VIII. ART-SYMBOLS AND AESTHETIC MEANING
We have now arrived at a stage of this inquiry when sufficient groundwork has been provided for an analysis of aesthetic meaning. We have already seen from the nature of the creative act that in the moment of artistic creativity, the imagination of the creator is autonomous and supreme. Consequently the "aesthetic consciousness" of the spectator, which attempts to revive the creative act, is a freedom from the perceptual, conceptual and the pragmatic. And this is supported by our analysis of the art object — its indifference to the external world. Thus it follows that in artistic communication, the use of artistic symbols is neither cognitive, nor prescriptive. However, before jumping to premature conclusions, we must analyse in detail the nature of art symbols, their usage in artistic communication; and finally the elusive problem of the nature of aesthetic meaning.

Before going into the analysis of the symbols employed in art, a clarification must be made regarding the domain of the term "symbol". For this purpose it is important to distinguish between "symbol" and "signal".

The term "signal" can be best defined by turning to Susanne Langer's definition of sign.\(^1\) She holds that "A

\(^1\)Mrs Langer has herself suggested in the preface to the Second Edition of Philosophy in a New Key that the term
sign indicates the existence — past, present or future — of a thing, event or condition. Wet streets are a sign that it has rained. Thus from the above example it is clear that a signal may or may not be linguistic in character. Any occurrence in the external world can operate as a sign or a signal. Thus, the use of signals can be regarded as a preliminary step to more sophisticated communication through the operation of symbols. Langer distinguishes a sign or a signal from a symbol as follows: "A term which is used symbolically and not signally does not evoke action appropriate to the presence of its object.... Symbols are not proxy for their objects, but are vehicles for the conception of objects." I would like to extend this definition a little; instead of regarding symbols as vehicles for the conception solely of objects, we may widen the field to relations, emotions, thoughts, etc. The field is to be kept open so that any number of operations of symbols can be added. This extension would save us from falling into any commitments to the referential theory, whereby any symbolic usage is to name and refer to objects. Thus a symbol may be regarded as a sensuous construct, involving a certain

"signal" conveys more properly what she means by "sign". This change of terminology is in connection with C.W. Morris's usage in his book *Signs, Language and Behaviour*.


3 Ibid., p. 61.
minimum amount of abstraction from that which it symbolises. There are two things involved here — a sensuous construct of visual, auditory or kinaesthetic nature and its significance which stems out of a certain usage of this construct in a given context. The relation between the sensuous construct and that which it symbolises is of a highly complex nature. It varies between structural analogy to objects and sounds in the external world (as in onomatopoeic and iconic symbols) to a completely abstract relation that holds between the scientific and mathematical symbols and the operations and relations in the external world.

The above definition of symbol is of a very comprehensive kind and includes in its domain the various genre of symbols employed in the divergent realms of creative activity. It is not possible to analyse all the genre of symbols in a single chapter like this, nor is it an aim of this inquiry. We would therefore concentrate mainly on symbolism in art. However, to guard oneself from any possible prejudices stemming out of any unwarranted assumptions, one basic question must be carefully examined: is there any justification for holding art to be symbolic? Looking into the above definition of symbols and supplementing it by what has already been stated about the nature of art objects (in Chapters V, VI and VIII), it seems evident that art does not fulfil at least one of the aspects of this definition. Art does not necessarily indicate anything beyond its sensuous
form. This is one main element which differentiates art from man's noetic activities. The symbols employed in the language of sciences like mathematics and physics signify and refer to certain physical operations and numerical relations. Thus in any mathematical system, the symbols are significant primarily because of their functional character. One scarcely looks at their structure as structure. It is this structure or form which becomes most important for art-symbols. That is why, in spite of an art work's realistic embodiment of objects and events in the external world, one can hardly call it referential in the sense in which a historical document would be referential. Thus it seems that art cannot be regarded as symbolic unless the term "symbol" is given a certain minimum extension. Art works cannot be treated like hieroglyphics because here we cannot draw a line between the pictorial or sensuous forms and the objects to which they refer. While all communication through hieroglyphics takes this form, in the case of art works the symbol and the symbolized are inseparably linked with each other. Thus unlike the word "table", which names the object table, a painting of a table does not function as a pictorial form to refer to the object table. Rather the referent and the referring form are intermingled. Thus it is this table, painted in these colours and this style which becomes important here. We could take here the example of Vincent van Gogh's "The Yellow Chair". Evidently, it is
not the usual use of the term "symbol". Thus, the following are the implications that must be kept in mind if the term "art-symbol" is to convey any significance. Furthermore, it may be marked that "art-symbol" would be held to be synonymous with the art object as a whole, and "symbols in art" the elements that constitute the total art symbol. (Reference has already been made to this usage of the term "art-symbol" in Chapter VI).

