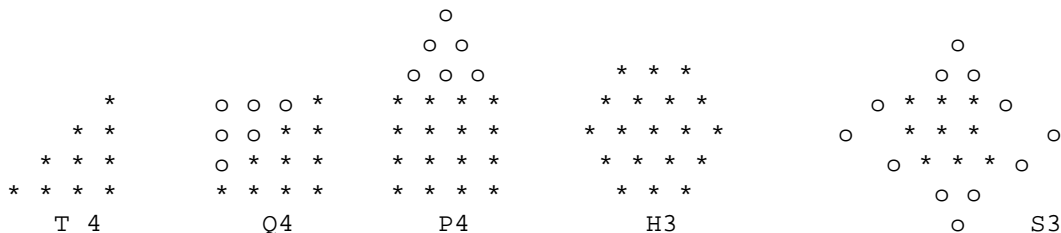
The letters have significance. The letter Y (cf. W. Harms, “Homo viator in bivio,” *Medium Aevum* 21 (Munich, 1970), the Pythagorean letter, signifies human life and the two ways; it also signifies Christ, for it is the first letter of “son” (YIOS) in Greek.

Both Dante and Berthold of Regensburg have the name (h)omo written on the human face (cf. R. Koehler, “Homo im Menschenangesicht, eine Parallele,” *Kleinere Schriften* 2.12 f., whence the puzzling passage in Grillparzer’s *Die Ahnfrau*, Act 2: Steht auf meiner offner Stirne doch der heitre Name Mensch! “On my open forehead stands, as you see, the joyous name: Human being!”

### 4. Significance of Numbers

The meanings of numbers are well treated by McNalley, Sauer, Hopper and others. Every number in the Bible can be used in the application it has there: 7 sins, 7 virtues, 7 cities, 7 gifts of the Holy Ghost, etc. etc.

Numerical composition was common, cf. the bibliography by M. S. Batts in *Formal Aspects of Medieval German Poetry*, ed. S. N. Werbow (UTexasP, 1969), 93-121. Both the Divine Comedy and the Old Icelandic Lilja (cf. T. E. Hill, “Number and Pattern in Lilja,” *JEGPh* 69 [1970], 561-67) are composed with the form of a triangle within a circle, the triangle being the trinity and the circle being the Virgin Mary (cf. *Roman de la Rose*, 19124-45), and the Ave Maria has 100 letters. The circle, a symbol of virgin purity, was indicated by a circle because the number 100 was made, in ancient and medieval finger reckoning, by a circle formed by the thumb and index finger.



The use of figurate numbers (triangular, square, pentagonal, hexagonal, stellate) is still to be investigated for the Middle Ages. The two Johannine numbers 153 and 666 were recognized in the Middle Ages as triangular numbers. 666 is the 36th triangular number and the square of six, the perfect number, the great tetractys of the Pythagoreans. Thus, the beast derives his power from 666.

Since numbers were indicated by letters, both could be significant. Thus 893 is *hic*, 983 is *ihc* “Jesus”, and 938 is *ich* “I”, Christ is here and now, resides in each and every one of us. Thus, the significance of finding exactly 893 gold coins in *Simplicissimus* is explained (example from Rudi Hofmeister).

## 5. Etymology

The traditional etymologies of Varro, Isidor, etc. (*lucus a non lucendo* “grove because there is no light there”, etc.) were added to in the course of the centuries by the technique of syllabic etymology: *caro data vermibus* “flesh given to worms” for *cadaver*, *ferens nos extra* “taking us outside” for *fenestra* “window”, and by acronymic etymology: *fundens late odorem suum* “spreading widely its odor” for *flos* “flower”, *dans eternam uitam suis* “granting eternal life to his [believers]” for *Deus* “God” (in *Piers Plowman*, for example, where it took a long time for people to recognize this). Languages could be mixed, as in the case of Isidor’s derivation of *avis* “bird” from *a* “without” (Greek alpha privative) + *via* “path”, for the bird doth fly the untrammelled paths of the heavens. These etymologies entered the vernaculars early (cf. F. C. Robinson, “The Significance of Names in Old English Literature,” *Anglia* 86 (1968), 14 ff.) Thus, Jerusalem was said to mean *visio pacis* “vision of peace”, whence it is often called *sibbe gesihth* “vision of peace” in Old English, *fridharsyn* in Old Norse. It is interesting to see how the medieval commentators handled the Hebrew pun *ish* “man” / *ishah* “woman” of Gen. 2:23: Symmachus did it in Greek by using *andros* and *andris*; St. Jerome did it poorly by translating: *haec vocabitur virago, quoniam de viro sumpta est* “she will be called virago, because she is taken from man,” but even that is superior to Theodotus’s *haec vocabitur assumptio, quoniam de viro sumpta est* “She will be called ‘assumption’ because she is taken from man.” The *Altdeutsche Genesis* says: *maget sol si haben namen, want si fone manne ist genommen* “She shall be called maid because she is taken from man.” Aelfric repeats Jerome’s put-down for women: *Beo hire name Virago, thaet is faemne, for than heo is of hire were genumen* “Let her name be Virago, that is, woman, because she is taken from her man.” The author of *Vom Rechte* has: *er ist charl, si ist chone*, much to be preferred to Luther’s *Mann/Männin* pair.

