SYMBOLISM IN MODERN ENGLISH POETRY

Synopsis

I THE NATURE OF THE SYMBOL

1 Introduction : Emergence of Symbolism

Symbolism, which had first been used extensively by several French poets of the nineteenth century, has emerged as a dominant force in modern English poetry. It can be considered as being mainly responsible for bringing a new vitality to English poetry at a time when its prestige and position as a serious art seemed to be threatened. In doing this service to poetry, Symbolism may have encouraged certain tendencies such as obscurity, complexity, excessive allusiveness and the absence of logical structure and of narrative links, but it has at the same time given them a poetic value in the light of which we can make a more meaningful approach to the work of such great moderns as Yeats, Eliot and Dylan Thomas.

The most important influence that has been responsible for the moulding and development of Symbolism seems to be the poet's quarrel with Science. The progress of Symbolism may be said to mark an important stage in the poet's attempt to meet with the challenge of Science. This attempt in itself is not new, nor is the quarrel with Science: both go back to the Renaissance and the humanistic outlook it encouraged. The beginnings of the conflict can be seen in Sidney's claim of superiority for poetry, and in Bacon's disdain of the 'feigned fancies' of poetry in favour of the observation and reasoning that is associated with Science. But for many years the newly revealed spirit of Science could flourish along with the spirit of poetry: there was a balancing of the older, more religious, view of life and the new, rational approach of Science. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Science rapidly gained force, but the spirit of religion was still strong enough to enable the poet to withstand the opposition of Science and yet adventure freely. When the pressure of Science began to be felt keenly for the first time, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Romantic poets gained a certain degree of immunity from the attack by creating an autonomous world for poetry. They did not reject Science, but based their poetry on a strong belief in nature and emotion. This belief could not be sustained by the Victorians, during whose time Science gained such power and prestige in society as led to the undermining of the stabilizing influence of religion. We have in Arnold a typical example of the effect of this undermining force which leads to a curious blend of profound scepticism about his own generation with plentiful optimism about future generations. Arnold, the culture-hero, felt Poetry could be reformed and revived. The French Symbolists had, in a somewhat similar situation, Arnold's scepticism, but they possessed an even greater poetic vitality: they met the challenge of Science boldly, and carried forward the crusade for Poetry. They did not accept the traditional norms of social and moral life, nor did they accept the supremacy of Science with all its implications: they tried to approach life and its problems in a new manner. The willingness
to meet life on its own terms and a consequent reappraisal of values remain the dominant characteristics of Symbolism, whether among the French poets or among the modern English poets.

2 The Philosophical Background

Symbolism has affected not only Poetry but recent trends in philosophy and epistemology. Ever since Kant expressed the view that the reason could not give us complete knowledge, there have been attempts to find an 'integral' approach to Reality. Existentialism and Symbolism have been two such attempts in modern times: they have, in their own way, tried to indicate the nature of Reality. Of these, the former seems to have been only partially successful, since it has not been able to say much about the means of attaining or revealing Reality. Among the Existentialists, it is only Heidegger who goes so far as to say that man must submit himself to Reality instead of trying to conquer it. Symbolism is more positive in its approach. Thinkers like Whitehead, Cassirer and Susanne Langer have all regarded Symbolism as a valid way of knowing and revealing Reality. The poet makes symbolic use of language to bring to us that 'wealth and fullness of immediate experience' which gives us a valuable insight into Reality.

3 The Concept of Symbolism

The realization of the value and importance of Symbolism is not the result of a metaphysical inquiry only, but is the product of a period of poetic experiment and critical thought. Ever since Jean Moreas adopted the term 'symbole' there have been attempts to define and justify its use. An important contribution to this inquiry is made by the French Symbolists, but the things they had to say could hardly be connected up so as to form a systematic exposition of the nature of Symbolism. Being poets they were more interested in using Symbolism than in undertaking a thorough-going investigation into its nature. We find such an investigation in the writings of certain modern thinkers, notably Whitehead, Cassirer, Urban, Susanne Langer and Kenneth Burke: these writings taken together would provide us with an adequate idea of the concept of Symbolism as it is understood in modern times.