Since the primary significance of art-symbols is structural, here the most important thing is the arrangement and composition of elements. And this arrangement has a certain uniqueness which makes art-symbols recalcitrant to all paraphrasing and translating. Thus they are autonomous and complete in themselves and their arrangement has a certain sensuous and emotive effect, which ceases to be there if the order of the elements is changed. This structural uniqueness continues to be there even in the language of literature which otherwise adheres to the conventions of verbal communication. This contrasts the language of science with that of literature. This point has been clearly demonstrated with the help of lines from poems. The example can be given of Hamlet's soliloquy: "To be or not to be -- that is the question..." If the concern here had been merely with the sense it conveys, then the above sentence can be easily substituted by another. But the significance of this sentence lies not merely in the sense but equally with the words and
the order in which they are expressed. This is one reason, among others, why poetic lines are untranslatable and unique. And no paraphrasing can be equivalent to a poem, though there may be complete identity of propositional content between the two. However, substitution becomes still more difficult in other arts as compared to literature. Since there are no syntactical rules to which we have to adhere, there is no definite way of arriving at the synonymity of two artistic symbols. Though synonymity in verbal symbols also depends largely on the context, still it implies a minimum clarity regarding the primary usage\(^\text{1}\) of verbal symbols in a language-game. But unfortunately we cannot think of any such primary usage of art-symbols. That would be possible only if we could create an inventory of the various usages of art-symbols; an inventory of the type which a dictionary provides for the use of words in a language.

Unlike the symbols of science and mathematics, art-symbols are non-cognitive. Thus any factual information which the art-symbols provide is only accidental, or at least not the primary reason for their creation. Art-symbols evoke a flux of associated images which have a dominantly

\(^{1}\) Thus Wittgenstein remarks: "Here one might speak of a 'primary' and 'secondary' sense of a word. It is only if the word has the primary sense for you that you use it in the secondary one." L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, p. 216e.
emotive character. However, this does not imply that art-
symbols have only one usage -- that of evoking and expressing
emotions. Like the varied levels of uses of language-
symbols, elements in art-symbols are also constitutive of
various levels -- referential, iconic and cognitive. However,
one usage seems to dominate all others and that is the
emotive one. That is why in spite of their varied levels,
we have branded the art-symbols as dominantly emotive. For
these varied usages acquire a different role in the context
of artistic communication. Apart from informing anything
about the external world, they join to create the total
atmosphere of the art work which is the art-symbol. This
we have already seen in our discussion of the unreality of
the art object.

