

Representing Transcendence: The Semiosis of Real Presence

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ABSTRACT

The double function of representation as “standing for” and “making present again” is explored in two case studies of ancient Egyptian cult statues and medieval Christian eucharistic transubstantiation. The experience of the “real presence” of the transcendent accomplished by ritual action is, in both cases, mediated by regimenting metasemiotic texts that proclaim and justify sacramental ontologies of transcendent realities that provide, in turn, models for their very representability in perceptible semiotic mediators. The concept of the “circle of semiosis” is proposed as a counter to scholarly efforts to anchor the variability of solutions to the paradox of representing the nonrepresentable in terms of their positioning relative to an “axial breakthrough” or to analyze metasemiotic texts as being primarily post hoc interpretations of universal psychological tendencies to see beyond the here and now.

The *Tao* of which one can speak is not the eternal *Tao*.

—Lao-tzu (quoted in Schwartz 1975b, 65)

There is no place in culture for the illusion of transparency.

—Valerio Valeri (1985, xii)

In using the phrase “representing transcendence” to focus this supplementary issue of *Signs and Society*, we are interested in socially constructed and historically specific discursive, behavioral, and material forms of signs that express (depict, imply, suggest, problematize, deny, etc.) something beyond normal human experience for individuals and groups in day-to-day and in specially marked contexts. We are not, that is, primarily interested in the questions

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raised, for example, by evolutionary psychology about the “naturalness” for all humans or for humans at some defined “age” of cultural history of cognitive representations expressing beliefs in transcendent entities or quests for transcendent experiences. What is at issue, rather, are the semiotic mechanisms and consequences of efforts to represent, in the double sense of *standing in place* of something that is absent and *making present again* that which was previously absent,¹ the “beyond” in some perceptible or imaginable medium while maintaining, at the same time, an ideological (theological or philosophical) stance that these transcendent objects (beings, deities, powers, ideals, universals) by the definition of their very natures cannot be so represented—because they are, on the one hand, beyond knowing and, on the other hand, anchored in an utterly separate realm. It may well turn out, ironically, that the fact that cultures at different times and places seem to get embroiled in this “paradox” of representation is itself a significant aspect of some long-term evolutionary or historical picture, but, for a journal devoted to semiosis or sign processes, there are always more localized explanations (especially, as we will see, metasemiotic ones) to be found and compared.

What, then, are some of the types of semiotic consequences for cultural systems that, on the one hand, postulate a radical and unbridgeable separation between a mundane world of human experience and a supernatural world that, being wholly other, is not a possible object of direct human experience and yet, on the other hand, demand, as a result, diverse mediational forms operable by virtue of or in opposition to “regimenting” ideologies of representation? And how are the resulting efficacious potentialities of these materialized representations understood in relation, for example, to less officially valued “magical” or “idolatrous” objects and to the logic of ritual action required to enliven their performativity? Finally, how can we explain the importance of sophisticated or esoteric semiotic ideologies that regiment local understandings of both representations and rituals when the real-time experience of transcendence often seems to demand a phenomenological “suspension” of those same abstract formulations? After some typological and methodological preliminaries, this

1. Marin (2001, 352) explains the difference between “mimetic” and “spectacular” representation: “‘To represent’ signifies first of all to substitute something present for something absent (which is of course the most general structure of signs). This type of substitution is, as we know, governed by a mimetic economy: it is authorized by a postulated similarity between the present thing and the absent thing. But in other respects, to represent means to show, to exhibit something present. In this case, the very act of presenting constructs the identity of what is represented, identifies the thing represented as such. On the one hand, a mimetic operation between presence and absence allows the entity that is present to function in the place of the absent one. On the other hand, a spectacular operation, a self-presentation, constitutes an entity and a property by giving the representation legitimate value.”

essay will focus on two cases of the “real presence” of transcendence: cult statues in the ancient world and eucharistic practices in medieval Christianity.

Semiotic Conventions and Ideologies of Representation

One possible reaction to this confrontation with absolute transcendence would be to systematically abandon (or actually reject) all efforts to represent the transcendent world in humanly constructed forms, insisting that anything “made by human hands” is utterly inadequate or religiously dangerous.² Even in such relatively iconophobic or rigidly iconoclastic regimes, some representations of transcendence might be allowed if they were believed to be sent to earth by divine powers, were created by some kind of mechanical or automatic replication process, or carefully avoided the direct pictorial depiction of gods in favor of decorative, abstract, or veiled forms (Freedberg 1989; Besançon 2000; Smith 2004). When set in the context of a “semiosphere” that generally favors the representation of gods, iconoclastic movements can arise that work against either an “external” neighboring tradition or against an “internal” religious norm demanding “reform” at the levels of both practice and ideology (Leone 2010). Well-documented examples of this include the ancient Israelite opposition to the surrounding “idolatries” of Canaanite and (later) Roman cults; the so-called Amarna revolution during the reign of Akhenaten (ca. 1353–1336 BCE) in eighteenth-dynasty Egypt that removed all statues and images of gods in favor of depicting only the sun disk, the body of the hidden god, and the sun’s rays as the remaining indexical linkage between the transcendent and the king; the two short-lived periods (730–87 CE and 815–43 CE) in medieval Byzantine Christianity that rejected the use of icons in liturgical practice and private devotion; and the “stripping of the altars” during the Protestant Reformation in Continental Europe and England.

