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Christ, "the form of the soul":
The concept of symbol in
the theology of Horace Bushnell

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CHRIST, "THE FORM OF THE SOUL":
THE CONCEPT OF SYMBOL IN
THE THEOLOGY OF HORACE BUSHNELL

BY

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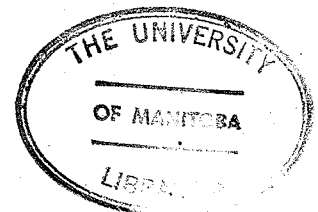
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THESIS Dawne McCance

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Outline

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Man and Nature: "God's Moral Economy"	5
Chapter Two: The Trinity: "language for God"	43
Chapter Three: The Person of Christ: "God's last metaphor"	64
Chapter Four: The Work of Christ: Atonement as the "art of God"	82
Footnotes:	
Introduction	129
Chapter One	130
Chapter Two	145
Chapter Three	155
Chapter Four	160
Bibliography	171

INTRODUCTION

We may assume it without rashness to be the supreme object of God as the creator and governor of men to bestow himself upon them or be inwardly communicated to them. For this men are constitutently made, even as an eye is made for the light. In a certain first view of things, observing chiefly the bounties of the world, one might guess that God's prime object here is the preparing of growths and fruitages that will grow men, growing animals for their sake; but in deeper second thought it will be seen that he is building for mind, to make himself the light of intelligence, the friend of guidance, the supreme joy of love. Physical production plainly enough is no main purpose with him. He glasses himself on every side in objects and forms related to mind. By music and fragrance and color he wakens the sense of his beauty. By unnumbered and persistent ways of discipline he trains experimentally to the knowledge of himself.

- The Spirit in Man, p. 13

Apart from the attention it has received in the context of his language theory, no attempt has been made to come to terms with the meaning and role of symbol in the theology of Horace Bushnell. This is surprising, considering the centrality of the concept in Bushnell's thought, its obvious relation to his own religious experiences, and the apparent tension between symbol and truth which underlies all of his major theological statements.¹ And in a sense, one can almost say that Theodore Munger, initiator of a great legacy of misinterpretation, hinted at a dimension of Bushnell's thought which has not been explored since.² For it is not so much that the natural and the supernatural are divorced from one another, but that all reality is an embodiment of

the divine, that the whole universe is one vast symbol of God.

Bushnell nowhere defined the crucial term "symbol", and he used the word synonymously with several other terms, such as "metaphor", "figure", "form", "image" and "type". Perhaps the best place to begin looking for his meaning of symbol is with the difference between the literal and the fanciful. For if the symbolic consciousness that was part of Bushnell's Puritan heritage had been lost to the New England mind after Edwards, Bushnell did not see its recovery in the "contrived" imagery of the New England left. If there were no mystics among the orthodox, neither could Emerson or Parker be called by that name. According to Bushnell, symbols could not be understood on the level of nature: "the roots of the known are always in the unknown". Every genuine symbol stands out from a background of mystery as a face through which the infinite and unknown looks out upon us, tempting us to struggle into that holy and dark profound which it is opening.

This does not mean, as we will see in Chapter One, that man is not a symbol-maker. Indeed, man is distinguished from all other forms of life on the basis of his symbolic imagination--his capacity to both generate and interpret symbols. Bushnell's definitions of "nature" and "supernatural" are part of an organic theory, according to which all supernatural powers live by embodiment, that is, by bodying forth symbols through the medium or means of nature. But it does mean that all symbol systems operate in terms of one grand and overarching whole, and that ultimately, the meaning of any symbol can be known only in terms of the whole.

In other words, the symbol is grounded in the Reality which it represents.³ This leads us to two fundamental dimensions of Bushnell's

symbolic theory: analogy and relationality. The correspondence between symbol and truth is not arbitrary, but "prepared". This principle of analogy applies not only to human language, but to all objective reality, to all "things and worlds". It gives Bushnell's symbolism its unlimited scope, and what he called its "moral" meaning.

One aspect of analogy is mystery--that the correspondence between symbol and truth is beyond investigation. We can never know what belongs to the symbol and what to the significance, but we can, through the universal presence of the form-element together with the discerning powers of insight, achieve a gradual spiritualizing of the symbolic world. This is our experimental training to the knowledge of God, the life-long drill in forms and images, prepared for the future benefits and uses of the practice.

The deepest meaning of symbol is as vehicle of God himself. God inspired us in a symbolic reality for the purpose of restoring a lost relationship, and ultimately, the role of the symbol is to conduct souls under sin back to God. Symbols are vehicles of God's own feeling, of the divine beauty and goodness and love. And as the truth which the symbol opens to us is a personal Being, our response to the symbol is one of commitment and trust. It is our embracing of the supernatural through the symbol that brings the inward communication of God.