This variety of the levels of artistic symbols goes
into the making of various levels of abstraction that art-
symbols embody. However, all art-symbols are abstractions;
howsoever imitative an art work may be, the very attempt
at a symbolic expression through a medium, abstracts the
art-symbol from what it portrays. Furthermore, all imitation
of the external world is done from a certain point of view,
which displays the mental set of the artist. This has been
very well demonstrated by Gombrich\(^5\) with the help of examples

\(^5\) Gombrich has referred to two paintings of a view
of Derwentwater, one by a Chinese painter and another
artist's painting from the Romantic period, and shows how
from actual art works. The abstraction varies from isomorphism of the symbol and the symbolized, to a creation of absolutely private symbols that do not follow the forms and sequences of everyday life. But this does not imply that these private symbols are on the level of a neurotic’s delusions; they are private and yet have the potentiality to be intersubjective. The more an art-symbol transcends the commonsensically-perceived world, the more abstract it becomes. In between the purely abstract and the iconic symbols, one finds the cultural symbols that refer back to the life, customs and rituals of a particular society. The cross and the Madonna can be very appropriate examples of cultural symbols. They have a certain amount of fixity in their usage and thus the phrase "standing for something" can be applicable to them. Though here too a certain amount of freedom obtains. The rendering of the Madonna varies from one painter to another; this variation is caused by the richness of human imagination. No two painted portraits of the same person can be exactly alike. It is because no code can be laid down for the creation of art-symbols. Though

the two renderings differ because of the mental sets of the two artists. Thus he says: "The style, like the medium, creates a mental set which makes the artist look for certain aspects in the scene around him that he can render. Painting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints, rather than to paint what he sees.... There is no neutral naturalism. The artist, no less than the writer, needs a vocabulary before he can embark on a 'copy' of reality." E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion (London, 1956), pp. 73-75.
in the art histories of various civilizations (like Egyptian) a certain set of norms have become absolute for an assessment of artistic creativity. Art-symbols in some of the periods of these civilization operated upon rigid conventions, laid down even prior to their actual execution. But this marks the decadence of any art-form, it is here that art-symbols petrify, harden and lose their import. They turn into insignias that designate the existence of varied cultures.

The examples given above may misleadingly imply that we are equating the cultural symbols with the religious. The latter are only one type of the former. All cultural symbols for their communication thrive upon a repeated usage of certain expressions in a given social community. These are automatically picked up by the people who are brought up in that social group. Thus they are neither iconic nor private, though they have an impact on both of these. It is the impact of cultural symbols that makes it difficult for art works to be extra-culturally communicable. However, I am not subscribing to the cultural monadology of Spengler -- thinking extra-cultural communication to be impossible. For if the "rules of the game" are specified, it will be possible to decode any symbol, whether private, iconic or cultural. Furthermore, this tripartite classification should not be held rigidly, for certain art works may not be necessarily classifiable under one form or the other. And it is also possible that one art work may constitute
an admixture of all the three forms.

The art-symbol, instead of referring to emotions and feelings, becomes the embodiment of emotions and feelings themselves. Here in this case it will be relevant to direct our attention to the role of verbal symbols in literature. In their aim to embody emotions and feelings, verbal symbols in the literary arts do not function like words in ordinary discourse. It was this perhaps that led I.A. Pichards to make a distinction between the emotive and the descriptive uses of language. All non-cognitive uses of language being labelled as emotive and the factual uses as descriptive. This differentiation may, however, be regarded as an oversimplification, but it does mark out very aptly the nature of art-symbols: their emotive character of evoking associative images. We have already seen that art-symbols do not refer to facts qua facts, but their reference to facts (if any), instead of providing any information, attempts to evoke feelings, images and associations in the spectator. Thus the term "emotive" does not have any derogatory overtone, it merely marks a difference in the levels of communication. Apart from directing attention towards a new dimension of communication, it has the benefit of saving art-symbols from an imposition of cognitive and factual criteria of significance. However, to make a distinction between the emotive and the descriptive usages in no sense implies compartmentalisation.
One can use any word descriptively or emotively, all depends upon the context at hand.  

Let us once again turn to the four theories we have been discussing and review them in the light of the present analysis. Thus we must evaluate their significance for the present discussion. One thing which these four thinkers wholeheartedly share (though evidently because of different reasons) is their belief that the sole function of art-symbols is not the imitation of the external world. It is clear from the foregoing remarks that the present analysis has greatly benefited from this insight. It will become evident that all the four theories have their significant share to contribute (either negatively or positively) to the analysis of art-symbols and consequently to aesthetic meaning. Let us look into them individually and assess their relevance.