But even more interesting from a semiotic point of view are cases in which a religious tradition simultaneously guards against the worship or reverence of “idols” but permits representations that are themselves exemplars or analogies of “semiotic mediators” grounded in the very nature of divinity (or the cosmos more generally) that have a duality of immanence and transcendence built in. A culture might, for example, recognize a special class of “bridges”

2. Camille (1989) notes that the positive value attached, in many traditions, to images that showed no evidence of being created by human hands reflects the general theological principle that humans should not “usurp God’s role as artificers of man and the universe” (33) as well as the widespread attitude “that human labor is degrading and ignoble,” resulting in the “displacement of production to somewhere outside human space and time” (30).

between this worldly and other worldly orders, along with sophisticated “theological,” “philosophical,” or “scholastic” reasonings that explain these interventions in terms that actually reinforce or even widen the distance between the natural and the transcendent (e.g., the multiple “embodiments” of ancient Egyptian gods, eucharistic transubstantiation in Catholic Christianity, and ancestor worship in China [Schwartz 1975b, 62]).

A second possibility would be to harness a culture’s ideologies of materiality and corresponding iconographic conventions that, denotatively or connotatively, express the “beyondness” (i.e., distant from the here and now), the maximal greatness (in relation to human finitude), the transient or permanent absence, or some other quality (blinding brightness, eternal stability, unfathomable powers) that distinguishes transcendent referents from everyday objects of experience. In both Greek and Roman antiquity the colossal size of statues of gods and emperors instilled “an impression of power and divinity, surpassing the human sphere” (von den Hoff 2012, 107). Early medieval texts explain that precious stones used in mosaics representing Christ are a “material analogy” between the brilliant play of light of the image and the pure divinity of Christ. Similarly, colored and translucent cloisonné enamel used in narrative images served “as a concrete analogy of the Word made flesh. . . . In this way, the very material out of which pictures were made complements and reinforces the incarnational meaning of the narrative” (Thunø 2005, 274).

Figural conventions such as the rayed or golden halo or nimbus found in many religious traditions were easily interpretable ways to signal the transcendence or sacrality of the depicted object: the depiction of Christ with a rayed nimbus derives from images associated with the Roman cult of Sol Invictus (unconquered sun) (Frazer 1979). Cruciform images, especially when enclosed by a circle or wheel (*rota*), were “convenient schemata above all for cosmological diagrams, which expressed divine order and harmony” (Caviness 1983, 103–4). Putting a frame around a portrait (*imago clipeata*) located within a picture was a device used to represent figures not visible to characters in the scene, thus signaling their apotheosis (Kessler 2000). The depiction of silence in an image can serve as a “visual analogy” (Strickland 2007, 107) for aspects of the divine: the closed mouths of angels contrast with the gaping mouths of demons.

Conventionalized pictorial styles can also be understood to signal transcendence. Pasztory (2005, 131) argues that, for both pre-Columbian and Western European artistic traditions, an “abstract” style, that is, a style that involves the reduction to single lines and the approximation of geometrical forms and that

depicts referents not normally observable in the everyday world, can be used to represent the “ideality” of those transcendent objects. While often difficult for modern museum goers to appreciate, Egyptian cult statues were carved with standardized “frontality,” that is, in a style with the god’s face looking directly forward—toward the ritual action taking place right in front of the statue. Frontality thus signals undivided attention, not stolid immobility (Robins 1994, 151; 2008, 19). The confinement of these statues in rectangular shrines only reinforces this by leaving one frontal opening: the basalt statue of Wahibra in the British Museum depicts the king holding in his lap a miniature *naos* (shrine) that contains a small relief of the god Osiris, also looking straight ahead (Robins 2008, 19).³

A third, and especially interesting, possibility is found in representations that work at the level of “metasemiotics,” that is, of explicitly depicting some phase, practice, or norm of nonrepresentational semiosis by showing, for example, the failure of the human faculty of sight; the act or process of hiding, making opaque or covering of the transcendent object; the temporal delay caused by the actual movement of the object outside a pictorial frame; or any other semiotic aspects of process involved in perception, communication, or interpretation.

