Chapter 5: Some misconceptions regarding Symbolism

I do believe,
Though I have found them not, that there may be
Words which are things.
— Byron: Childe Harold.

Symbolization is pre-ratiocinative, but not pre-rational.
— Susanne Langer: Philosophy in a New Key.

Ever since Ogden and Richards pointed out the need for a science of symbolism\(^1\), there have been critical attempts to understand and to define Symbolism. The importance of Symbolism seems to have increased with these attempts. However, the use of the term 'symbol' in various contexts, and its apparent similarity to other modes of meaning have given rise to certain misconceptions about its nature. It might be useful to examine briefly how some of these misconceptions arise, and how they can be avoided.

The most common view of the Symbol seems to be that it is a representation of some sort; a fairly typical example of such a view is to be found in the following definition of symbolism:

Symbolism may be defined as the representation of a reality on one level of reference by a corresponding reality on another.\(^2\)

This would imply that there are two definite elements or realities which are already known to us, and that the symbol only effects a correlation between them. But the Symbol is not a mere representation or a comparing device: by observing a symbol we cannot immediately say, 'This signifies so-and-so' or 'by this we understand that'. A device which gives a one-to-one correspondence may more rightly be called a 'sign', and thus be distinguished from the Symbol. A sign

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1 Ogden and Richards: 'The Meaning of Meaning', p.11.
2 W.T.Shipley: 'World Literary Terms'.
refers to or points to an object or idea. It is directional, and its function
is to give an exact reference. For instance, we have the national flag, a reali
reality in visible form representing another conceptual reality. When Ogden and
Richards speak about symbols referring to facts or emotions, they are really
speaking of signs. The symbol might contain a referential element, but referenc
is not its sole purpose. Also what the Symbol refers to is something whose
limits cannot be fixed. The Symbol contains many meanings, and these cannot
be represented or expressed in statements. The Symbol is articulated meaning or
knowledge of a special kind: it embodies

... knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns experience
that are not formally amenable to the discursive projection. Such experiences
are the rhythms of life, organic, emotional, mental (the rhythm of attention is
an interesting link among them all), which are not simply periodic but endlessly
complex and sensitive to every sort of influence. Altogether they compose the
dynamic pattern of feeling. It is this pattern that only non-discursive
symbolic forms can present.

The symbol has thus, at its centre, a core of meaning that is 'endlessly complex'.
This meaning the Symbol tries to reveal, but the revelation cannot be complete :
the more we study the symbol, the more does it seem to say. This is a peculiar
quality of the Symbol. Tindall speaks about this:

Though definite in itself and generally containing a sign that may be
identified, the symbol carries something indeterminate, however we try,there
is a residual mystery that escapes our intellects.

There is a depth in the Symbol which cannot be exhausted by interpretations.
This depth is responsible for the association of Symbolism with Mysticism.
The French Symbolists generally regarded the meaning of the Symbol as being
spiritual in nature: Arthur Symons followed them in his famous book. We also
find a modern scholar like Bowra insisting on the mystical nature of Symbolism.
The term 'mystical' may not appeal to moderns, but it cannot be denied that
there is some element of the unknown in the symbol. This element of mystery

3 Susanne Langer: 'Feeling and Form'
is responsible for the confusion of Symbol with myth, archetype and dream. All these are 'symbolic languages' which have meanings that resist full explanation. A symbolic language would be, broadly speaking, any mode of activity in which inner experiences, feelings and thoughts, either individual or collective, are expressed 'as if they were sensory experiences, events in the outer world'. Poetry, as one of the symbolic languages articulates what is deepest in us and thus symbolizes archetypal truths. This is what makes poetry so powerful in its appeal:

Every relation to the archetype, whether through experience or the mere spoken word is 'stirring', i.e. it is impressive, it calls up a stronger voice than our own. The man who speaks with premordial images speaks with a thousand tongues. He entrances and overpowers, while at the same time he raises the idea he is trying to express above the occasional and the transitory into the sphere of the ever-existent. He transmutes personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, thus evoking all those beneficial forces that have enabled mankind to find a rescue from every hazard, and to outlive the longest life. That is the secret of effective art. The creative process, in so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in an unconscious animation of the archetype, and in a development and shaping of this image till the work is completed.