To Spengler we owe the analysis of cultural symbols and their rendering in the diverse forms of artistic creativity. The natural inheritance of the cultural traditions is very ingeniously revealed by Spengler. This lends a keen insight into the role of tradition in the communication of art. However, Spengler erred at two points — first regarding his theory of closed systems of cultural symbolism which are

6 This point has been very brilliantly discussed by Stevenson in the context of ethical language. See C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (Yale, 1944).
not communicable beyond the threshold of a certain space and time, and secondly at his failure in not being able to create any clear cut distinctions between artistic symbolism and the non-artistic. This barred him from touching the core of the problem of artistic communication.

The same flaw is perceptible in Freud's analysis. He certainly created a landmark by providing an absolutely novel mode of artistic interpretation — a mode that had been hitherto unknown to all critics and historians. With the help of examples from fairy tales, novels and paintings, Freud very ingeniously revealed the communication of private and unconscious dimensions of man's psychic life through the medium of art. But he too, like Spengler ignored the distinction between art and non-art. Perhaps it is because both Freud and Spengler were concerned with the content rather than with the form of art works. It is this that has been stressed in the course of this entire chapter: that any analysis of art-symbols must keep in view the formal aspect of art works. Because it is their structural configuration that marks the peculiarity of art-symbols, and thus makes it impossible for them to be reduced to other forms of symbolic activity. In this sense we adhere to Croce's formulation of the domain of the aesthetic. For this autonomy of the aesthetic has been very clearly marked by Croce. We have seen how Croce refuses to make any compromises between the moral, conceptual and aesthetic.
This autonomy of the aesthetic is stressed by Sartre also, but in his enthusiasm to synthesise the bourgeois and the Marxist aesthetics, Sartre seems to be ambivalent at times. On the one hand he stressed the essential unreality, otherness and autonomous character of art and on the other hand he seems to treat art-symbols as disguised commands for action. And in this context he prefers literature to other arts because the language of literature is more facilitated to convey one's ideas and commitments. Other media of artistic communication do not have a syntax and thus communication gets clouded. This observation of Sartre regarding the relative difference between the linguistic and non-linguistic media seems valid and will be discussed in the pages that follow. Furthermore, Sartre (as we have already seen in Chapter VI) has displayed a keen insight into the role of verbal symbols in literature and their distinction from words in ordinary discourse. Words and sentences in novels do not play the same role that they play in ordinary communication. In spite of all the usages of words in fiction and ordinary discourse being parallel, one thing which marks the peculiarity of the language of literature is its function of fabricating an unreal world. And in this process, words cease to have a transparent character and acquire an opacity by which they themselves become the images which they tend to embody. However, this does not imply that words in a novel are used iconically,
they are not imitative of the characters of things in the external world. They form a world of their own — their own space, time and events. This combination of space, time and events may, or may not have an isomorphism with events in the external world. To the significance of an art work this is an arbitrary and accidental fact.

If the foregoing is the nature of art symbols, we are led to ask — is art communicative in the sense in which language is? In other words, is art-symbolism a language? This question cannot be answered immediately, in either affirmative or negative. To examine this problem, it is necessary to turn to an analysis of the nature of language as a medium of communication. Language has aptly been defined by Edward Sapir as "... a purely human and non-instantive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are in the first instance auditory and they are produced by the so-called 'organs of speech'."7 The above definition has the following implications:

a) Language is not born out of an instinctive urge.

b) It is primarily an inventory of auditory symbols. This includes the written script also, which constitutes a combination of auditory and visual symbols.

c) The communication through language necessarily involves an adherence to a set of conventions.