4 Coleridge on Symbolism

An interesting example of an independent discovery of many aspects of Symbolism is to be found in Coleridge, who had the unique distinction of combining creative power with rare intellectual and critical ability. Coleridge not only used the term 'symbol' and distinguished it from 'allegory', but said a number of things which anticipated the practice and thought of the Symbolists. Though it would be difficult to point out any direct connection between Coleridge and modern Symbolism, it would not be wrong to regard him as the first Englishman with Symbolist ideas. This also partly explains the importance that Coleridge has in modern critical theory.

5 Some Misconceptions regarding Symbolism

The use of the term 'Symbolism' in various contexts, and its apparent similarity with other poetic modes has often led to certain misconceptions regarding its nature. The 'symbol' has been confused with such things as 'sign', 'allegory', 'myth', 'metaphor' and 'image'. Though, beyond doubt, there are elements shared in common, it would be wrong to identify the Symbol with any of these: it is something greater than what all these terms represent in themselves.

The foregoing inquiry may help us to know something of the nature of Symbolism, but its true greatness can be realized only by seeing it in action in the poetry of the French Symbolists and of the modern English poets.
II THE FRENCH SYMBOLISTS

6 The Aesthetic Background

The French Symbolists of the nineteenth century, being pioneers, had constantly to defend and justify their practices; in their attempt to do this, they built up a certain aesthetic background for Symbolism. Though they do not provide any systematic formulation, they do open out fresh approaches to many poetic problems. What the French Symbolists have said about the nature and aims of Symbolist poetry, and about such problems as its relation to Reality, its form, its closeness to music and dream, its use of tension and its attitude to language, proved of great value to French poetry and to modern English poetry, as the leading English poets of our time have looked to them for inspiration. The pronouncements of the French masters help us to gain an insight into many of the aims and problems of twentieth century English poetry.

7 French Symbolist Poetry

The poetry of the great Symbolists of France is marked by boldness, originality and love of experiment. Nerval, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Valéry, were all dedicated men who aimed at nothing less than absolute Reality and perfect art. But in pursuing these aims, they depended entirely on their own experience of life and on their imagination rather than on theories. They took the poet's vocation very seriously and did remarkable things which seem to explore the full possibilities of Symbolism. They may have failed in many of the things that they tried to do, but they did certainly gain for poetry a new power and value, and established a high place for it in the face of hostile forces like Science and Industrialism. A literary assessment of French Symbolist poetry as a whole could be attempted in the light of their special use of language and imagery to symbolize Meaning. The best work of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud reveals the completeness or 'inclusiveness' of Reality they have been able to achieve as well as the remarkable correspondence in their poems of image and idea, of form and meaning. Their work also focussed fresh attention on certain aspects of poetry such as form, tension and the quest for Meaning: this consideration has had great influence on modern critical thought as well as poetic practice.

III THE SYMBOLIST POEM

8 Organic Form

The idea of organic form seems to have been given critical exposition first by Coleridge, and then it enjoyed a certain popularity among the English Romantics. Symbolism implies organic form, since form and content are inseparable in a symbolic poem. The poem which in itself is the symbol of a directly intuited reality, is something unique, a created order, with every thing in its right place: hence it has the unity and independence of an organism. The symbol is also able to capture something of the dynamic quality of life: we experience a sense of growth or movement, a vitality, which is one of the distinguishing qualities of the symbolist poem.

