Poetry is the establishment of Being by means of the word ... Poetry is the inaugural meaning given to being.  
— Martin Heidegger: Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry.

... the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer it than any other. This expression or naming is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree.  
— Henry Waldo Emerson: The Poet.

Symbolism has been an ardent struggle to explore and reveal meaning: the struggle finds parallels in the field of philosophy, during the last hundred years. Of course, it would be futile to argue for any direct relation between developments in poetry and in philosophy. The poets conducted their experiments independently of the philosophers. And perhaps, they always preceded the philosophers in exploring new ways.

The great transcendentalist 'adventure of ideas' launched by Immanuel Kant inspired considerable reflection on the phenomenal character of experience and on the relation of art and epistemology. A new recognition of the importance of expressive forms for all human understanding led to the concept of science, myth and art as intellectual activities of a symbolic nature. Ever since Descartes gave his theory of knowledge, the dichotomy of mind and matter, subject and object, conception and fact, had found encouragement; and the question arose whether any 'integral' act of knowledge was at all possible. Romantic idealism and materialist positivism had both attempted to find a satisfactory answer to the question, but they had been unsuccessful. As Whitehead has pointed out, the idealists merely 'put matter inside mind', while the positivists 'put mind inside matter'. A departure was made by Symbolism, which tried to recapture once again, the unity of a world now...

divided. According to R.M. Eaton...

... the truly significant tendency in modern metaphysics ... is toward breaking through the old fixed categories of the mental and the physical. We are returning to the point of view of the ancients, having suffered for three centuries from the blindness of the Cartesian dualism. If a chasm is opened as it was by Descartes between the physical and the mental, there is no way of closing it. ... Mind and body are aspects of abstractions from a known reality which is wider and richer than either.²

Ever since Kant, attempts had been made to know this wider reality. What was this wider reality and how could it be known? An answer had been provided by Kant: that the human mind can never know the object-in-itself. And from this position it was but a short step to Nietzsche, who declares that knowledge of the object-in-itself is unnecessary—all that we need is to be able to master it, and hence the Will to Power is primary. It was perhaps Heidegger who reversed radically this development in modern philosophy. He destroyed the Cartesian picture at one blow by saying that what characterizes man essentially is not that he is (Cogito ergo sum) but that he is Being-in-the-world. He is in the world because by existing he is involved in it totally. Heidegger takes man as a field or region of being. One of the effects of Cartesian thought had been a cleavage between man and nature, the alienation of man from Being. The object which has been detached from the enveloping ground of Being can be measured and calculated, but the essence of this object—the thing-in-itself—becomes more and more remote from man. The subject becomes conscious of himself as cut off from the object even as his power to control the object increases. Man masters beings, but Being, the open region in which both subject and object stand and are not divided, is forgotten. Western man had to fetch Being back from the oblivion into which it had fallen: Existentialism and Symbolism were two such attempts to gain knowledge of Being.

The names generally associated with Existentialism are those of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. It is perhaps unfair to put all these names together, but each represents a point of view which had important consequences

for modern thought. Kierkegaard, who had a Socratian love for wisdom, was not prepared to accept the current Hegelian theories. He had a great admiration for Socrates the man, who professed no system or doctrine. Socrates had said he had no knowledge of his own, but only acted as the midwife to other men by bringing to birth the knowledge they had within them. For Socrates, philosophy was a way of life, and thus there was no danger of his thoughts remaining only in the realm of theory. Kierkegaard was Socratic in the sense that he believed that existence and a theory of existence were not the same thing; he began exploring what discrepancy there was between the two. Here was something radical in Western thought.