It is important to keep these etymologies in mind; otherwise, many a passage in the vernacular will be impossible to read or will suffer an impoverished reading:

OE *Solomon and Saturn* (Kemble, 179): *Saga me for hwylcum thingum heofon sy gehaten heofon? Ic the secge, forthon he behelath eal thaet him be ufan bi* “Tell me why heaven is called heaven. Because it hides everything which is above it.” Old Norse *Joca monachorum* (see my edition in *Medieval Scandinavia*, 1976): *Thvi er himen kalladur? thvi att hylr undir sig allt thad i veralldine er* “Why is heaven so called? Because it hides under it everything which is in the world.” Cf. Postola Soegur (Unger, 268): *En celum thythiz hulning, ok er thvi loptith celum, at thar er mart leynt ok hulit fyr maunnum, that er i loptinu er* “Celum ‘sky’ means ‘covering’, and the sky is called celum, because many things are covered up and hidden from men which are in heaven.”

All of this makes little sense until we realize the Latin “etymology” of celum (Balbus): Celum a celo, quia celat nos secreta...“Celum ‘heaven’ comes from the word celo ‘hide’, because it hides secrets from us ...”

An interesting example is found in L. G. Collings, “The Old Icelandic Lives of the Apostles” (Cornell U. Diss, 1969; unger, 541), where we read that the five letters of Jesus’ name mean: Glethi sytandi manna, eilif lifandi manna, sathning hungrandi manna, fliotandi naegth thurfandi manna, heilsa siukra manna “Joy to the sorrowing, eternal life to the living, satiety to the hungry, abundance to the needy, healing to the sick.” But this makes no sense without the Latin of Albertus Magnus (Compendium theologiae veritatis, 4.12), who tells us that the name Jesus comes (by acronymic etymology) from: Iucunditas maerentium, Eternitas viventium, Sanitas languentium, Ubertas egentium, Satietas esurientum “Joy to the sorrowing, eternity to the living, health to the sick, abundance to the needy, satiety to the hungry.”

Frauenlop	Reinmar	Greek	Middle Dutch
wunne ‘blissful’	mediatrix	<u>i</u> esous	<u>i</u> nnicheit
<u>i</u> rdisch ‘earthly’	<u>a</u> uxiliatrix	<u>x</u> ristos	gehoersamheit
<u>p</u> aradis ‘paradise’	<u>r</u> eparatrix	<u>t</u> heou	<u>e</u> nvoldigheid
	<u>i</u> lluminatrix	<u>u</u> ios	<u>s</u> ympelheit
	<u>a</u> djutrix	<u>s</u> oter	<u>v</u> redsamheit
wip ‘woman’	Maria	ichthys	Ihesus

Oops! Forgot our injunction to translate. The Reinmar means: mediatrix, auxiliatrix, reparatrix, illuminatrix, helper; the Greek: Jesus Christ, of God the Son, Savior = fish; if you do the horoscope of the world, Christ was born under the sign of the fish. The Dutch: fervency, obedience, simplicity, simplicity, peacefulness.

## 6. Typology

Gonzalo de Berceo, Del sacrificio de la misa, cuadernavia 2:

Del testamento viejo quiero luego hablar,  
E como sacrificaban, e sobre qual altar,  
Desent tornar al nuevo, por encierto andar,  
Accordarlos en uno, fazerlos saludar.

I would like first to speak of the Old Testament,  
And how they sacrificed, and on what altar;  
Then turn to the New (Testament), to be on safer ground,  
Accord them one with the other, make them salute one another.

Christ had inaugurated typology with His statement (John 3:14): “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,” and Paul had continued the tradition (1 Cor. 10:6; 10:11). Already by St. Augustine’s time the technique had become so fixed that his friend Quodvultdeus (sounds Puritan, doesn’t it) could fill two volumes with an enumeration of types. Every event and person in the OT prefigures one in the NT. Thus, the Crossing of the Red Sea is a type of baptism; the Rod

of Aaron, the Rod of Jesse, the Rod of Moses, the Burning Bush, the Hortus Conclusus, the portus et porta, the virga et virgo, the Fleece of Gideon and the Sling of David are all prefigurations fo the Virgin Mary. The last is a typical example of the method used. Mary is called the funda “sling” of David, for, just as David fundit “casts” the rock against the forehead of Goliath, so does Mary fundere “give birth” to Christ, our Rock and Redeemer, against the intents of Satan, symbolized by the forehead of Goliath. A good-sized book has been written, containing the epithets of Mary: Anselm Salzer, *Die Sinn- Bilder und Beiworte Mariens in der deutschen Literatur und lateinischen Hymnenpoesie des Mittelalters* (1886-1894; repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967). Notice that many of these types may be taken *in bonam partem* (the lion is Christ, the Lion of Judah) or *in malam partem* (the lion is Satan, who roars about seeking whom he may devour). They may also be taken to apply to various levels (St. Augustine, *City of God*, XIII, 21):

