

THE INVERSION OF SYMBOLS

SURPRISE IS SOMETIMES EXPRESSED at the fact that one and the same symbol can be taken in two senses, which are, at least apparently, directly contrary one to the other. This question is not merely one of the multiplicity of meanings that can, generally speaking, be carried by any symbol according to the point of view or the level from which it is considered, any kind of 'systematization' of symbols being made impossible by this very adaptability, but is a question more particularly of two aspects linked together through a mutual correlation, taking the form of an opposition, in such a way that one is so to speak the reverse or the 'negative' of the other. In order to understand this, duality must in the first place be considered as presupposed by all manifestation, and consequently as conditioning manifestation in all its modes, and it must always be traceable therein in one form or another;¹ it is true that any such duality is in truth a complementarism and not an opposition; but two terms that are really complementary can appear from a relatively exterior or contingent point of view to be opposed.² All opposition only exists as such at a certain level, for there can be no such

1. As it is one of the linguistic errors that are of common occurrence and are not without serious inconveniences, it may be useful to state clearly here that 'duality' and 'dualism' are two quite different things: dualism (of which the Cartesian conception of 'spirit' and 'matter' is among the best known examples) properly consists in regarding a duality as irreducible and in taking account of nothing beyond it, thereby denying the common principle from which the two terms of the duality really proceed by 'polarization'.

2. See *The Symbolism of the Cross*, chap. 7.

thing as an irreducible opposition; at a higher level it is always resolved into a complementarism, in which its two terms are found to be reconciled and harmonized, until they return at last into the unity of the common principle from which they both proceed. It can therefore be said that the point of view of complementarism is in a certain sense intermediate between that of opposition and that of unification; and each of these points of view has its good reason and its own value in the order to which it applies, although the three are obviously not situated at the same level of reality; what matters therefore is to know how to put each aspect into its proper hierarchical place, and not to try to carry it over into a domain in which it would no longer have any valid significance.

That being so, it is understandable that there is nothing in any way illegitimate in taking account of two contrary aspects in a symbol, and in addition that the consideration of either of these aspects in no way excludes the other, since each of them is equally true in a particular relation, and lastly even that by virtue of their correlation their existence is a single existence. It is therefore a mistake, and incidentally rather a common one, to suppose that the special consideration of one aspect or the other must be peculiar to doctrines or to schools that are themselves in opposition.³ In such cases everything depends solely on the predominance that may be assigned to one or the other, and sometimes also on the intention with which the symbol is used, for example as an element taking part in particular rites, or again as a means of recognition for the members of particular organizations; but this is a point to which we shall return. The fact that the two aspects may be united in one and the same complex symbolical figuration shows clearly that they are not mutually exclusive and can be considered simultaneously; and in this connection it will be well to note, although there can be no question of developing the subject fully, that a duality, which can be an opposition or a complementarism according to the point of view adopted, can be arranged, so far as the relative situation of its terms

3. Attention has been drawn elsewhere to a mistake of this kind in connection with the representation of the swastika with its arms turned so as to indicate opposite directions of rotation (*The Symbolism of the Cross*, chap. 10).

is concerned, either vertically or horizontally, this being an immediate consequence of the cross-shaped arrangement of the quaternary, which can be resolved into two dualities, one vertical and the other horizontal. The vertical duality can be related to the two extremities of an axis or to the two contrary directions in which that axis may be followed; the horizontal duality is that of two elements situated symmetrically on either side of that same axis. As an example of the first case the two triangles of the seal of Solomon can be cited (as well as all other symbols of analogy disposed according to a similar geometrical arrangement), and as an example of the second the two serpents of the caduceus; and it will be noticed that only in the vertical duality are the two terms clearly distinguished one from the other by their reversed positions, whereas in the horizontal duality they can appear completely similar or equivalent when considered separately, although their significance is not really any less contrary in this case than in the other. It can also be said that in the spatial order the vertical duality is that of up and down, and the horizontal that of right and left; though this observation may perhaps seem rather too obvious, it nonetheless has its importance, because symbolically (and this leads back to the intrinsically qualitative value of the directions of space) these two pairs of terms are themselves susceptible of multiple applications, traces of which could without difficulty be found even in current language, showing that matters of very general application are here in question.