Kierkegaard had first of all to fight against the dominance of Hegelian philosophy. Hegel had said, 'The Real is rational and the rational is real'; and this view was in complete agreement with the fundamental assumption of Western philosophic tradition: the belief in a completely rational universe. Since existence could not be reduced to a completely rational system (it could not be thought, but only lived), reason had to leave existence out of its picture of reality. This was what the positivists did. Hegel, however, tried to account for existence, but through reason. The Hegelian attitude may be summarized somewhat as follows:

We begin ... with the concept of Being, a pure empty concept without existence; this begets its opposite, Nothing, and out of the pair comes the mediating and reconciling concept that is the synthesis of both. This process goes on until at the proper stage of the dialectic we reach the level of Reality, which is to say, Existence.

Kierkegaard protested that existence was not something vague, indefinite, but 'dense, concrete and rich'; the fact of existence cannot be reproduced in any mental concept, because it's a compelling and enveloping reality. The question would be: if existence cannot be reflected as a concept in the mind,

where do we really come to grips with it? Kierkegaard's answer was that we encounter existence not in the detachment of thought, but in the involvement and pathos of choice. The critical moments of our life are those when we are thrown forcibly against the fact of existence, and cannot help knowing it. This according to Kierkegaard is a subjective act. He distinguished between 'objective' truth, the realities we come to know through our ability to think, and the 'subjective' truth which is a matter of complete and inner realization. 'Subjective truth is not a truth that I have, but a truth that I am'.

Nietzsche faced the fact of existence or life in a different way: he felt existence was permeated by a dynamic power. He held that 'the strongest and highest will to life does not lie in the puny struggle to exist, but in the Will to war, the Will to Power'. The Will to Power was at work everywhere: it was in fact the innermost essence of all beings, the essence of Being itself. This conclusion is remarkable because...

...Nietzsche had ridiculed the very notion of Being as one of the most deceptive ghosts spawned by the brains of philosophers, the most general and therefore the emptiest of concepts, a thin and impalpable ectoplasm distilled from the concrete realities of the senses.4

Nietzsche had affirmed that the real world is the world of the senses and of Becoming. But the metaphysician in Nietzsche had driven him on to the idea of Being. But Nietzsche's thought preserves his dynamism, for Being is turned into Becoming, becomes, in fact, essentially the Will to Power.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche emphasize a profound dissociation or split that has taken place in the being of Western man, which is basically the conflict of reason with 'the whole man'. According to Kierkegaard, reason threatens to swallow up faith, without which man will fall into despair. For Nietzsche the era of reason and science raises the question of what is to be

4 Ibid., p.178.
done with the primitive instincts and passions of man; in pushing these
aside the age threatens us with a decline in vitality for the whole species.
What lies behind both prophetic messages is that man is becoming separated
from his own being. The estrangement from Being itself becomes Heidegger's
central theme. Heidegger deals in a radical way with the celebrated
alienation of modern man, and indeed with the problem of man generally, by
subordinating it to something else, without which man can never regain his
roots: to Being itself. In order to deal with the important question,
what is Being, Heidegger makes use of 'phenomenology' borrowed from his
teacher, Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology was the attempt to describe what
is given to us in experience without obscuring preconceptions or hypothetical
speculations. Being cannot be known, according to Heidegger, except by
allowing it to reveal itself. We cannot gain knowledge of Being by attempting
(as Nietzsche would have us do) to conquer and subdue it, but by rather by
submitting ourselves to what is. In the everyday world in which all of us
live, none of us is a private Self confronting a world of external objects.
We are each simply one among many: this everyday public quality of our
existence Heidegger calls 'the One'. The One is the impersonal and public
creature whom each of us is even before he is an 'I'. So long as we are
in this externalized and public existence, we are spared the terror and
dignity of becoming a Self. But as happened to Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's
story, such things as death and anxiety intrude upon this state, destroy
our sheltered position of being one among many, and reveal our own existence
as fearfully and irremediably our own. Because it is less fearful to be
'the One' than to be a Self, the modern world has multiplied all the
devices of self-evasion. Man is illumined by letting Being reveal itself,
and not vice versa. Man must learn to let Being be, instead of meddling
with it to make it yield up answers to our need for power.