Whether directly dependent on the mystical writings of Pseudo-Dionysus or, as Zinn (1986) contends, the more locally available influence of Richard of St. Victor, Abbot Suger, the force behind the design of St.-Denis outside Paris as well as the author of texts justifying its ornamentation, was careful not just to exemplify the logic of “anagogical” symbolism but to carefully construct an image showing how this interpretive logic worked in a particular case. One of the bronze medallions on the door depicts the scene of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and Zinn argues that this particular scene was chosen to illustrate a “specific understanding of the way visible reality leads to invisible truth” (35), that is, the failure of humans to perceive the proper relationship between material signs and spiritual realities: without redemption, no aspect of the created world can lead to the “True Light.” Hamburger (2000, 50) gives a parallel example of the *Madonna and Child with Canon George van der Paele*, completed by Jan van Eyck in 1436, which shows the canon gazing

3. Although Akhenaten’s “religion of light” temporarily eliminated the cultic use of statues of the gods, depictions of the sun’s disk and rays continue the convention of frontality as expressing the “greatest possible effectiveness” (Hornung 1999, 78). Rather than showing the face-to-face interaction between the king and the god, as was typical prior to the Amarna Revolution, the king and his family are depicted as the exclusive recipients of life-giving rays descending from the solar disk above, itself depicted frontally.

at the holy pair with his spectacles removed, thus signaling that his vision is with his inner or spiritual rather than his corporeal eye.

Generalizing across early Mesopotamian civilizations, Winter (2000, 36) reasons that peoples' "direct and intense visual experience of the sacred" is precisely mirrored (according to contemporary texts) in the affective impact of their experience of temples, cult objects, and royal dwellings. This, she argues, is one explanation for the enlarged eyes of statues of the gods, not just to focus the gaze of spectators but to represent their expected response—literally "being struck" by their awe-inspiring nature.⁴ A gypsum relief of Atargatis and Hadad from Dura Europos (late second or early third century CE) provides an interesting inversion of the vector of the gaze, according to Lucian, who remarks: "There is another wondrous feature of this statue. If you stand opposite and look directly at it, it looks back at you and as you move its glance follows. If someone else looks at it from another side, it does the same thing to him" (quoted in Elsner 2007, 21).

Valeri's (1985) comprehensive analysis of the ancient Hawaiian sacrificial rite (*luakini*) offers an excellent extended illustration of the metasemiotic role ritual action plays in creating the possibility (and, in this case, the necessity) of an apperception of transcendence. In ancient Hawaii the faculty of sight, made possible by the organ of the eye, was thought to be the fundamental source of knowledge, but in order to create a distinction between (individual) sensory experience and (collective) conceptual understanding, the former must be first blocked, covered, or blinded to fully reveal the latter. The *luakini* ritual that accomplishes the installation of the new king involves the construction of an anthropomorphic image of the god (Haku 'ōhi'a) carved out of a particular species of tree growing wild in the forest and then the sacrificial eating of the victim's eye, taken to be a metonym of human consciousness: "By eating the victim's eye, then, the god feeds on human consciousness, or rather on its transformation. And indeed the god exists as a result of the transformation of man's consciousness, which moves from empirical vision to intellectual vision, from the particularity of percept to the universality of concept" (Valeri 1985, 324). This transformation of a visual symbol into an invisible reality is equivalent to the construction of a "true god" (*akua maoli*) "by negating man's empirical vision by blocking it with regard to an initially visible manifestation of the god" (324). The Haku 'ōhi'a image, embodying the natural properties associ-

4. Gaifman (2006, 266) notes a similar depiction of astonishment on a Greek krater resembling Athena Parthenos.

ated with maleness—vertical, strong, red—emblematic (for these Hawaiians) of the ideal form of the human species, stands in the center of the *luakini* temple complex, and this wooden image is then ritually transformed into an image of the god, whose very human qualities are revealed—literally—by removing its covering of ferns and vines.

A key player in the ritual action is the Kahōali'i, who as both the human incarnation of the god Kū and the “double” of the king consumes the eye of the sacrificial victim, thereby transferring to the king that “superior vision embodied in that eye” (325). Accordingly, toward the end of the ritual process all except the king and the high priest turn their backs on the Haku ‘ōhi‘a image: “The “real gods” just produced by the ritual must now become invisible in order to invisibly guide men’s actions and their vision of the empirical world. Men can experience the invisible gods only through the visible victims who are the representations of men as they transcend empirical reality through death” (Valeri 1985, 327). By appropriating objects that are, at first, only implicitly symbolic and making them fully symbolic through collective ritual action, those objects are understood to be gods, not merely the products of the collective subject (345).

Semiotic Mediators and “Axial” Issues

In considering these and other modalities of representations of transcendence, a distinction can usefully be made between a person or group *engaging* in some form of semiosis (singing a chant, looking at a stained glass window, participating in a ritual) and reflexively *considering* the operational principles governing these same sign processes. To be sure, an adequate account of “engaging” in semiosis requires understanding the cultural conventions that, for participants, make singing, viewing, or acting meaningful activities; and part of that understanding involves their metasemiotic construal—in real time and after the fact—of signs as coherent “texts” (specifically, what Silverstein [1996] has termed “interactional texts”). But to frame semiosis as semiosis—that is, to develop an esoteric metasemiotic vocabulary and elaborated theoretical discourse about sign processes—implies a mode of referential consciousness that cannot be equal to the consciousness of the engaged participants, though such vocabularies and discourse can have a “feedback” relationship with human experience.

