



# LRS Newsletter

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The Library of Renaissance Symbolism

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A symbol is a juxtaposition, that is an adaptation, of visible forms brought forth to demonstrate some invisible matter.  
(Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141): quoted by M-D Chenu)

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The theme of this newsletter is inspired by a reading of the book *Nature, Man and Society* by M-D. Chenu which is featured in the Book Review section below. In this we get Hugh of St. Victor's answer to a rather basic question: what is a symbol? - a question that is at the center of the speculations of all the authors who are featured in this Library. Hugh's answer given above is in the classic tripartite form still used by semioticians today: it comprises something visible, the signifier, which signifies something invisible, the signified, by some method of demonstration. It is this latter which I focus on here. What is meant by demonstration?

It is not logic. Hugh is trying to go beyond logic, beyond reason, to a reality which as Chenu says, "reason cannot attain and cannot even conceptualize." Besides logic is only a tool, it cannot tell us anything about the validity of the premise it works from. Aristotle confirms this in the opening words of his *Topica*: to be valid, he says, a premise must be self-evident or based on the "authority" of illustrious men. But however eminent the authority, it is not satisfactory for the inquiring mind always to accept what you are told to accept. Boethius in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century famously confirmed that "authority" is the weakest sort of proof.

Hugh tells us that the relationship between signifier and signified is not random but an "adaptation of visible forms" and this must be so otherwise the use of the symbol would not advance our understanding of what is signified. If the signifier was just a randomly chosen representation of the signified we would be no further forward.

Much of the "worldview" of medieval and Renaissance culture centered on the belief that all things in the universe were in some way connected one with another and much philosophical energy and ink was devoted to demonstrating how this could be.

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## Sympathy

The overarching concept for the interconnection of all things in the universe used by the ancients and right through to the Renaissance was *sympatheia* a word probably deriving in this context from the Greek Stoic philosopher Chrysippus from the third century BCE. It was well known that a change in one part of a living being could affect the whole of that being or indeed any part of it and since the universe was regarded as a living being the conclusion followed. What was done here in our own backyard could influence what went on in another part of the universe. Plotinus the neoPlatonist philosopher from the third century CE confirmed that: “this One-all, [the universe] therefore, is a sympathetic total and stands as one living being” (Enneads IV, iv, 32: trans. Stephen Mckenna). Then we have Pseudo-Dionysius from the sixth century who succeeded in fusing Platonic philosophy and Christian theology with his concept of the universal hierarchy of being. The goodness of God flowed down through the levels of the hierarchy until it reached Man who in turn seeking God through love (think Plato’s *Symposium* or Ficino’s “*furor*”) rose back through the hierarchy until he reached the perfection of the One. Man being at the bottom of the pile and a confused mixture of the material and the divine was, in the characteristically vigorous words of Montaigne, “the filth and mire of the world, the most lifeless part of the universe, the bottom story of the house” (*Essais* II, 12 trans. Donald Frame). For our purposes, the point is that each level of the hierarchy coming down and going up, was according to Pseudo-Dionysius bound together by *sympatheia*. Thus, only through the mystical ascent to the highest levels of the hierarchy, to perfection, could one expect to achieve knowledge of God. It was this exclusivity of perfection, the exclusivity of the achievement of knowledge, that was at least partly responsible for the continuous refrain of contemporaries that knowledge should be kept secret, must be kept from the *idiotae*, the ignorant masses and should only be revealed by symbols.

By the time of the Renaissance the details of the workings of *sympatheia* had been parsed in almost unintelligible detail into the concepts of *amicitia*, *aequalitas*, *consonantia*, *concertus*, *continuum*, *proportio*, *similitudo*, *conjunctio*, *convenientia*, *copula*, *aemulatio*, *analogia* and others (a detailed discussion of the differences is contained in Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* 1966). Beyond this, the question was how did these multiple modes of *sympatheia* enable a connection between one object and another? The answer was, in the words of Foucault uncannily repeating Hugh of St Victor, that there must be “visible marks for the invisible analogies.” These marks were indications on the surface of things, symbols of what they represented; the technical term was “signatures.” Paracelsus said “And even though [God] has hidden certain things, he has allowed nothing to remain without exterior and visible signs in the form of special marks” (*De Natura Rerum* 1537) and Oswald Crollius in his *Traite des Signatures* (1612) said the same; the internal virtue of objects “has been given to them by heaven as a natural dowry ... that is to be recognized rather by its signature.”

As Foucault puts it: “the nature of things, their coexistence, the way they are linked together and communicate is nothing other than their resemblance. And that resemblance is visible only in the network of signs that crosses the world from one end to the other.” And as Hugh also indicates, these resemblances cannot be exact, they must be offset one from another, adapted in some way so as to present a degree of new information on what is symbolized. To use the language of language we are not dealing with simile here but metaphor, by means of which language itself advances as a result of close but not exact connection between ideas. The paradigm for the advancement of knowledge for the Renaissance was the discovery of resemblance through the medium of the signature.

This of course is not the end of the story. Examples of signs and symbols of the Renaissance where signifier and signified are related through resemblance will be discussed in future newsletters.

Bibliography: Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses - une archéologie des sciences humaines* Paris: Gallimard, 1966; translated as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.



Title Page: Crollius' *Traite des Signatures*

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century.*  
*M-D. Chenu. Edited and translated by J. Taylor and L.*  
*K. Little. University of Chicago Press, 1968.*

It is seldom that we can read a book by an author who not only has a brilliant mind and is absolutely at home in his subject but also can write well. As an added bonus the translation expresses fluently the complex philosophical subject-matter. The chapters on Platonisms of the Twelfth Century and the Symbolist Mentality are particularly apposite and the whole book well illustrates that the classical, medieval and Renaissance periods formed a single era of which one cultural element the belief in the symbolic as an aid to understanding the mysteries of life and of the divine was in continuous development.

## EVENTS

The British Library displays a manuscript of the Roman de la Rose, the 13<sup>th</sup> century allegorical poem at <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/remarkmanu/roman/index.html>

The BnF has an online exhibit on Geoffroy Tory including the 1529 edition of the Champ Fleury <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/remarkmanu/roman/index.html>

And it also has an extensive exhibit on the Bestiary. <http://expositions.bnf.fr/bestiaire/index.htm>



Future editions of the Newsletter will contain: Stories from the first English edition of Poggio's Facetiae; Fables and the Lives of Aesop; And much, much more.

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Contributions of text to the Newsletter, including Articles; Reviews, Notes or Events or contributions of bibliographic material to the Library are welcome and will be properly acknowledged in their place. For how to contribute see [www.libraryofsymbolism.com/contributionsandconbutors.php4](http://www.libraryofsymbolism.com/contributionsandconbutors.php4). The Library now offers Research and Book locating services. For details see [www.libraryofsymbolism.com/bookservice.php4](http://www.libraryofsymbolism.com/bookservice.php4). For general correspondence email [raybould@libraryofsymbolism.com](mailto:raybould@libraryofsymbolism.com). For comments on the web site email [benheller@libraryofsymbolism.com](mailto:benheller@libraryofsymbolism.com)

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