*Perhaps the most popular

The name of Sartre is more well-known to the public than as an exponent
of Existentialism. Sartre too is concerned with Being, but he distinguishes two varieties: Being-in-itself ('en-soi') and Being-for-itself ('pour-soi'). The former is the self-contained being of a thing, the latter is co-extensive with the realm of consciousness, and the nature of consciousness is that it is perpetually beyond itself. In this distinction we have once again the Cartesian dualism of subject and object, the world of consciousness and the world of things. Sartre has advanced as the fundamental thesis of his Existentialism the proposition that existence precedes essence. This thesis is true for Heidegger as well, but for him another proposition is even more basic than this: namely, Being precedes existence. 'Man can make himself be what he is only because all his projects are revealed to him as taking place within the open field or region of Being'. This is why Heidegger once remarked, "I am not an Existentialist". The Existentialists of the Sartrian school do not grasp this priority of Being, and thus their philosophy remains locked up, like that of Descartes, in the human subject.

What the Symbolists did was to go further, to accept Being, and the possibility of the artist merging with Being. The Symbolist becomes one with Reality, and is able to recreate reality in a symbolic form. As Cassirer has expressed this view admirably, then he says that myth, art, language and science are all parallel symbolic forms which give us access to reality, without being imitative of reality. He writes:

... the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us... For the mind only that can be visible which has some definite form, but every form of existence has as its source in some particular way of seeing, some intellectual formulation and intuition of meaning."

Knowledge of Reality or Being can thus be had only through symbolic forms.

The real discovery of Symbolism is, however, as much an achievement of the poets as these philosophers.

5 Ernst Cassirer: 'Language and Myth', p.8
Symbolism perhaps found encouragement as a mode of philosophy by the new interest
aroused in extrarational modes of knowledge, by the study of myth, anthropology,
psychology and the history of science. The name most usually associated with
Symbolist philosophy is that of A.N. Whitehead. His book on 'Symbolism, its
Meaning and effect', however, does not tell us much about the new approach to the
problem of knowledge. Whitehead tried to show in this book how Symbolism, a
new 'mode of perception' gives us a more correct attitude towards reality. He
points out that Cartesian philosophy had led to an unreal position:

... the fundamental principles are so set out as to presuppose independently
existing substances with simple location in the community of spatial extensions.
Those principles lead straight to the materialistic, mechanistic nature, surveyed
by cogitating minds.

Whitehead regarded Reality as a flux of inter-related forces: following him,
modern philosophy has come to realize the insufficiency of a mind independent of
objects, and of a theory of objects independent of mind. Whitehead was one of
the first among modern thinkers to show the fundamental unity of relationship
which exists between mind and matter. He tried to explore the problem of the
nature of this relationship: 'in his search for solution, Whitehead retained
the scientific ideal of a more inclusive generalization: Reality was not something
static or narrowly limited. As he puts it,

The actual world is a process, and that process is the process of becoming actual entities. ... Actual entities are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real.

The problems of reality and of knowledge cannot be treated adequately in isolation
of each other. He is against dualisms of knower and known, ideas and things.
Knowing implies the ability to see the way contradictory things become parts
of a pattern. Every event or actuality brings together dynamic but opposing
factors:

Cognition discloses an event as being an activity, organizing a real
togetherness of alien things.®

Cognition here implies a symbolic mode of knowing the event, which comes through

experience of the reality. Whitehead distinguishes between two modes of experience, which he calls 'presentational immediacy' and 'causal efficacy', which he explains as follows:

... By 'presentational immediacy' I mean what is actually termed 'sense perception' ... Presentational immediacy is our immediate perception of the contemporary external world, appearing as an element constitutive of our own experience ... Causal efficacy is the hand of the settled past in the formation of the present?