In the past, myth was regarded as no better than fiction: it was something scientifically and historically untrue. Since the time of Coleridge and Nietzsche, myth has come to be considered, with poetry, as a 'kind of truth, or equivalent to truth, not a competitor with historic or scientific truth, but a supplement'. Many moderns have seen archetypal elements in myths and legends, these elements give it a deep sense of reality. Myth is an imaginative rather than a discursive way of rendering realities. Myth, considered from this point of view and defined in broad terms, is a symbolic form of expression. It is possible to regard myths as the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large controlling image that

gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life. ... Without such images, experience is chaotic, fragmentary and merely phenomenal. It is a chaos of experience that creates them, and they are intended to rectify it. All real convictions involve a mythology either in its usual broad sense, or in a private sense. In the first case it is embodied in literature or in ritual or in both, in which it has application to the whole of society and tends to be religious. In the second, it remains in the realm of fantasy, in which it tends to be obsessive and fanatical. Myths unify experience in a way that is satisfactory to the whole culture and the whole personality.

The modern poet, surrounded as he is by so much chaos is faced with the necessity of unifying experience, and of finding a way to render meaning; in the light of this unified experience he can discover, imagine or give order to his images. Myth can help the poet in doing this; so can religion. Myth can also help the poet to evoke 'that within us which, in Gilbert Murray's phrase, leaps in response to the effective presentation in poetry of an ancient theme'; or, in other words, the poet can symbolize 'archetypal patterns'. Myth can be helpful to the poet in giving him a sense of the depths of human experience to the reality he presents. The myth-making mind is perhaps able to grasp somehow the very fundamentals of experience: writers like Richard Chase would maintain that the mythopoeic mind or imagination is superior to the rational or speculative reason.

Chase holds that 'myth is only art', and concludes:

Any poem which we-affirms the dynamism and vibrancy of the world which fortifies the ego with the impression that there is a magically potent brilliancy or dramatic force in the world may be called myth.  

In equating myth with art, Chase puts himself in opposition to philosophers of symbolic form like Cassirer and Mrs. Langer, who are both careful in distinguishing

3 Mark Schorer: 'Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake'.
4 Maud Bodkin: 'Archetypal Patterns in Poetry'.
from art. Though myth, ritual and poetry are to be found developing along with each other at the beginning of every culture, they cannot be said to be completely similar. Susanne Langer makes this clear when she says,

Legend and myth and fairy tale are not in themselves literature, they are not art at all, but fantasies; as such, however, they are the natural materials of art.\textsuperscript{11}

The study of a poem as an expressive form similar to myth does not help us much in grasping its symbolic power; moreover, it tends to 'put good and bad art on a par, making all art a natural self-expressive function like dream and "make-believe".\textsuperscript{12} The use of myth or archetypal image in a modern poem may give it a certain depth and universality, but it does not on that account become a good poem. A symbolist poem may be able to capture something of the first, fine, careless, rapture that marks out the ancient myth, but it differs from myth by not implying belief. In the true 'mythical imagination there is always implied an act of belief'.\textsuperscript{13} A poet like Yeats, trying in our own times to create a new myth, found that no amount of effort can really bring back the 'old, simple celebration of life tuned to its highest pitch'.\textsuperscript{14} The Symbolist works out his meaning in purely poetic terms.

These attempts to equate the symbol with something else, to find an analogy for it in dream or myth, have only served to emphasize the fact that the symbol is something more than what these analogies in themselves stand for. Often, a particular aspect of the Symbol has been regarded as its characteristic feature, and this has led to the confusion of the Symbol with other forms. Thus, for example, the multiplicity of meanings in the Symbol makes it similar to the Allegory. A recent book has put forward a suggestion for the revival of the term allegory, and the author points out that nowadays

\textsuperscript{11} Susanne Langer: 'Feeling and Form', p.274.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p.280.
\textsuperscript{13} Ernst Cassirer: 'An Essay on Man', p.75.
\textsuperscript{14} W.B. Yeats: 'Wheels and Butterflies', p.65.
people often use the term Symbol instead of Allegory which seems to be an old-fashioned word. The description of Allegory that follows makes it clear how far it is from the Symbol:

