

“*This is my body*”: Symbolism in bread & bread-making

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Bread is older than man.
(Albanian proverb)

Bread is life, the ‘food of the body and soul; the visible and manifest life (...) bread is the visible manifestation of the spirit which dies and rises again; man and divinity united; the balanced product of man’s skill and effort in agriculture’.¹ It is also universal, having been adapted many times over without serious compromise to its process or value.² Its prime ingredient is flour, from the medieval *flower* meaning the “best part of the ground grain,” and it shares much of the same symbolism of nourishment, vitality, blessing. It is a continuous gift as provided from the feminine principle of the Divine.³

For the Greeks and Romans, bread, along with wine and oil, represented the three sacramental foods; along with figs and honey, these were symbols ‘of the simple life, of a dignified poverty characterised by hard work and satisfaction’.⁴ The whiteness in bread

¹ J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, Thames and Hudson, 1978.

² A short list could include: *Lavash*, *tabun*, *sangak*, *panettone*, *tortilla*, *farl*, *chapattis*, *rotis*, *brioche*, *pretzel*, *naan*, *oatcake*, *pita*, *injera*, *baba*, and *bagel*.

³ ‘Demeter/Ceres gave the Greeks/Romans barley and wheat; Chicomecoatl gave the Aztecs maize. The Egyptians worshipped Reneoulet, the harvest goddess, and Min, the god of cultivation and master of generative force, whose son, Nepi, the spirit of wheat, was a life-giving principle’ (M. Toussaint-Samat, *History of Food*, Barnes & Noble, 1992).

⁴ M. Montanari, ‘Food Systems and Models of Civilization’ in J.-F. Flandrin & M. Montanari eds., *Food: A Culinary History*, Columbia University Press, 1999. ‘The citizen-farmer remained the Roman ideal: every Roman was supposed to own enough land to supply his family’s daily needs. Romans used the term *paupertas*, the root of our “poverty,” to refer to this idea of self-sufficiency without excess’ (F. Dupont, ‘The Grammar of Roman dining’ in Flandrin & M. Montanari eds., *Food: A Culinary History*).

was ‘a mark of purity and distinction’.⁵ Bread rose to the (if not degraded) symbol of citizenship itself⁶ and this perhaps adds a little understanding into the historical significance of the coming of Jesus Christ⁷ who was born in *Beth-Lehem* (“House of Bread”) and who said: ‘I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger’ (John 6:35). This echoes the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* that says: ‘I am a man who has bread in Heliopolis/My bread is in Heaven with the Sun God/My bread is on earth with Keb/The bark of evening and of morning/Bring me the bread that is my meat/From the house of the Sun God’. During the Eucharist we are given an unleavened wafer, or Host, that is the “body” of Christ and this, together with His blood in the form of wine, represent a union of the feminine and masculine principle (respectively) in the Divine. ‘St. Martin’ writes Madame Toussaint-Samat ‘recommended that the communicant receiving it should meditate on the three concepts suggested by its threefold symbolism: affliction and privation (both material and spiritual), preparation for purification (since it is unleavened), and the memory of our origins [‘In thy sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread’ (Gen 3:19)]’.⁸ We ask for our “daily bread” during the Lord’s Prayer as ‘hunger that cannot be satisfied with bread must be truly great’ (Finnish proverb).

For Paracelsus: ‘Nature brings to light nothing that is perfect, but man must perfect it. This perfection is called *alchimia*. An alchemist is

⁵ ‘...Archestratus, a contemporary of Aristotle and author of the *Gastronomia* (a compendious account of ancient Mediterranean eating whose title gave us the word “gastronomy”), accorded extravagant praise to a barley bread from the island of Lesbos on just these grounds, calling it “bread so white that it outdoes the ethereal snow in purity. If the celestial gods eat barley bread, no doubt Hermes goes to Eresus to but it for them” (Harold McGee, *On Food & Cooking*, revised ed., Scribner, 2004).