The synthetic activity whereby the two modes of experiencing reality are fused into one Whitehead calls 'symbolic reference'. Symbols, he defines, as concrete aspects of experience referring to actual things with which they are inter-related, for a symbol is only one aspect of experience 'eliciting consciousness' respecting other components of experience. Symbols give us knowledge of the actual, concrete world, which is a world of dynamic interdependence. Since all thought is abstractive, we are continually in danger of reducing the rich, complex dynamic processes which we experience to simple abstractions, and then of mistaking these abstractions for realities.

What he is essentially protesting against is the bifurcation of nature into 'two systems of reality', the one actually experienced, the other inferred consequent upon abstractive processes, or 'the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness'. According to him,

... an individual entity, whose life history is part of some larger, deeper, more complete pattern, is liable to have aspects of that larger pattern reflected in itself as modifications of its own being.

Thus, 'subject' and 'object' are inter-related patterns. This view of the integration of self and object in the act of knowing is not very different from the view most generally accepted among Symbolists, and stated very well by

8 Quotation by Herbert Read in his essay on 'Descartes', 'Collected Essays', p.194.
another modern philosopher, R.G. Collingwood; he speaks of the symbolic or integrated act of knowing that the Symbolist artist believes in:

... the artistic consciousness (that is, consciousness as such) does not distinguish between itself and its world, its world being for it simply what is here and now experienced, and itself being simply the fact that this is here and now experienced.

Theoretically, the artist is a person who comes to know himself, to know his own emotion. This is also knowing the world, that is, the sights and sounds and so forth which together make up his total imaginative experience. The two knowledges are to him one knowledge, because these sights and sounds are to him steeped in the emotion with which he contemplates them; they are the language in which that emotion utters itself to his consciousness. His world is his language. What it says to him it says about itself. His imaginative vision of it is his self-knowledge.

This integrated act of knowing makes away with the old metaphysical distinctions between knower and known as well as that between thought and emotion and between intellect and imagination. Over the past hundred years the development of philosophy has shown a progressive orientation toward the immediate and qualitative, the existent and the actual, toward concreteness and adequacy as Whitehead put it.

The old philosophy may be said to have reached its culmination a century ago in Hegel, who wished to enclose Reality within a completely rational structure. Kierkegaard, differing from him, said that there is no System possible for human existence. The System is impossible even for exact sciences like Physics and Mathematics, as has been shown by the discoveries of Heisenberg in Physics and Godel in Mathematics. Heisenberg's Principle of Indeterminancy shows that there are essential limits to our ability to know and predict physical states of affairs. Niels Bohr's Principle of Complementarity sets a rigorous limit upon the observations of Physics. Godel has shown that Mathematics too contains insoluble problems, and hence can never be formalized in any complete system. And if human reason can never reach complete systemization

in Mathematics, it is not likely to reach it anywhere else. This fact was recognized in the field of metaphysics, when it was realized that man can have no complete knowledge of reality by proceeding in merely rational and systematic ways. Further, the cleavage that had set in after Descartes between 'subject' and 'object' was actually a form of man's alienation from Being. The 'object' which has been detached from the enveloping ground of Being can be measured and calculated, but the essence of this object — the 'thing-in-itself' — becomes more and more remote from man. Western man has got to detach being back from the oblivion into which it had fallen.

The attempt to realize this wider Reality began seriously, a century ago, in the field of Poetry, with the Romantics. The imperative need for this attempt was felt most keenly by the poets perhaps because of the 'dissociation of sensibility', one of the products of Rationalism. Cartesian philosophy and the systematic approach of Newtonian Science inspired a rational approach to life and its problems; and Rationalism gained force rapidly, and so did the 'dissociation' which mainly made for such distinctions as between thought and emotions and between 'subject' and 'object'. But awareness of the dissociation did not come till late in the eighteenth century. The influence that Classicism, Rationalism and Industrialism had over people reached the stage of tyranny at about that time, and this brought a strong reaction.