It would be, however, a huge error to use this distinction between engaged and reflexive consciousness to characterize entire epochs of human history, to assume, for example, that some cultural traditions are locked into an unreflexive

“mythological” consciousness, while others, thanks to brilliant or creative intellectuals, make the “axial breakthrough” so that, for them, the “shadows in the cave are revealed as fake, as not reality but a manipulated simulacrum of reality” (Bellah 2011, 592; cf. Humphreys 1975; Schwartz 1975a; Gauchet 1999; Taylor 1999, 2011). Cross-cultural investigations suggest rather, as an hypothesis, that the greater the assumed unbridgability of the gap between earthly and transcendent realms (diagnostic for some scholars of the presence of “axial” traditions), the more difficult becomes the task of traditional “semiotic mediators” between realms, mediators that can now become increasingly open to intense ideological critique and political attack.

The “statistical” frequency of these mediators cannot, of course, be used analytically to argue for a normative “collapse” between realms, since the necessity of their operation implies the opposite. And while it is surely the case that not all these critiques and attacks are the result of rational, “second-order” reflection (another supposed “axial” diagnostic), these cultural conflicts do, in many cases, lead to the generation of heated discourses—a veritable clash of semiotic ideologies—and to innovative forms of semiosis.

In this vein, Assmann argues that, for both the prophetic reforms in ancient Israel and the growth of philosophical speculation in classical Greece, revolutionary “political theology” that insists on the radical separation of politics from religion “turns into a critical discourse which, in the biblical tradition, is critical of government, and in the Greek tradition is critical of religion” (2004, 151). One of the many ironies of the theorization of “axial age” traditions, then, is that the very conceptualization of the “tension” (rather than a doxic homologous or analogical correspondence) between the mundane and the transcendent “necessarily posed the question of the ways in which the chasm between the transcendental and the mundane could be bridged” (Eisenstadt 1986, 3). Criticism of traditional beliefs could, for example, lead to more complex self-consciously constructed discursive practices, such as the *allegorization* of stories contained in epic poetry, the *rationalization* of religious beings (so that god becomes, for Plato, the immaterial cause of the cosmos); and the *ritualization* of commemorative public ceremonies (Humphreys 1986, 98–100). And in certain situations the florescence of image use in rituals could be a logical response to the adoption of certain highly general moral principles, as the development of the doctrine of noninjury to live beings (*ahimsā*) in post-Vedic India might correspond to the spread of the sacrificial use of images as animal substitutes (Salmond 2004, 24). On the other hand, there is also the analytical irony that the greater the postulation of the absolute and universal

transcendence of the gods, the more some analysts point to a “sociological” explanation for this transcendence, as anchored, for example, in the representational analogy from ever-wider sociopolitical units, so that high gods are seen as projections of earthly monarchs—“the entire cosmos functioned exactly as a kingdom” (Bottero 1992, 215), a situation exactly the opposite of purported “axial” civilizations.

First Case Study: Cult Statues

Cult statues in ancient Mesopotamia were made of wood, plated with gold and silver, and clothed in splendid robes (Dick 2005, 47–50). Texts refer to statues as being displayed in ritual processions, repeatedly plundered and destroyed, and periodically in need of physical restoration. Statues of the same god could be located in multiple temples, and the artificial quality of the artisans’ craft was minimized in references to the role of the gods in ceremonially “giving birth” to their own statues.

In the ancient Greek world statues of gods were constructed of materials (wood, plant material, aromatics) specifically appropriate to the divinity involved, were often filled with papyrus texts naming the god, and were empowered by ritual spells. Although, as Haluszka (2008) argues, worshippers might have come to regard the god as being “contained” in the statue, from a semiotic perspective the statue functioned as a Peircean “index,” that is, as a “pointer” linking the vivified object to a divinity, whose power is thereby brought into cognitive salience and thus effective action (cf. Bahrani 2008, 53). Price (1999, 57), on the other hand, states that the “anthropomorphism” of Greek statues was a matter of “conventional representation,” that is, that worshippers did not think that the “guises” (old or young, male or female) and “attributes” (thunderbolt, trident) of a statue formed a “literally accurate image” of the god.

The crux of the dilemma of representing divinity in ancient Greece involved a tension between the gods’ propensity to reveal themselves (as sources of potency and generation) and the danger to humans who might experience, however momentarily, that power. To mitigate this situation the gods tended to conceal themselves within clouds or behind masks and to impersonate mortals; humans believed that divinities were, correspondingly, present in various aniconically shaped objects, such as pillars, pyramids, and rock piles (Steiner 2001, 81–85): “The installation of images within temples and shrines may have sought to recapitulate the notions expressed in these myths. Just as numinous powers choose to hide themselves, or only to allow a rare glimpse of

their epiphanic presences, so the idols that housed the god should properly do the same, conveying something of the divinity's own mode of oblique self-representation and the fleeting quality of his self-display" (87). If not divine creations, cult statues could sometimes be divinely approved, as Pausanias recounts: "Even the god himself bore witness to the art (*techne*) of Pheidias: when the statue [of Zeus] was completely finished, Pheidias prayed to the god to make a sign if the work pleased him, and immediately a flash of lightning struck the pavement at the place where the bronze urn was still standing in my time" (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5.11.9; quoted by Finkelberg 2000, 30).