Now, coming back to the initial question of the possibility of art being a language, it is evident that there are some common elements in language and art. One basic common feature is the role of the "other" — without the other, a hearer, an audience, neither the creation of language nor art-symbols is possible. Thus, one may say that as media of communication, both art and language have a dispositional character — they are communicable only with the participation of others. In themselves they embody a potentiality which is actualized only by the participation of others. This process of the import of art-symbols may be called artistic communication. However, this does not imply that the communication through language symbols and art-symbols is of the same level. Both in art and language a certain set of conventions operate. Communication through language is possible only through a rigid adherence to these conventions.

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6 The term language-symbol would refer to to elements in a language; words and their combinations. For the purpose of clarity, a reference can be made to C.W. Morris's definition of "lansign-system" in Signs, Language and Behaviour. Lansign is synonymous to "language-sign." He defines it as a "Set of plurisituational signs with interpersonal significata common to members of an interpreter-family, the signs being producible by members of the interpreter-family and combinable in some ways but not in others to form compound signs." See Glossary of Signs, Languages and Behaviour (New York, 1955), p. 350.
Thus Wittgenstein remarked that communication through a language is like playing a game, where each move is decided in terms of a set of conventions. Not adhering to these conventions is not playing the game. However, all the rules are neither explicitly stated in the grammar of a language nor in the conventions of a game. Thus Wittgenstein says:

"... the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules.... A rule stands there like a sign-post — Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go."  

The above statement of Wittgenstein clearly marks out the flexibility of rules in a language and the possibility of their varied interpretations. However, in spite of this flexibility in the interpretation of the rules of language-games which is common to both verbal and art symbols, there is one major difference between the two. This difference would remain as long as syntax and grammar remain in a language, in art there are no alphabets and thus no definite limits to the invention of symbols. However, one cannot altogether deny the role of convention in art. Certain conventions in terms of style and technique do operate in the creation of art-symbols. But these conventions do not limit the modes of communication through art-symbols, while linguistic communication is substantially limited by its

\[\text{9L. Wittgenstein, op. cit., Nos. 84, 85, p. 39e.}\]
grammar. For here the freedom can only be of the interpretation of rules while every art-symbol can create its own set of conventions and rules by which we can interpret it. One may recall here Spengler's distinction between expression-language and communication-language. Art for him, is not a communication-language because it is not dependent upon any rigid grammatical rules. Thus in the domain of art we can infinitely multiply the language-games, for here there is no syntactical limit and all communication depends upon paradigm cases. The latter, however, is not a peculiarity of art-symbols only; both words and symbols in art acquire their significance in a context. For there is no univocal and essential meaning, it all depends on the use of symbols in a given context. But the difference in degree (if not in kind) does stand between symbols in art and verbal symbols because of the latter being parasitic on a set of syntactical rules. Even the language of poetry, which represents the maximum exploitation of the semantic flexibilities of the verbal medium, shows a minimal adherence to syntactical rules. We can take here the example of Lewis Carroll's poems like "Jabberwocky". This poem shows that

10 To make this point clear it will be best to quote a passage from this poem and supplement it by Lewis Carroll's own explanation of it through Humpty Dumpty. The opening stanza of the poem is as follows:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe'.

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in poetry, sometimes we not only use words metaphorically but also coin new expressions. These new words can be coined only because we already have a language and by the permutations and combinations of the already existing vocabulary we form new words. Thus we cannot coin the word "mimsy" unless we know the usage of "miserable" and "flimsy" which go to make "mimsy". This example may not be regarded as a representative of a high degree of literary skill, but it goes to show that even in cases where new literary expressions are coined, there is a minimum adherence to certain linguistic conventions. It is this distinction which makes the literary medium different from that of the other arts.