It is the thesis of this paper that Bushnell's theology can not be interpreted apart from his symbolic theory. Any revelation, he said, whether it be a proposition of language, a vision or "a divine life in the flesh", takes place under conditions of symbol or form. Chapters Two, Three and Four of the thesis are concerned to examine Bushnell's understanding of God in Christ in terms of this basic theory;

in particular, in the light of an apparent tension which surfaces from within this theory and which is evidenced in Bushnell's theology in terms of a shift, or a gradual movement, which comes to a rather abrupt climax in the 1870's. It is the purpose of this paper not to "explain" that shift, but to put it in the context of Bushnell's symbolic theory, and further, to illustrate how central that symbolism is in Bushnell's doctrines of the person and work of Christ.

CHAPTER ONE

Man and Nature: "God's Moral Economy"

(i) Recovering the supernatural and the symbolic

Notwithstanding the interpretation of Theodore Munger, Horace Bushnell did not come down to Yale breathing some sort of nature-mysticism bred in the fresh, free air of Litchfield.¹ About four years before entering college, while tending a carding machine, Bushnell penned, a half-sentence at a time, an exposition of the ninth chapter of Romans. Says Mary Bushnell Cheney of this essay: "The method throughout is strictly logical, and has no trace of the spiritual insight which later characterized his thought on these and kindred subjects."²

Cheney sees this youthful essay as one of the many evidences that Bushnell was, prior to his college days, striving and straining to adapt himself to the arid religious orthodoxy of the day. But as time passed, and despite his exertions, "my religious character went down".³ He would later see his own experience in terms of the struggle faced by "every ingenuous young person" who, in his search after truth, had to grapple with the speculative logic of New England theology. Such a person, said Bushnell

. . . has either to clear his way out into the truth by himself, through years of sorest conflict and groans of private mental war that God only does not frown upon; or else, in fault of any such persistency, to settle back into the more facile embrace of a confirmed and scornful infidelity.⁴

Bushnell's first glimpse after truth came in 1831 while he was tutoring at Yale. It was, says Cheney, "the most important crisis in his life".⁵ Through the reading of Coleridge's Aids To Reflection, Bushnell was able to see beyond the confines of speculative logic to the possibility of intuitive knowledge.

My habit was only landscape before; but now I saw enough to convince me of a whole other world somewhere overhead, a range of realities in higher tier, that I must climb after, and, if possible, apprehend.⁶

Through Bushnell's own account of 1831, given in the autobiographical sermon, "The Dissolving of Doubts", we can recognize the nature and significance of this spiritual awakening. The sermon opens with a description of the questions which were confronting him and a large class of young thinkers in that "specially doubting age":

Science puts every thing in question, and literature distils the questions, making an atmosphere of them. We doubt both creation and Creator; whether there be second causes or only primal causes running ab aeterno in aeternum; whether God is any thing more than the sum of such causes; whether he works by will back of such causes; whether he is spirit working supernaturally through them; whether we have any personal relation to him, or he to us. And then, when we come to the matter of revelation, we question the fact of miracles and of the incarnation. We doubt free agency and responsibility, immortality and salvation, the utility of prayer and worship, and even of repentance for sin.⁷

Prior to 1831, Bushnell had, like a true son of the homespun mode, harnessed all his mental energies into the settling of these great questions, reasoning with restless urgency, "thinking of this and thinking of that". But such attempts "to find" the truth had brought him to a dead end, to what he called a "painful vacuity".⁸

My very difficulty was that I was too thoughtful, substituting thought for every thing else, and expecting so intently to dig

out a religion by my head that I was pushing it all the while practically away. Unbelief, in fact, had come to be my element.⁹

In 1831, Bushnell resolved to "begin at the beginning", to stake his life on the universal law of right.¹⁰ In judging the meaning of this experience, commentators have been less inclined to note the touch of Coleridge than the influence of Scottish common sense realism or Calvinistic moralism. And in all, the estimates given of 1831 as a "conversion" to duty rather than to faith, miss the full meaning of this experience for Bushnell's future life and thought.¹¹

For in 1831, with a deliberate dedication to moral rectitude, Bushnell first became experientially aware of a "higher sense", what he would later call "imagination". With his conscious commitment to a right God, he first "dimly felt" the reality of God; with his resolution to settle himself practically in the great first law of right, came his first apprehension of Christianity as a "practical truth".¹² In terms of his later theology, Bushnell's surrender of will had concomitantly revitalized his intuitive sense:

And this is the power of the will, as regards our moral recovery. It may so offer itself and the subordinate capacities to God, that God shall have the whole man open to his dominion, and be able to ingenerate in him a new, divine state, or principle of action; while taken as a governing, cultivating, and perfecting power in itself, it has no such capacity whatsoever.¹³