Vernant proposes a historical transition (around the fifth century BCE) from objects that presented or manifested the divine without being in any sense a figuration of divinity to artifacts that represent divinities mimetically by the illusionistic skills of artists.⁵ But both sides of this periodization, Vernant (1991, 153) claims, respond to the same need to establish real contact with "inaccessible and mysterious" divinity, that is, with its "otherness." Burkert (1997, 22–30) sees this dichotomy rather differently: in place of the aniconic-ionic sequence of Vernant he suggests that, across the ancient Mediterranean more generally, a more useful distinction is between "classical" representations of divinities—epitomized in large-scale seated cult statues—and coexisting nonvisual modes of experiencing transcendent powers based, for example, on ecstatic dancing, auditory epiphany, or oracular signs.

In ancient Egypt divine transcendence and absolute hiddenness were strongly linked in texts, architecture, and ritual objects (Assmann 2001, 35–47). Assmann (2002, 186–87) explains that the institution of kingship is the primary focus for the "symbolic mediation" required by the cosmological gap between earthly and transcendent worlds:

Because the gods are remote, there has to be an institution that ensures contact with the divine world even under the conditions of remoteness. From now on, gods will be manifest on earth only through a structure of representation. In their myths the Egyptians describe themselves as inhabiting a disenchanted world; the present state (in both senses of the word) is both the healing of a breach and a compensation for a loss, the loss of corporeal closeness to the gods. Real presence is replaced by represen-

5. Price (1999, 57) warns against restricting the Greek term *xoana* to aniconic statues, quoting an inscription from 197–196 BCE describing a procession carrying images (*xoana*) of twelve gods "attired as beautifully as possible" (175). And Vegetti (1995, 261) adds the important point that figural conventions of statues can be seen as iconographic supplements to the traditional imagery of epic poetry.

tation. By virtue of their symbolic power, state and cult, temples, rites, statues, and images make present the divine and establish an irremediably indirect contact with the gods. . . . The state is the institution of this closeness. The pharaoh rules as the representative of the creator god.

Assmann ([1995] 2009, 142) cites a ritual description of the god Amun: “His hidden all-embracing abundance of essence cannot be apprehended.”

Cult statues in temples were considered to be the bodies of the gods that serve the function of sacred communication between realms, but only after being submitted to rituals of purification, consecration, and vivification. The gradient sacredness of temple space—the location of the *naos*, or niche for the cult statue—was signaled by the decreasing amount of available light toward the far end of sanctuary, which was almost totally dark except for carefully positioned window shafts allowing a sliver of solar rays to penetrate the darkness (Teeter 2011, 41–42). The perspective of the deities reversed that of the officiating priests: descending from heaven to earth, deities (in their *ba*, or active essence) entered the temple at the shrine end and, if sufficiently attracted by the beauty and appropriateness of the construction materials used (e.g., silver for bones, gold for flesh, lapis lazuli for hair), entered the statue through the “door of heaven” (Robins 2005, 6–7). Taken out of the shrine’s darkness, the statue (or its double), still hidden from view by a protective cloth, was transported in a sacred boat and, closer now to the human realm, could be the source of oracular pronouncements and other performative effects (Hornung 1992, 116).

Assmann ([1995] 2009, 174) notes the parallel mediational role of Egyptian hieroglyphs (defined as the “writing of divine speech”) that operate in a type-token relationship, with the god Ptah creating the divine types and then filling the world with tokens or material realizations (especially natural phenomena, animal species, and humans beings) of these cosmic models—“a kind of Platonism with an infinite variety of material impressions of a finite set of immaterial ideas” or a set of visible signs that stand for something invisible (Assmann 1992). Thoth then “found” or “recorded” the hieroglyphic shapes and linguistic names that are the precise iconic forms of and for these realities. Thus, “writing carries out what is already implicit in the structure of reality” (Assmann 2007, 165).

Scholars disagree about the exact point that the theological rationale (and its poetic expression) for cult statues of gods and king became finalized,⁶ but

6. Compare, e.g., Frankfort (1948, 7–8); Morenz (1973, 153–55); Hornung (1982, 136); Quirke (1992, 75–76); Dunand and Zivie-Coche (2004, 14–18); Meskell (2004); Assmann (2005, 109); and Teeter (2011, 46–51).

it does seem that an analogy was developed between the cosmic creation by the gods of their various embodiments in the physical universe (ranging from heavenly bodies to animal species to the king) to the cultic *re-creation* by the king (or his priestly substitutes) of temples containing the shrines that house the statues of the gods: “The world as it is today (divided into the Now and the Hereafter, into a divine world that is remote and can be visualized only in images and symbols and into an earthly world administered on behalf of the creator by a deputizing king) is a relatively new establishment” (Assmann 2007, 165). The darkness, stillness, and hiddenness of the shrine recreates, to the degree humanly possible, the initial conditions of creation, while the beauty and preciousness of the material forms of the statue are designed to attract the descending god, who sees the statue as one possible body and who understands the promise, clearly illustrated on the temple walls,⁷ of pleasingly appropriate cultic actions (cleansing, feeding, clothing, entertaining, processing, etc.).⁸