Another important difference between words in ordinary discourse and symbols in art is in their total impact on the audience. We have seen that art symbols are non-cognitive, non-pragmatic, non-imperative, expressive, evocative and

Humpty Dumpty explains the above passage in the following way:

"Brillig" means four O'clock in the afternoon -- the time when you begin broiling things for dinner... "slithy" means "lithe and slimy". "Lithe" is the same as "active"... it's like a portmanteau — there are two meanings packed up into one word... "toves" are something like badgers -- they're something like lizards -- and they're something like corks crews.... To "gyre" is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To "gimble" is to make holes like a gimlet'.

'And "the wabe", is the grass plot round a sundial, I suppose?' said Alice.... 'Of course it is... then "mimsy" is "flimsy and miserable".... And a "borogove" is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round -- something like a live mop... a "rath" is a sort of green pig: but "mome".... I think it's short "from home" -- meaning that they'd lost their way,... "outgribing" is something between bellowing and whistting....' See Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (London, 1954), pp. 211-12.
emotive in their total effect. However, saying this does not imply that no knowledge and pragmatic value can be elicited from art works and they are merely emotive exclamations in an apprently different form. But one may say that in artistic creations imaginative expression and evocation dominate all other usages of art-symbols. Examples from historical novels will be most relevant here. They represent clearly how knowledge and information are subordi­nated to a concern for building-up an imaginative atmosphere, which is the major function of art-symbols. That is the reason why art-symbols require an imaginative perception by others. It is not communication in the sense of active conversation but a quiet contemplation. And what is communicated through art-symbols is largely non-conceptual and non-factual, it is not possible to be stated in terms of propositions.

This brings us to the basic problem of this inquiry -- the nature of aesthetic meaning.\textsuperscript{11} There are bewilderingly divergent definitions of meaning and one can scarcely find anything common in these approaches. It has sometimes been looked upon as the referent to which the verbal symbol indicates; the idea that a word evokes; the denotation or

\footnotesize
connotation of a term; the behaviour pattern that a sign induces; the expected empirically verifiable state of affairs asserted by a proposition and so on. The evaluation of these varied theories of meaning belongs in another place, and at any rate, is likely to drive the present discussion a little off the point. We may once again recall Wittgenstein's definition of meaning referred to in the beginning of the present study. Since meaning is neither an attribute nor an entity we cannot talk about it apart from the use of art-symbols. Thus we may say that there is no essential concept of meaning which runs through all art-symbols as the norm of significance. It is precisely in this sense that Wittgenstein's analysis is significant. He denounces any univocal notion of meaning, that is universally applicable to all symbolic devices. The slogan "Don't look for the meaning look for the use" is essentially a product of this denial of essence. Because the notion of "use" is also not univocal — its implication varies with varied contexts. We have already seen the relative difference between art and language as media of communication. This makes it still more clear that no single notion of meaningfulness can be developed in art and neither does it seem to be worth pursuing. For then it will not even do justice to the multiple uses of verbal symbols, what to say of art-symbols which are still more complicated in their usage. The fate of Referential, Ideational and Behaviouristic
theories of meaning is too evident to anyone to fall into the same trap once again of fixing up some final definition of meaning. Furthermore, for an aesthetician it is still more necessary that he should not fix up a criterion of meaningfulness and force all art activity to follow it. Instead of starting from a conceptual universal and attempting to supplement it with relevant facts, his discussion should start from individuals and then move to universals (if there can be any universals). This would save him from making empty generalizations. Thus looking into the history of the various art forms, he should analyse the varied usages of art-symbols and thus discuss the nature of aesthetic meaning. He should look into the 'family-resemblances'\textsuperscript{12} between this multiplicity of usages. And in this process he must occupy a neutral standpoint and avoid creating any norm (or norms) of significance. For this would be an attempt at artificially blocking the creation of new symbolic forms. Thus it would be a gross misunderstanding of the problem. What we need is to keep our notions open, open to the myriad symbolism of arts so that we can keep pace with new adventures in creative activity.

\textsuperscript{12} The phrase 'family-resemblance' owes its origin to L. Wittgenstein, it would be discussed in detail in Chapter X.