It is then in "that subtle gleam of sympathy", or in the assurance that "A Being so profoundly felt, must inevitably be", that Bushnell intimates the nature of his revelation of 1831.¹⁴ "The Dissolving of Doubts" provides several of Bushnell's own "aphorisms", and these show some results of his mind's "new conditions". The great questions were

not gone, but he had a new way of approaching them. Hereafter, Bushnell's life is marked by a growing sense of inner peace, which would carry him through years of illness and accusation. He would wrestle with the doctrines of trinity, incarnation and atonement to the end of his life, but never again would he be afraid to "hang up questions and let them hang".¹⁵

A soul thus dissolved of doubts, wrote Bushnell, "will undertake shortly some point that is not cleared at once by the daylight of his new experience, and will, by and by, master it".¹⁶ It is significant, then, that as early as the year following this experience, Bushnell first addressed himself to what he called "the great question of the age"--the concept of nature.¹⁷ The meaning of nature, the relation of nature to God and of man to God and nature, were issues challenging every enlightened American in the mid-nineteenth century, and specifically threatening inherited Christianity.¹⁸

In an article written in May, 1832, Bushnell distinguished the realm of nature ("inert and powerless, never truly acting, but only acted with or upon") from the realm of mind ("agency itself, power acting of itself and revealing its motions through physical symbols"). At a later time, Bushnell pencilled in the margin of this manuscript: "This article shows the ferment out of which my Nature and Supernaturalism grew into shape thirty years after."¹⁹

These early definitions are consistent with Bushnell's later elaboration of the themes of nature and supernatural, given in the 1858 treatise, Nature and the Supernatural as Together Constituting the One System of God, the 1868 collection of essays, Moral Uses of Dark Things, and in several shorter selections, such as "Progress", and "Science and

Religion".²⁰ They indicate a fresh expression, a new approach to the questions, and one which is basic to Bushnell's entire theological reformulation. But the significance of this new approach can be measured only against the overall naturalism of the day.

It was for Bushnell that "death-damp" which like an atmosphere permeated the mind of the age, that "insidious form of unbelief" which threatened to undermine the foundations of all knowledge and community. And he focused his attack against it in the two fundamental presuppositions underlying naturalistic philosophy: first, the belief that nature, as a physical order, is itself the single and whole sphere of reality; second, belief in the essential goodness and perfectability of man.

"From the first moment or birth-time of modern science", wrote Bushnell, "it has been clear that Christianity must ultimately come into a grand issue of life and death with it, or with the tendencies embodied in its progress".²¹ With the successful demonstration of the workings of cause-effect, the mechanical model was becoming normative for all reality, such that nothing could be true unless proved by the scientific method. It was a scheme alien to any concept of freedom or personality or relationship.²²

There had developed, said Bushnell, "a skeptical tendency by modern science, which has set the laws of nature, for the time, in such prominence, as to operate a real suppression of thought in the spiritual direction".²³ The abuse lay not so much in the apprehension of nature as in "the assumed universal extent of nature, by which it becomes a fate, an all-devouring abyss of necessity, in which God, and man, and all free beings are virtually swallowed up."²⁴ This is the "new infidelity" which can allow no supernatural or spiritual dimension,

nothing distinct or apart from "a world as being a world".²⁵

Busied in nature, and profoundly engrossed with her phenomena, confident of the uniformity of her laws, charmed with the opening wonders revealed in her processes, armed with manifold powers contributed to the advancement of commerce and the arts by the discovery of her secrets, and pressing onward still in the inquest, with an eagerness stimulated by rivalry and the expectation of greater wonders yet to be revealed,--occupied in this manner, not only does the mind of scientific men but of the age itself become fastened to, and glued down upon, nature; conceiving that nature, as a frame of physical order, is itself the system of God; unable to imagine any thing higher and more general to which it is subordinate.²⁶

While the new geology evidenced this secularity of nature, biology's "development theory" posed an even greater threat to the Christian view of man and history. Since progress ruled all life, man's story was also one of ascent. His progress hinged not on the action of God in history, but on the forward thrust of natural causes. His imperfections would soon be abolished through an inherent process of linear development. There are, said Bushnell, no sins, for there is nothing to sin against. Evil is good in the making, and man is on his way to all that is virtuous and true. Bushnell cited New England Unitarianism as a case in point:

Denying human depravity, the need of a supernatural grace also vanishes, and they set forth a religion of ethics, instead of a gospel to faith. Their word is practically, not regeneration, but self-culture. There is a good seed in us, and we ought to make it grow ourselves. The gospel proposes salvation; a better name is development. Christ is a good teacher or interpreter of nature, and only so a redeemer. God, they say, has arranged the very scheme of the world so as to punish sin and reward virtue; therefore, any such hope of forgiveness as expects to be delivered of the natural effects of sin by a supernatural and regenerative experience, is vain; because it implies the failure of God's justice and the overturning of a natural law. Whoever is delivered of sin, must be delivered by such a life as finally brings the great law of justice on his side. To be justified freely by grace is impossible.²⁷