The Romantic Movement passing over the body of Europe like a spasm was an effort to shake off the shackles of a world limited within the bounds of Rationalism, and to gain the freedom of a fuller realization of Reality. The Romantic poets felt man was being cut off from Reality and he was thus sinking down into a meaningless existence. Their poetry was an attempt to regain Reality for man; the 'return to Nature' was a reflection of this attempt.

The first trumpet-tones of the Revolt against Reason were sounded, as we
know, by William Blake. A much greater thinker than an early essay by Eliot
leads us to suppose, Blake is remarkable for the vision of what might become.
In 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', Blake in a way anticipates both Nietzsche
and Baudelaire. If man marries his hell to his heaven, his evil to his good,
he will become, according to Blake, a creature such as the earth has not yet
seen. Blake’s protest against the Tyranny of Reason is gloriously carried forward
by Wordsworth, though he had great respect for Science and Reason. The protest
he makes against the intellect is fundamentally, that it is something that severes
man from his immediate responses to Nature:

Our meddling intellect
Mishapes the beauteous forms of things
We murder to dissect.

Wordsworth’s protest was in fact against man in an urban civilization cutting
himself off from Nature, and in doing so cutting himself off from the roots of
his own being.

What Wordsworth did initiated a tendency which was carried forward by the
Symbolists. The poet was trying to do something new. The more the people
around him concentrated on external reality, the more he turned inward. Indus
Industrial man was making noisome advances in his conquest of Nature; he was
building more and more factories, producing more and more markets goods — these
seemed to be important things for him. But to the poet what mattered was
his inner self: a limitless world for private exploration. Poets were
reacting and would continue to react to the concomitant effects of the
Industrial Revolution more than to the Revolution itself — to changed attitudes,
values, personal relations, social institutions, and so forth. From such
alienation a few sought refuge in religion, but a great many more in the
Unconscious or in the unknown Reality. The search for Reality becomes a
new mission for the poet, who is no longer merely a maker of rhymes, but an
explorer and wielder of vast, unsuspected powers, whose discovery can bring


heaven down to earth. External reality was a surface to be seen through and
the greater Reality that lay behind was to be explored. This is the main idea
behind Baudelaire's sonnet on 'Correspondences'. Poetry was thus now to be
regarded as the means of arriving at some truer, more real sphere of Being.
It would be a mistake to consider the great Romantics as excessively subjective
aesthetes: for them the value of the aesthetic attitude was always metaphysical
and concerned with the total human condition. Or, we could say, their
subjectivity is one whose bounds are so enlarged as to include all Being. The
wall between man and the world disappears as in moments of mystical ecstasy,
but without such union with God as the mystics avow. The 'non-religious' quality
comes through in Mallarmé's 'Ma pensée se pense' ( = my thought thinks itself),
and in Baudelaire's 'What a delight to drown one's gaze in the immensity of the
sky and sea ... all those things think through me, or I through them (for in
the vastness of 'reverie', the I quickly loses itself) ...'. Roger Shattuck
calls this 'one of Baudelaire's most lucid moments, a purely self-reflexive
perception...'.

Rimbaud made a no less famous journey towards self-alienation,
and this succeeded at last in his victories: 'Je est un autre' ( = I am another).

In terms of poetry, the basic belief in Baudelaire, Rilke, Rimbaud and
the moderns is that of the continuity of the self and the world outside. Baudelaire prefigured it when he called the modern conception of pure art
'a suggestive magic which contains both the subject and the object, the external
world and the artist himself'. It has also come to be the view of
philosophers and scientists for whom 'subject-object' are no longer valid distinctions
and commonsense notions of time are no longer true.

These developments had an important influence on the attitude of philosophers and poets towards language. Language which had hitherto been considered merely as an instrument of expression or communication was now found capable of a new power: the generation of meanings, the symbolic embodiment of reality. Hopkins insisted on getting the quality of 'thinginess' into his poems: in the poems of Dylan Thomas we get, as Bailey puts it, 'types of linguistic experience! The step-by-step exposition of meaning that logic and syntax make necessary, does not suit the modern poet who has a different type of reality to give. In reading the poems of writers like Rimbaud and Laforgue, we feel that the reality they tried to express was beyond the bounds of the linguistic and conceptual apparatus at their command.