9 Tension

The Symbolist regards tension or conflict as a necessary element in the poem. The organic unity of the poem is achieved through a system of tensions. The Symbolist brings together as many contradictory elements as possible, and then harmonizes them in a larger order. The poem becomes symbolic only when the poet finds that 'there is a rage waiting to be ordered, and a rage to find, or to make
that ordering'. The ordering implies an undissociated sensibility in the poet, the ability to bring together dissimilar elements and create a new unity out of them. The Symbolist finds tension offered even by the language he uses, since language tends by nature to be discursive and thus fails to give the full meaning of the poet. The Symbolists, both French and English, exploit this resistance to create what Elizabeth Sewell has called a 'closed system' of language. This makes the Symbolist poem autonomous and self-sufficient, creating and containing its own meaning.

10 The Quest for Meaning

The French Symbolists valued poetry for the knowledge of Reality it embodied. The sense of reality that the Symbolist poem gives us is not available through any other means: that is the Symbolists' claim. Since the meaning of the Symbol is unique, it cannot be paraphrased or interpreted in rational terms. The Symbolists, in achieving this unique sense of being, went beyond the prevailing concepts of reality and of time. Modern Science appears to lend support to the view that in doing this the French Symbolists were getting closer to reality than was supposed. The French poets were doing something not only unusual but hazardous. In the quest for Meaning, there was the great risk of the Symbolist reaching the point of complete obscurity: the poem would then cease to be a poem. However, the best Symbolist poets were often able to avoid being excessively esoteric and obscure, and could achieve a sort of universal validity for their poems by relating their symbols to human experience in a comprehensible manner. Thus, peculiar as their methods might seem to be, the French Symbolists have rendered a valuable service to poetry by revealing Meaning in a fresh manner. It is perhaps their independent approach to Reality that has had the greatest influence on modern English poets.

11 The Antique Flute — Eliot's Quest for Meaning

Eliot's poetry shows, from the beginning, a tendency in the poet to evaluate experiences, and to see life as a meaningful pattern. In his early poems the desire for reality takes the form of a direct concern with the physical actualities of modern urban life together with ironic contrasts and comments. These poems give us some sense of the futility of the average citizen's life. In 'The Waste Land', Eliot succeeded, for the first time, in symbolizing the boredom and the horror of the modern world, while at the same time he tried to give significance to our pain and suffering by placing it in the wider context of time. The poet finds that self-control and discipline can make suffering meaningful, and can take men beyond the boredom to a vision of the glory of life. Though the poem does not directly embody any religious doctrine, it comes very close to the Christian view of life. In his later poetry there is a specifically Christian element. Like the antique flute of Pan, Christianity represents a traditional time-tested wisdom which seems to provide the poet with the 'stops and steps of the mind'. Discipline also implies a process of purification through which the soul has to pass before it can aspire to salvation. 'Ash Wednesday' symbolizes penitence and purgation, and suggests that these are available even to modern man. 'The Four Quartets' explore the subject of salvation and it...
The poems also represent Eliot's success in the quest for Meaning. Eliot's experiments in forms, techniques and ideas were mainly inspired by the French Symbolists who had made bold and original attempts to evaluate the values that still prevailed in modern urban civilization and to find what truths could help it to survive. Eliot, with their example before him, with a cosmopolitan background and a firm determination to revitalize English poetry, found in Symbolism a great source of power.

12 The Still Centre — Eliot's Meaning

Both Eliot and Yeats, the greatest of the modern English poets, have made attempts to symbolize Reality, but whereas Yeats's symbols have a spontaneity and originality, Eliot's imply a tradition of training. There is something esoteric and scholarly in Eliot's symbols: they often imply a strong Christian background. The poetry of Eliot, as a whole, has a certain unity of purpose: it shows the poet's earnest attempt to get at the meaning of life. 'The Four Quartets' represent the fulfilment of that quest: the vision of the still centre of the turning wheel symbolizes illumination. Though the meaning symbolized by the 'still centre' is in perfect accordance with Christian belief, Eliot has succeeded in rendering it symbolically, as the meeting point of the timeless with time. The Quartets of Eliot show what success a modern poet can achieve in Symbolism, and how it helps a poet to face and measure difficult problems.