⁶ ‘Barbarians were depicted and described by civilized citizens as nomad hunter-gatherers in contrast to those who grew their own produce ... Ovid’s myth of Anius and his three daughters who transformed everything they touched into grain, wine, and oil presented a utopia in which nature could be transformed by the human hand. Grain and wine made the eater and drinker human—to the extent that in Homer the term “bread eaters” was synonymous with the world “men” (Montanari, ‘Food systems and models of civilization’).

⁷ ‘Into this world of the Roman imperium came Jesus Christ. It was ... a world of real distress, of physical hunger; a world in which the grain speculators withheld the grain and the emperor misused bread for political purposes by feeding only those who supported his power. Into such a world came Christ... the Son of God’ (H. E. Jacobs, *Six Thousand Years of Bread*, The Lyons Press, 1997).

⁸ Toussaint-Samat, *History of Food*, Barnes & Noble, 1992.

the baker when he bakes bread, the viniculturist when he makes wine, the weaver when he makes cloth' (*Paragranum*). The baker is a solitary creature, often starting his day during the fragile hours before dawn and remaining in his workshop throughout the duration of his waking hours, but 'whatever grows in solitude then goes back into the community'⁹ as 'bread is baked in order to feed people and strengthen them so that they may live' (Hildegard of Bingen). Albeit its abuses through scientific and technological "improvements," baking remains a traditional craft.¹⁰ In many areas of the world, knowledge of baking bread must be taught by a master-baker with the apprentice enters into an unbroken chain of such relationships stretching back over 4000 years.¹¹ From D. M. Dooling:

'Perhaps we could paraphrase what Coomaraswamy said of art and religion, and say that 'craft is alchemy, alchemy craft, not related, but the same.' For the craftsman as well as the alchemist knows that his central task is the creation of himself, the artisan; and it is above all his aim that he strives with endless patience, 'separating the subtle from the gross, softly and with great care' to make what his hands touch turn into gold'.¹²

The grain is the soul, as manifestation or "likeness" of God, as 'the universe is the mirror of God—the mirror in which His majesty and perfection are reflected, the mirror in which He sees Himself'.¹³ But

⁹ 'Paid in Gold: An interview with Ruth Cooke,' *Parabola* 17.1, 1992.

¹⁰ 'A traditional society made every activity holy, not only labour, but even what is now gambling was originally an oracular procedure; our games originated as liturgies, our towns pilgrimages, our vehicles as portable tabernacles, our cities and homes as shrines, our marriages as hierogamies, our jokes as sacred clowning, our laws as taboos, our language and mathematics as prayers, our dresses as vestments, our medicine as propitiation, our jobs as symbolic worship' (E. Zolla, 'The Meaning of Tradition' in R. Fernando ed., *The Unanimous Tradition*, The Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 1991. See also R. Sworder, 'The Desacralization of Work' in H. Oldmeadow ed., *The Betrayal of Tradition*, World Wisdom, 2005).

¹¹ In France, the apprentice to the *boulangier* is called *compagnon*. English: "companion," which is from the Latin *com* ("together," or "with") *panis* ("bread"). Interestingly, "Boulangier" is also a French surname, as vocation and life were once inseparable, with equivalents in Italian, Panettiere, and English, Baker.

¹² D. M. Dooling, 'Alchemy & Craft,' *Parabola* 3. 3, 1978.

¹³ 'Aziz ibn Muhammad al-Nasafi, Maqсад I aqsa in *Oriental Mysticism*, Cambridge, 1938.

simply as we are, we are raw and “indigestible” because of our “fallen” or “ignorant” state. The milling, or grinding, of ourselves is *metanoia* which is ‘usually rendered by “repentance,” is literally “change of mind,” or intellectual metamorphosis ... a transformation of one’s whole being: from human thinking to divine understanding’.¹⁴ As the rough grain is transformed into fine flour that is suitable for our consumption, so we “grind” ourselves, rid ourselves of weakness, passion, and pride—and into a substance capable for His deliverance. Water is mixed with flour to create dough (from the Indo-European root “to form, to build”).¹⁵ The water is also religion, from *religio* (“that which binds”); it is baptism and submission under orthodoxy. Then comes the process of kneading (manipulation, usually by hand), a physical stretching and folding that strengthens the bonds of protein molecules (gluten: “the muscle of bread”) while simultaneously aerating the dough.¹⁶ As William Stoddart writes ‘it is the exposing of our paltry egoism ... to the withering and yet quickening influence of the divine Subject, the immanent Self’.¹⁷ If a cask is to hold wine, its water must first be poured out, says Meister Eckhart;¹⁸ then ‘by means of putrefaction, fermentation,¹⁹ and trituration—all of which take place in