We find the allegorical quality in a twice-told tale written in rhetorical or figurative language, and expressing a vital belief. The term Allegory might therefore be more usefully reserved for a narrative in which there is a fairly explicit point-for-point correspondence between the characters and events on the one hand, and their referents—whether they are religious, ethical or political—on the other. Allegory has usually an axe to grind: a political, social or moral motive. In form it is something conventional and extrinsic, imposed upon the material from outside. The form of the Symbol is intrinsic; it is born out of the vitality in the vision symbolized. The Symbol, we may say, has a personality of its own. The Symbol stands not merely for a convenient representation or sign denoting an idea, but for an independent creation, 'an expressive concretion of linguistic imagery which is absolutely irreplaceable'. It is born out of an artistic need, an inner necessity of the poet.

Of a different order are the misconceptions which arise out of the view that symbol, metaphor and image are basically of the same nature. To justify this, the meanings of 'metaphor' and 'image' have been so much extended as to make the view almost acceptable even to those who insist on making distinctions among the three terms. Cecil Day-Lewis shows a strong preference for the term 'image' which he defines in such broad terms that it becomes not far different from what we would call 'symbol'. In the same way, 'metaphor' with the additions and enlargements in meaning which it has gained in the hands of Richards, Empson, Brooks and Stanford, assumes the proportions and powers of the

15 Edwin Honig: 'Dark Conceit: the Making of Allegory'.
16 A.G. Lehmann: 'The Symbolist Aesthetic in France'.
Symbol. But in these matters it is only a poet who can fly successfully through the mists of misconception and get at the truth. Cecil Day-Lewis, in his book 'The Poetic Image' remarks that the 'image' or 'symbol' tries to embody 'the principle that emerges of itself from that dance of words in which life and art, the real and the imagined, so delicately interweave themselves'—that even the poet can barely tell one from the other.

O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossom,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

From all this it becomes clear that the symbolic poem has a complexity which defies the attempt at an exact definition. The symbolic poem has, at the same time the organization of elements into a unity: it is the unity not of a rational argument, but of an organism, in which the poem, having found 'its proper symbol defined and redefined by the participating metaphors ... becomes a part of the reality in which we live — an insight, rooted in, and growing out of concrete experience, many-sided, three-dimensional'. This quality of the Symbol makes it suggestive and indirect, placing it in opposition to the direct and explicit language of prose. The conception of a poem as a symbolic mode of communication has stimulated a great deal of critical thought in modern times. In fact, the progress of modern criticism, we are told by one of the best known of the 'New Critics' is

... part of a general intensification of the study of language and symbolism. The development of semantics, symbolic logic, cultural anthropology, and the psychology of Jung and Freud may all be taken as responses to the same general situation ... they all bear upon the problem of symbolism (logical and extra-logical) and represent attempts to recover symbolic "languages" whose real importance has become evident to us only as the supporting cultural pattern breaks down.

It is no accident, therefore, that a great deal of modern criticism has

occupied itself with the problem of how language actually works and specifically how it works in a piece of literature.18

Yet all these critical revelations would at best give us an imperfect acquaintance with Symbolism, whose nature cannot be properly understood unless we turn back to its development in the hands of those pioneers known to us as the French Symbolists. To them it was not merely a critical experiment but a glorious adventure opening up vast new possibilities for poetry, and holding promise of survival and success. The experiments of the French Symbolists in aesthetics and in poetry are full of successes as well as failures: what is admirable is their courage in opening up new ways. Symbolism brought a new vitality to French poetry at a time when it was beset with serious problems, and was passing through one of the darkest phases in its history. Being true poets, the French Symbolists were more interested in expression than in exposition: their creation rather than their criticism reveals the power of Symbolism. Their courage and their discoveries have proved of immense value to modern English poets, whose problems seem to have been anticipated, to a considerable extent, by the great French Symbolists. A consideration of what the French poets attempted to do and what goals they set for themselves would be interesting and relevant to a study of Symbolism in action.