With such ominous perceptions all around him, Bushnell embarked on Nature and the Supernatural, where he upheld and elaborated his 1832 distinction between matter and mind in terms of "nature" and "supernatural". To lift man out from nature, and recover a view of man as a creature of freedom, he followed Coleridge's distinction between "powers" and "things". And again, like Coleridge, he located the seat of personal freedom in the human will.²⁸

Nature, Bushnell defined as "that created realm of being or substance which has an acting, a going on or process from within itself, under and by its own laws . . . a chain of causes and effects, or a scheme of orderly succession, determined from within the scheme itself."²⁹ The supernatural, on the other hand, he did not confine to the divine. All beings, persons, or "powers" are supernatural, the basis for this designation being the will.

Man is thus distinguished from all other forms of organic life in that he is a being supernatural, a creature of freedom who is both in nature and partially sovereign over it.

He is under no law of cause and effect in his choices. He stands out clear and sovereign as a being supernatural, and his definition is that he is an original power, acting, not in the line of causality, but from himself.³⁰

Man is part of nature in the sense that all functions of his soul but the will are a nature, and as nature, operate under their own fixed laws of causality, partially subordinated to the uses of the will and its sovereignty over their changes and processes.

In certain parts or departments of the soul itself, such as memory, appetite, passion, attention, imagination, association, disposition, the will-power in him is held in contact, so to speak, with conditions and qualities that are dominated partly

by laws of cause and effect; for these faculties are partly governed by their own laws, and partly submitted to his governing will by their own laws; so that when he will exercise any control over them, or turn them about to serve his purpose, he can do it, in a qualified sense and degree, by operating through their laws. As far as they are concerned, he is pure nature, and he is only a power superior to cause and effect at the particular point of volition where his liberty culminates, and where the administration he is to maintain over his whole nature centers.³¹

It is not necessary, then, "to go hunting after marvels, apparitions, suspensions of the laws of nature, to find the supernatural; it meets us in what is least transcendent and most familiar, even in ourselves."³² Bushnell calls self-determination "the central attribute of all personality", imparting to man "what is personal in character". It is by virtue of his will that man is what Bushnell calls a "moral" being, and life is what he calls a "moral" affair.³³ At the basis of this term is not some scheme of morality, but the understanding of man as a personality, a self who is unable to live in isolation from other selves. It is a concept which comprehends man's freedom, his individuality, his capacity to respond to the other. And it is a concept which abhors any view of man conceived in mechanistic terms.

Hence, for example, it is that we look on the nobler demonstrations of character in man, with a feeling so different from any that can be connected with mere cause and effect. In every friend we distinguish something more than a distillation of natural causes; a free, faithful soul, that, having a power to betray, stays fast in the integrity of love and sacrifice. We rejoice in heroic souls, and in every hero we discover a majestic spirit, how far transcending the merely instinctive and necessary actings of animal and vegetable life It is no mere wheel, no link in a chain, that stirs our blood in this manner; but it is a man, the sense we have of a man, rising out of the level of things, great above all things, great as being himself.³⁴

But man is also part of nature in the sense that he is "in it, environed by it, acting through it". And that he is set in such close connection with it, Bushnell sees as no fortuity but predetermined in a reality where all supernatural expression is "embodied". "All vital or vitalizing powers are organific, and live by their embodiment".³⁵ This means that from his own point of liberty, man acts upon the laws of cause and effect in nature, thus bodying forth forms or symbols which the mere laws of cause and effect could not themselves produce. That is supernatural, according to Bushnell, which is capable of affecting nature in such a way as to produce results, which by mere nature, could not come to pass. And nature, in this view, is the medium through which such supernatural activity occurs.

And what is the supernatural? It is that which comes down upon nature out of will For nature, we shall see, is put down as a constant quantity, to be the medium or means, the coin or currency system, for exchanges going on between supernatural agents acting themselves into it and through it.³⁶

In rejecting naturalistic monism, Bushnell thus makes a radical distinction between matter and mind, nature and supernatural. Yet inherent in this duality is an underlying unity of structure: things and powers are always related, the one as "organ", "field", "instrument", "vehicle", "medium"; the other as "agent, or force, which acts from itself, uncaused, initiating trains of effect that flow from itself".³⁷ It is this structure that makes all of life a "supernatural transaction" or a "grand conversation of wills".

And thus it is that we find ourselves embodied in matter to act as powers upon, for, with, and, if we will, against each other, in all the endless complications of look, word, act, art, force, and persuasion; in the family and in the