Cassirer was perhaps the first epistemologist to recognize the importance of language as one of the symbolic forms which could articulate the vital patterns of reality. He put language on an equal footing with other symbolic forms such as art and myth, as a mode of knowing and revealing Reality. This can be seen from what he says about the 'expressive forms' in the following passage:

Every authentic function of the human spirit has this decisive characteristic. ....(that) it does not merely copy but rather embodies an original formative power. It does not express passively the mere fact that something is present, but contains an independent energy of the human spirit, through which the simple presence of the phenomenon assumes a definite meaning, a particular ideational content. This is as true of art as it is of cognition: it is as true of myth as of religion.11

The importance of language in symbolization was also realized by Collingwood, who considers it as one of the most vital factors in poetic creation. He writes about the relation between the artist and language:

The aesthetic experience ... is a knowing of oneself and one's world. ... It is also a making of oneself and of one's world, the self which was psyche

being remade in the shape of consciousness, and the world, which was crude sensa being remade in the shape of language, a sensa converted into imagery, and charged with emotional significance ...

Moreover, his (the artist's) knowing of this new world is also the making of the new world which he is coming to know. The world he has come to know is a world consisting of language.

Before Collingwood, Bergson, Whitehead and others had made new approaches to the problem of the nature of Reality, and had recognized the need for symbolization; but they continued to regard language as an expressive medium rather than as a symbolic form. Bergson associated language with an intellectualization that necessarily misrepresents the fluid reality, which is available directly to pure intuition. Whitehead merged mind and matter, but continued to hold that language is external to reality.

Whitehead, however, conceded that language could be redesigned to correspond with reality as process. A distinction should be made between these Symbolist attitudes and Crocean Expressionism. Though the latter is cognate to symbolism in its identification of intuition and expression, its concept of language is explicitly opposed to the material medium.

Similarly, Collingwood's theory of 'art as language' labours the opposition between the medium and the 'work of art' proper, 'whose only place is in the artist's mind.' But in many respects Collingwood represents a point where expressionism is turning into symbolism. (Ref. 'The Principles of Art', pp. 300-308).

To know is to master through medium, as Collingwood says. If absolute dualism (mind versus matter) is abandoned, there is no longer any question of subjective expression or objective description. In fact, this new metaphysics is made possible only by the new theory of language. To know is to symbolize in one way or another; this was also something first stated by Cassirer. He recognized the original creative power of language.

language, which it loses as civilization advances. From this original condition of creative speech, rational expression tends away. Or, as Cassirer points out, poetry is nearer 'the wealth and fullness of immediate experience' than prose, and that in growing into 'an expression of concepts and judgments' language has to forego this wealth. That is, poetry is still able to make use of language as a symbol, and by doing so can get nearer Reality.

Thus, we see the whole movement of thought since Kant has been in favour of the integral view of Reality that Symbolism aspires for. Of the two great approaches of the modern age to Being or Reality, Symbolism is the more positive and poetically effective: Existentialism could not effectively indicate any way to reveal complete Reality. The success of Symbolism in this respect has actually shifted philosophy into 'a new key'. Its establishment as a principle for modern poetry has been given additional strength and power by the redefinition of the function of language as a symbolic mode. It is not, however, the philosophical attempts at justification which prove the greatness of Symbolism as the ruling force of modern poetry, but its sense of inevitability. Neither poets nor critics have been able to get away from it completely. Even most of the opposition to Symbolist theory takes place within the same frame of reference as that theory, thus, becoming not a change of venue but a retrial. Yvor Winters, for instance, sets out to show that poetry has the same sort of reality as any other mode of expression, being a statement of some sort, but while the differentia of this approach is the emphasis on 'statement', the determinant of Winters' approach is his awareness of 'words' or language.