So much being established in principle, certain consequences may easily be deduced in connection with what could be called the practical use of symbols; but here a consideration of a more special kind must first be introduced, namely, that of the case in which the two contrary aspects are taken as 'benefic' and 'malefic' respectively. It must be made clear that these two terms are used for want of any better, as on a previous occasion; they have in fact the disadvantage of leading to a supposition that some more or less 'moral' interpretation is admitted, whereas really there is nothing of the kind, and the words must be understood here in a purely 'technical' sense. Furthermore, it must be clearly understood that the 'benefic' or 'malefic' quality is not attached absolutely to one or the other of the two aspects, because it appertains only to a special application which

is such that all opposition, of whatever kind, could not possibly be brought indifferently within its range, and also because this quality would in any case necessarily disappear when the point of view of opposition is replaced by that of complementarism, to which any such consideration is wholly strange. Within these limits and after taking account of these reservations, the point of view of 'beneficence' or 'maleficence' has its normal place among all others; but it is also from this very point of view, or rather from the misuses to which it leads, that the subversion of the interpretation and use of symbolism now to be referred to may arise, a subversion constituting one of the 'marks' characteristic of everything that is derived, consciously or otherwise, from the domain of the 'counter-initiation', or is more or less directly subject to its influence.

This kind of subversion may consist either in attributing to the 'malefic' aspect, while continuing to recognize it as such, the place that normally belongs to the 'benefic' aspect, even to the point of giving it a sort of supremacy over the latter, or alternatively in attributing to symbols a meaning opposite to their legitimate meaning, by treating as 'benefic' the aspect that is really 'malefic', or the other way round. It must also be noted that, in accordance with what was said above, a subversion of this kind may not appear visibly in the representation of the symbols, because there are some in which the two contrary aspects are not marked by any outward difference recognizable at first sight. Thus, in the figurations related to what is commonly but very improperly called 'serpent-worship', it would often be impossible, at least if only the serpent itself were considered, to say *a priori* whether the *Agathodaimón* or the *Kakodaimón* is symbolized; hence many misunderstandings arise, especially on the part of those who are ignorant of the dual significance of the serpent and are tempted to see in it everywhere and always only a 'malefic' symbol, as has been in fact the case for a long time past with the generality of Westerners;⁴ and what has been said of the serpent could equally well be applied to many other symbolical animals, for it has become a habit for one reason or another no

4. For the same reason the Far-Eastern Dragon itself, really a symbol of the Word, has often been taken by Western ignorance to be a 'diabolical' symbol.

longer to consider more than one of the two opposed aspects in reality borne by these animals. In the case of symbols that can be made to take up two opposite positions, and especially those that are reduced to geometrical forms, it might be thought that the difference ought to be much more clearly apparent; nevertheless it is not always so, because the two positions of the same symbol are each capable of carrying a legitimate meaning, also because their relation is not necessarily that of 'beneficence' and 'maleficence', for, let it be said once more, that relation is only a particular application among all others. What it is important to know in such a case is whether there can be said to be a real intention to 'invert' in such a way as formally to contradict the normal and legitimate value of the symbol; that is why, for example, the use of the inverted triangle is very far from being always a sign of 'black magic' as some people think,⁵ although it certainly is so in some cases, namely, whenever it is accompanied by an intention to adopt an attitude opposed to what the triangle represents when its apex is turned upward. Incidentally, it may be remarked that an intentional 'inversion' of this kind can also be applied to words or to formulas, in such a way as to form various sorts of reversed *mantras*, as may be seen in certain of the practices of sorcery, even in the simple 'country witchcraft' such as still exists in the West.

Thus it can be seen that the question of the inversion of symbols is rather complicated, and it might well also be described as rather delicate; for in order to know what the real position is in any particular case it is necessary to examine, not so much the figurations seen in what may be called their 'materiality', as the accompanying interpretations which express the intention that dictated their adoption. And furthermore, the cleverest and most dangerous subversion is not the one that betrays itself by too obvious singularities easily noticed by anyone, but it is the one that deforms the meaning of symbols or reverses their import while making no change in their outward appearance. But the most diabolical trick of all is perhaps that which consists in attributing to the orthodox symbolism itself,

5. Instances can even be found in which the inverted triangles occurring among the alchemical symbols of the elements have been interpreted in that sense.

as it exists in truly traditional organizations and more especially in initiatic organizations (the latter being specially liable to attack in this case), the inverted interpretation that is specifically characteristic of the 'counter-initiation'; and the 'counter-initiation' does not fail to take advantage of this method of promoting confusions and uncertainties when it can derive some profit from them. This is really the whole secret of certain campaigns, very significant in view of the character of the present period, conducted either against esotericism in general or against any one initiatic form in particular, with the unconscious help of people who would be very astonished, and even appalled, if they could become aware of the use that is being made of them; unfortunately however it sometimes so happens that people who imagine that they are fighting the devil, whatever their particular notion of the devil may be, are thus turned, without the least suspicion of the fact on their part, into his best servants!