Statues of gods (and, by parallel logic, mummified bodies of kings) are, thus, the locus of a two-directional process of semiotic mediation required to connect differentiated yet linked realms.⁹ Assmann borrows the concept of “sacramental explanation” from medieval Christian hermeneutics to describe the underlying principle by which the literal sense (*sensus literalis*) of ritual action by cult officiants and public participants (e.g., purification and feeding) are mystically or allegorically interpreted (*sensus mysticus*) as rebirth and ascent in the heavenly realm. Furthermore, “It is not only a matter of explana-

7. The ubiquitous illustration of cultic activities on Egyptian temple walls contrasts sharply with the (almost—the Parthenon being the notable exception) absence of such pictures on the walls of Greek temples (Price 1999, 32), although they are frequent on other media such as amphora. In both cases the parallel interpretive question arises: are these images representations of the gods “themselves” or of their “representations”? On this general problem of “divine reflexivity,” see Patton (2009).

8. In the temples constructed at his new capital Akhetaten (Horizon of the Sun-Disk), Akhenaten removed the roofs so that sunlight could illuminate the cultic objects and activities within. While revolutionary in the Egyptian context, this use of light was in fact the norm in Mesopotamia and other ancient traditions, as Winter explains: “Texts record special value accorded the attribute of light and/or radiance. Temples are described as being endowed with interiors of silver and gold—not merely as signs of material wealth, but as indications of divine presence—the logic being that if radiance is an attribute of the divine, then that which shines has been touched by the divine. Indeed, this use of light in a symbolic way to indicate the sacred unites Mesopotamian temples and liturgical objects with early Christian churches and objects, and provides links as well across the divide between the pre-Islamic and Islamic Near East, as well as with the rest of Asia” (2002, 13). On the impact of “dazzle” in Late Antique Christianity, see Miller (2009, 77–81).

9. Assmann notes that the “beyond” realm increasingly becomes the ideal destiny of people (especially pharaohs) for whom immortality shifted from being a matter of social memory (secured through monumental architecture) to a quest for permanent residence in “a radically other sphere, beyond human reach, the realm of Osiris” (2004, 142). This required the exercise of the divine authority of Osiris’s “court of judgment” and led ultimately to the emergence of concepts of internal consciousness (“heart”) and personal decision making as being themselves “transcendental” (138–42).

tion, however, but of a genuine transformation. From nourishment, as ascent to the sky comes into being, and from the presentation of the *qnj*-breastplate, an embrace that restores life. Transformation is achieved through the establishment of a relationship between the cultic realm and the realm of the gods: something that happens in the cult is transformed into an event in the divine realm” (Assmann 2005, 351–52).

Second Case Study: Eucharistic Transubstantiation

Following Assmann’s “sacramental” lead, we now turn to the second case of the “real presence” of transcendence.¹⁰ Scholarly discussions of the various forms and practices of semiosis in the Christian Middle Ages suggest a potential methodological dilemma involving the kinds of evidence addressed: the same evidence for the proliferation of ritualized manifestations and discursive theorizations of semiotic mediation can be used to argue, on the one hand, as evidence for a standardized norm of “participation,” “consubstantiality,” “filiation,” or “immanence” (Bedos-Rezak 2006) or, on the other hand, as extraordinary attempts to overcome an equally normative separation or “disengagement” of the sacred from the profane (Brown 1975, 135). This methodological ambiguity can be seen in Brown’s comment, in the context of his discussion of what he sees as a transformation in religious consciousness starting to occur in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: “For the situation we have seen in the early centuries of the Middle Ages is one where the sacred and the profane can be intermingled because the borderline between the objective and the subjective in human experience is deliberately blurred at every turn” (142). To illustrate this hypothesized distinction between the two medieval periods Brown contrasts “the squat and bejewelled figure of Sainte Foye,” the holy relic at Conques, that could act as an “objective force” on its own “subjective” initiative, and the “heightened majesty” of the eucharistic sacraments as defined by the new rational and speculative theological sensibilities of the twelfth century, according to which “the supernatural was strenuously *defined* as that which was totally discontinuous with the human group” (144) and in which human groups, in turn, were defined in terms of their hierarchically differentiated contact with the supernatural. The point to note is that Brown silently switches from the popular, “blurring,” religiosity

10. The following discussion follows the programmatic analytical approach set out by Bedos-Rezak (2000, 1491), especially taking to heart her warning not to assume or even seek “conformity” between semiotic ideology and semiotic practice. Helpful sources for the discussion include Stock (1983); Rubin (1991); Kobialka (1999); Radding and Newton (2003); and Bynum (2007).