13 Players and Painted Stage — Yeats's Poetic Development

Yeats began his career as a romantic with a strong inclination toward the spiritual life. It was only after he had passed through a long period of experimentation that the empirical facts of life begin to assume a significant place in his poetry. His sense of 'realism' led Yeats to create symbols which do not depend for their meaning on any received tradition of meaning but arise out of and take meaning from the lived experience of the poet. He had, in his later years, been able to overcome his fondness for 'players and painted stage', that is, for the dream, the work of imagination which does not give importance to real life. He developed a new vision of life as tragedy, and a realization of the fall poetic value of tension or conflict. The great symbols of his later poetry have a freshness and autonomy that is remarkable, but at the same time they bring the poetry nearer the natural and centrally 'human' values — values which society has accepted, by and large, through the ages. The last poems show a brave confrontation and acceptance of death, change and time. An analysis of certain aspects of his later poetry has been attempted in order to show how Yeats has been able to arrive at the most important questions of modern man.

14 The Artifice of Eternity — The Symbols of Yeats

Yeats used symbols in his poetry from his earliest years. His early symbols, like the Rose and the Tree have a static quality about them: they do not give us a sense of movement, development or of vitality. They have a tendency to become allegorical. They do not seem to achieve the quality of permanence which we expect in great poetry. This is perhaps due to the inability of Yeats to relate them to the groundwork of a philosophical system or a religion: no established system or religion was acceptable to him. Yeats tried to solve this problem by creating his own system of philosophy in 'A Vision'. The system gave him a sense of imaginative liberation, and a deep awareness of such great problems as those of Time, Unity of Being, and the value of Art: these problems were given symbolic expression in his later poetry. In symbols like Byzantium or the Dancer, we find that understanding of life in which poetry and religion seem to become one. These great symbols attain something of the changeless quality and sense of perfect being that we associate with eternity.
The linguistic brilliance of Dylan Thomas has dazzled many, but this impression must not obscure the fact that the brilliance goes hand in hand with a deep concern for reality. He has, however, none of the doubt or despair that we find in Yeats and Eliot. He has no quarrel with Science, Religion or Myth, but is confident that the poet can make his own independent approach to the great problems of life. He celebrates his discovery of the greatness and wonder of creation. He exults in his view of man as the image of God, though the implication here is not theological but intensely physical. Through a deep awareness of the sensuous reality of Creation, he is able to find meaning in life. He touches upon some of the deepest problems of life, but sees them as parts of a larger order. In its incantatory quality and purity of vision, his poetry attains an almost religious intensity. Some of his well-known poems have been analyzed to show how Thomas has been able to achieve that 'elemental' quality which has ever been the goal of Symbolists.

Envoi

Symbolism has been a major force in English poetry for more than half a century. It has brought to poetry a new sense of reality and sincerity, and by doing so has been able to restore to poetry some of its dignity and prestige as a serious art. Symbolism has also encouraged a new attitude towards poetry and new critical standards. Many modern critical concepts seem to have developed under the influence of Symbolist poetry, and are particularly useful in understanding such poetry: when Allen Tate speaks of 'Tension', Ransom of 'structure' and 'texture', Cleanth Brooks of 'paradox', and Kenneth Burke of 'symbolic action', there is a family likeness in them all. There is however a sense of strain in the way they apply these concepts to the older poetry. This sense of strain seems to emphasize the difference of modern poetry which has a tendency towards difficulty, complexity and esotericism. Poetry, in becoming a specialized and scholarly pursuit, may have gained much, but at the same time it has lost the simplicity, the spontaneity and universality of appeal that we associate with Shakespeare or Wordsworth. In recent years, there seems to have been a reaction in the move to regain some of these lost qualities for poetry: several of the younger poets of today favour rational content and directness of expression. Perhaps this is an indication that English poetry is once again moving in a new direction: Symbolism may, after all, prove to be only a phase, though an important one, in the progress of poetry.