“They understand all its (Paradise’s) trees and fruit-bearing plants as virtues and habits of life...No one denies that Paradise may signify the life of the blessed; its four rivers, the four virtues, prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice; its trees, all useful knowledge; its fruits, the customs of the godly; its tree of life, wisdom herself, the mother of all good; the tree of knowledge of good and evil the experience of a broken commandment...These things can also and more profitably be understood of the Church, so that they become prophetic foreshadowings of the things to come. Thus Paradise is the Church, as it is called in the Canticles; the four rivers of Paradise are the four Gospels; the fruit-trees the saints, and the fruit their works...These and similar allegorical interpretations may suitably be put upon Paradise without giving offence to anyone.”

Thus, the bride in the Song of Songs may be taken to be Mary, the loving soul, or the Church. Note also the types of virtues: Christ = humility; Mary Magdalene = tearful penitence; Absalom = pride, beauty; St. Lawrence = generosity, etc. These were often taught by rote in schoolboy manuals on antonomasia, synecdoche, etc. NB: I have proposed St. Lawrence as the patron saint of pro football, since his two attributes are money-bags and a gridiron.

## 7. Recapitulation

Just as each act or thing in the OT prefigures one in the NT, so also are certain things recapitulations, reenactments, of others (W. Staerk, “Anakephalaiosis,” *Reallexikon fuer Antike und Christentum* 1 [Stuttgart, 1954], 411-414). The eucharist is a recapitulation of Christ’s sacrifice. Gonzalo de Berceo refers to Mary as “un prado, verde e bien sencido” (a green and unplowed meadow), not as a quaint reference to her virginity, but also because the birth of Christ is a recapitulation of the birth of Adam from the unplowed ground (terra inarabilis) of Genesis 2:5; cf. Peter Riga 1:37 f.

non erat ullus homo qui terre cultor inesset;  
 Irrorabat ibi gratia fontis humum.  
 Nescia Virgo viri tellus est absque colono;  
 Fons Sacer est Flatus viscera sacra replens.  
 De terre limo fit homo: de Virginis aluo  
 Carnem Christus habet, que quasi terra fuit.

Thus, the moistening of the earth is equated with the insufflation of the Holy Spirit. As we know from the Ave Maris Stella, the angelic greeting “Ave” reversed the course of human damnation, set into action by “Eva”. Many medieval sources have Adam’s birth or his conception be on the 25th of March, the traditional day of the annunciation (Missal of Abraham of Freising, Sacramentary of St. Vast, Jerusalem Breviary). Moreover, it was usually held that this was at Golgotha, and one of the forms of the Joca Monachorum has the question: Where was Adam baptized? and the answer: At the foot of the cross, from the blood of Christ.

Each day was the recapitulation of the history of salvation; the eight canonical hours the eight ages of man. The world also had its horoscope; medieval man lived under the sign of the fish.

The microcosm, man, recapitulated the macrocosm. ADAM was named from the four directions, in Greek, and with a star at each extremity. Each part of his body was connected with a particular planet, etc. etc. We Swedes could even prove that Adam was Swedish, since SVEN was composed of Soeder, Vaester, Euster (so we had to borrow), Nord.

Interesting in this connection is the certainty with which medieval man asserted that Christ was crucified at terce, etc. The following are from the canonical hours in the Leabhar Breac:

- a. Terce: Christ delivered up by Pilate; pentecost; crossing of Jordan; 3 youths and Daniel prayed; Jews accuse Christ; James beaten; John filled with Holy Spirit; walls of Jerusalem fall down; Helena found the cross.
- b. Sext: Adam formed; Adam sinned; Adam driven out; Cain slew Abel; youths in furnace; Christ crucified; Noah entered the ark and came out.
- c. Nones: crossing of Red Sea; walls of Jericho; Elija taken up; Elija comes to battle Antichrist; Christ cried aloud on the Cross; his body wounded, yields up spirit, harries hell, etc.
- d. Vespers: offering of the lamb; washed disciple’s feet
- e. Compline: celebrated by Christ in garden; prayed thrice, sweated.
- f. Nocturns (midnight): earth made, angels, firstborn of Egypt slain; Peter denied Christ; Paul delivered.
- g. Matins: birth of Christ, resurrection; judgement; perdition of world.
- h. Prime: manna; Christ brought before Pilate; 3 Maries at sepulchre; Christ ate honey and fish with disciples, after resurrection; ascension of Christ.

On all this, see Durandus.