¹⁴ A. Coomaraswamy, ‘On Being in One’s Right Mind’ in *The Review of Religion*, Columbia University Press, 1942. ‘If thou wouldst reach the kernel, thou must break the shell’ (Meister Eckhart).

¹⁵ ‘For the Hindus, the water of life finds embodiment in the Ganges ... Its water is held to be pure from beginning to end, and in fact it is preserved from all pollution by the fine sand which drags along with it. Whoever, with repentant mind, bathes in the Ganges, is freed from all his sins: inner purification here finds its symbolic support in the outward purification that comes from the water of the sacred river. It is as if the purifying water came from Heaven, for its origin in the eternal ice of the roof of the world is like a symbol of the heavenly origin of divine grace which, as “living water,” springs from timeless and immutable Peace. Here, as in similar rites of other religions and peoples, the correspondence of water and soul helps the latter to purify itself or, more exactly, to find anew its own—originally pure—essence. In this process, the symbol prepares the way for grace’ (T. Burckhardt, ‘The Symbolism of Water’ in *Mirror of the Intellect*, Quinta Essentia, 1987).

¹⁶ For his understanding into the subtle chemical activity of these processes, the author is indebted to Harold McGee and his book *On Food and Cooking*.

¹⁷ W. Stoddart, ‘What is Mysticism?’ in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting*, World Wisdom, 2008.

¹⁸ R. B. Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, Harper & Brothers, 1941.

¹⁹ ‘The process of fermentation allows the spirit to surpass ordinary limitations, to release intuitive powers and produce dreams’ (J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*).

darkness—the *materia* is divested of its initial form'.²⁰ The malleable dough can be baked right away, resulting in unleavened “flat” bread, or it can be left for a short period of time and develop leaven. This occurs through the infection from single-celled fungus, yeast, which roam freely everywhere; they breathe air and exhale carbon dioxide (which expands the mass of the dough). Leavened and unleavened bread are complimentary as they represent the exoteric and esoteric dimensions, respectively, of religion. The mystical or “direct” path of esoterism is the “centre” from which outward forms diverge. Unleavened bread is “pure,”²¹ not because bread with leaven are “impure” but because it wears nothing else, being unaffected by ornaments or additional flavours. Leavened bread, in turn, is the “form” of religion—its dogma, faith, and devotion. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened’ (Matthew 13: 33). This marks the end of the first stage of our “work,” purgation, and has prepared us for the second stage of perfection or illumination;²² the dough is shaped into its desired form and then baked.²³ It is no coincidence that the end result, our finished bread, is “golden” in colour and is, in itself, complete in its “union.” It is, in the words of Dante: ‘... the bread of the angels whereby life is here sustained but wherefrom none come away sated’ (*Paradiso*, 2.11).

²⁰ T. Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, Fons Vitae, 1997.

²¹ Matzo is “historically” eaten on Passover to commemorate the Jews flight from Egypt; cf. Exodus 12: 20. The Eucharist Host, as mentioned, is also unleavened.

²² ‘The second stage “perfection,” corresponds precisely to the aspirants’ assimilation to the created Logos. In Christianity, this takes form of the “imitation of Christ” (Stoddart, ‘What is Mysticism?’).

²³ ‘Then, as in a furnace, the fire draws out of matter and divides what is best, spirit, mind, life ... leads it upwards, takes the topmost by the helmet, holds fast to it and then flows downwards ... the same as God will do on the Day of Judgment; with fire He will separate everything, and divide the just from the godless’ (Martin Luther, *Tischreden*).