of pilgrimages to saints' relics to the "defined" decrees of the Lateran Council of 1215.¹¹

Kessler (2004, 166–67) contends that it was medieval Christianity's belief in the dual nature of Christ, a mysterious union of human and divine, that provided religious viewers' "inner eye" with a theory of artistic representation in which the physical image and the transcendent prototype are simultaneously distinct (representationally) and united (theologically):

The old theologians had dealt with the basic question by referring to the common experience of the image and its relation to the person represented. They argued that God had become visible in Christ, as in an image, while the new theologians, as advocates of the image, contended that Christ could become visible in his image. If the invisible God, they said, had become visible in the man Jesus, then the latter could be made visible in images. The reality of Christ's incarnation, a dogma still widely discussed, thus was linked to the possibility of Christ's representation, and the image was thereby promoted to a criterion of orthodoxy (Belting 1994, 152).

Rather than merely resting on the assumption behind this "theory," medieval artists explicitly represented the transformational moment, for example, depicting the bottom half of Christ's torso as he leaves the earth at the Ascension: "As pictured in the Odbert Gospels [ca. 1000 CE], the Lord's disappearance introduced the fundamental paradox of Christian art: as a man, Christ had been seen and cherished by other humans and therefore could be represented in material images; but his absence had to be asserted as well so that the love engendered by his person could be transferred to his invisible divinity" (Kessler 2004, 168). Still other examples contain explicit wording to remind the viewer not to confuse the pictorial image and the divine reality: "Revere the image of Christ by kneeling before it when you pass by it; but in so doing make sure you do not worship the image but rather him whom it represents" (171).

11. This methodological difficulty parallels a similar problem in evaluating the relationship between "regimenting" proscriptions and common practices—e.g., that Queen Elizabeth's royal proclamation of 1559 against all things "superstitious," including among other things shrines, pictures, paintings, tables, candlesticks, and other "monuments" of miracles, pilgrimages, and idolatries, implies in fact the widespread and fervent use of *just these semiotic forms* and practices (Davidson 1988, 37; Frankfurter 2008, 139). Indeed, as Duffy (2005, 570) notes, subsequent to these injunctions, many churches attempted to avoid the destruction of their images by placing them in private households, and many parishioners hoped for a speedy return to the old, Catholic ways.

Thus the incarnation became a model promoting sacramental signification as “real presence,” since the transcendent *res* (“thing”) is actualized in the immanent *signum* (“sign”), first of all by not undergoing any change and second of all by virtue of an ontological dualism not dependent on the arbitrariness of linguistic agreement (Bedos-Rezak 2000, 1499). As conceptualized by advocates of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the consecrated elements (the signifying forms) *are* the body and blood of Christ (the signified reality) and at the same time they stand for them. So if the dual nature of Christ codified in Incarnational theology offered a theory for experiencing transcendence through material representation, the medieval development of eucharistic theology went one step farther in reaffirming the immanent presence of divine reality in the material signs repeatedly generated at each performance of the liturgy.

Once doctrinally established for the unique case of the Eucharist, however, the argument for the “participation” relationship between sign and reality became generalized: “Thus, although this mode of signification pertained strictly only to the eucharist, the argument for real presence and its principle of immanence ultimately realigned theories of representation, with consequence for society as a whole” (Bedos-Rezak 2010, 177). Sophisticated metasemiotic reflection was, thus, harnessed to explain the consilience between the hermeneutics of the incarnation and the Eucharist by, for example, the metaphor of sealing as a semiotic process in which the impressed or imprinted image (Son) is consubstantial with the metallic substance (God), while remaining invisible until the incarnational moment: “The notion of image as imprint therefore promoted, like the Eucharist, a form of immanent semiotics whereby the image in actualizing its constitutive relationship to an originating model signified by formulating likeness as a relationship between form and matter, which involved gradations of contact and presence” (Bedos-Rezak 2012, 83).

To this ideological generalization (following the pattern of “secondary elaboration” elucidated by Franz Boas) must be added the other pole of the semiosis of real presence: the experiential responses to images, including but going beyond the Eucharistic, that complete the “circle of semiosis.” The first example is a story retold by Ginzburg about a cleric named Bernard d’Angers, who made a pilgrimage in the early eleventh century to Conques to see the famous saint’s image located there. Having complained to his fellow pilgrims about the Christian “idols” they had met along the way (“Do you suppose that Jove or Mars would have thought such a statue unworthy of them”), Bernard continued to show his disdain by comparing the image of

Saint Foy to the likeness of Venus or Diana. And yet, Ginzburg explains, by the time Bernard wrote an account of his experience he had changed his mind, after witnessing the miracles performed by Saint Foy:

In the miraculous tales that Bernard of Angers relates, the image of Saint Foy is regarded in a characteristically ambivalent manner. On the one hand, it aroused hostility and sarcasm among its detractors; on the other, it appeared in the visions of the faithful. The monks carried it in procession so that, in accordance with established practice, it might take possession of a piece of land left to the monastery of which they had been unlawfully deprived. The people of Conques made no distinction between the image of Saint Foy and the saint herself. Bernard's suggestion that the image was an aid to memory—an argument that he put forward to ward off the suspicion of idolatry—would have been acceptable to only a tiny minority of believers. (2001, 75)

A second example is provided by Rubin's (1991, 109–42) account of late medieval *exempla*, that is, collections of tales (often derived from vernacular preaching) dealing with the experience of the Eucharist. While designed to supplement more “parochial guidelines” to orthodox doctrine, these widely distributed stories challenged the automatically “miraculous” yet invisible moment of transubstantiation by offering “florid . . . sometimes lurid miraculous events that had left a great impression on contemporaries” (112) and only served to reinforce the “miraculous mood” in medieval culture: “Viewing a eucharistic miracle could influence understanding of sacramental claims more than many sermons, and tales abound of shaky belief which was strengthened by a vision, such as that told of the Patarins of Ferrara who were convinced of the faith when a lamb appeared in the host, or that of a northern heretic, Gautier of Flos, who saw a baby in the host during a mass celebrated by St. John of Cantimpré” (113). Rubin documents a number of tale types: tales in which the Eucharist stimulates visions of a bloody, crucified, or childlike Christ; stories involving miraculous effects of the host experienced by skeptical laity and doubting priests; narratives of changes in the course of nature brought about by contact with eucharistic elements; and stories revealing the agency of the host in repelling violations of the liturgical code.

Later medieval depictions of eucharistic transubstantiation continued to face the key theological paradox that this transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood occurred at the level of invisible substance and not in the accidents of appearance. The representation of what Bynum (2006,

210–15) calls “a presence beyond”—a “real” presence that was objective (or “real”) to laypersons, visionaries, pilgrims, and theologians—could never be justified by appeal to the sensory experience of the eucharistic elements but only to the experiential and testimonial evidence of performative effects in believers and nonbelievers. Bynum (2011, 285) identifies the fundamental paradox for late medieval Christianity, as evidenced in both religious practice and theological discourse, as the “simultaneous intensification of contrary responses” with regard to the difference between a material world of generation, change, and passing away, on the one hand, and a realm of the “eternal changelessness of God,” whose nature is eternal, immutable, and unknowable, on the other: “Therefore, I would suggest that behind the resistance to seeing found in so much theological writing of the period is a resistance to change itself, a sense that the fundamental difference between early and divine is that fact that we change, God does not. For becoming visible is *mutatio*. The objections of theologians and diocesan synods to seeing Christ in the host or revering holy relics . . . were not merely fear of superstition or popular piety but efforts to maintain the changelessness and unseeability of God” (Bynum 2006, 230). The key to understanding these “contrary responses,” Bynum proposes, is to realize that instances of the paradoxical admixture of contradictory realms are themselves fleeting, lasting “only a moment,” and to appreciate that, in the final analysis, the relationship between “the stuff of the world” and the “beyondness of ultimate meaning” (Bynum 2011, 286) cannot be spoken of, only lived.

Conclusion: Toward a “Circle of Semiosis”

But as the two extended case studies above so clearly demonstrate, this is certainly not true: “lived” experience is always mediated by available symbolic forms, and that mediation is itself mediated by various modalities of metasemiotic regimentation—both in the forms themselves and in the discursive apprehension of the real-time functioning of those forms. And so what “cannot be spoken of” becomes precisely the focal object of entextualized discourses that claim to know about what cannot be known and to represent what cannot be represented. This way of rethinking the relationship between semiosis as the experience of transcendence and semiosis in entextualized discourse about transcendence in this way suggests, finally, an alternative way to enter into the important debate between David Freedberg’s *The Power of Images* (1989) and Hans Belting’s *Likeness and Presence* (1994). In clarifying his argument against Belting, Freedberg claims that

understanding sacred images (or, in his view, any image) requires, first, a re-assertion of an “anthropology” (i.e., a universal psychological tendency) of apprehending the prototype (the divine referent) as “inhering” in the image, and second, a serious attention to metasemiotic texts (philosophical, theological, etc.) that postulate a specific “ontology” informing the image-prototype relationship. But as his discussion of accounts of Artemidorus’s dream reveals, Freedberg gives clear priority to the first over the second of these methodological principles: “But it is worth remembering these textual variations simply as demonstrations of how a complex and general psychological problem [first principle], that of the belief in the inherence of the prototype, illustrated most sharply by the phenomenology of dreams, actually informs and determines the philosophical tradition and the history of a text [second principle]” (1996, 74).

The focus of the present essay has been to reverse these priorities, to see the (“universal”) regimenting function of texts as the key to understanding the (“relative”) psychological response to semiotic forms such as images. Egyptian cult statues and Christian eucharistic elements look very similar in terms of the semiosis of real presence—their “sacramental” dimension, to recall Assmann’s usage—not because of an “anthropological” tendency but because of the historically contingent regimenting operation of parallel metasemiotic texts.

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