Chapter 3 : The Concept of Symbolism

There are two ways in which the subject of Symbolism might be approached. First, we might try to study what the Symbolists themselves have said about the Symbol, and find out from their utterances the answer to the question: What is the Poetic Symbol. We may thus arrive at a definition which would tell us unambiguously what we should expect of a Symbol. The other way is to make an attempt to find the general characteristics of the Symbol, from the observations made by modern philosophers and critics. All this might help us to discover something about the nature of the Symbol.

The word 'Symbol' is used in general parlance, and is quite popular. The word is also used in widely different contexts, and for widely different purposes. 'It appears as a term in logic, in mathematics, in semantics, and in epistemology; it has also had a long history in the worlds of theology, of the fine arts, and of poetry'. Even while speaking about it in poetry and in literary criticism, the term has been given varied meanings. Most commonly it has been used in the sense of 'sign' or 'representation'. For example, we say, the crown is the symbol of power; the word 'tree' is the symbol of the thing represented by the word. We also speak of the poem as a symbol of the poet's feeling. To refer to such representations ( = something standing for something else ), it would be preferable to use the term 'sign' rather than 'symbol'. Most people who speak about the Symbol seem to have no clear conception of what they mean by the term, but they cleverly avoid committing themselves to any definite formulation of the meaning of the term which would help to demarcate it from other terms. On the other hand, there have been a host of pursuers of the Symbol, from Baudelaire to

Bowra, who have chased it as an ever elusive shadow. The word 'Symbol' itself is of ancient origin. It came from an interesting custom among the ancient Greeks. When they made a contract, they would finalize it by breaking a coin into two closely-fitting parts; the broken halves were known as 'symbola'. The Greeks associated the symbola with the unity of the contract, the two similar halves standing for the similar sense of responsibility in each of the two parties of the contract. The French Symbolists retain this sense; they are also interested in conveying a sense of unity and co-extension between the Symbol and what it represents: the form and the meaning. The image or symbol which they used in a poem was not a representation of some reality only, but was part of that reality. To them, the poem or image, and its spiritual counterpart (= the reality or meaning symbolized) were aspects of the same truth. The Symbol embodied some reality and was co-extensive with that reality. This also is the sense in which Carlyle seems to have used the term "Symbol", when he writes:

In the Symbol proper, what we can call a Symbol, there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there.²

Here, Carlyle has not only referred to the peculiar way in which the Symbol is representational, but also the conception of the Symbol as an embodiment of some spiritual essence: this is also the conception generally held among the French Symbolists.

When we speak of the Symbol in poetry, our mind goes most usually and naturally to the work of those French poets of the nineteenth century who have been known as the French Symbolists, poets like Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud. In spite of the general term used for them, they can hardly be regarded as a school.

Nor do they seem to have any common principle or attitude which can help us to either distinguish Symbolist poetry from poetry written under earlier traditions, or to establish its general kinship with that. They do not help us to see in what way Symbolist poetry has made an advance. An attempt to formulate a Symbolist theory of poetry on the basis of the critical pronouncements of these French poets and their friends seems to be hazardous. Their comments and descriptions only make us aware of a certain sense of vagueness, a certain elusiveness in their very conception of Symbolism. Added to this is another difficulty in the form of the bewildering number of contradictory statements made by them. A modern scholar of repute, threading the mazes of French Symbolist aesthetics, comes to this conclusion by the end of his work:

It seems almost as though one sector of our intellectual field is doomed for ever to be haunted by 'utraquistic fallacies' based on ambiguities in the word 'Symbol'. It would be desirable, then, if only for this reason, to expel the word from our histories of literature and our literary discussions. Such an irritable impatience at the vagueness and elusiveness of the Symbol may be quite natural, but one cannot help observing a certain sincerity towards, and faith in, Symbolism that the French poets really had. Their attempts to pursue Symbolism were not wholly futile or ineffective: their efforts did help the better poets among them to give a new direction to French poetry when the need for this was great. In tribute to this work, Kenneth Cornell writes:

Whatever their failures or excesses, the Symbolists courageously invaded an unexplored world of human emotion and feeling, deeper than mere sensation, more difficult to seize than logical reasoning. Accessory circumstance, narrative development and descriptive detail yielded to the more difficult problem of expressing delicate shadings of mood. These innovations led to experiments in musical effects, in imagery, and vocabulary, which have proved of lasting importance, and also to less felicitous efforts which were soon discarded.

Perhaps, the problems taken up by the Symbolists were too great, their aims too

3 A.G. Lehmann : 'The Symbolist Aesthetic in France'.
ambitious, and their powers too diffused to make them come to grips with an aesthetic definition of the Symbol, but their experiments, their achievements and failures have had an important effect upon the development of modern poetry. It is worthwhile, therefore, to see what they have to say on the subject of Symbolism, even though many of the things they said may prove to be misleading.

It was Jean Moréas who made the first attempt to give a critical definition of the aims of Symbolism. In the article he contributed to 'Le Figaro Littéraire' of 18-9-1886, he gave what stands as the closest approximation to a Symbolist manifesto:

Ennemie de l'enseignement, la déclamation, la fausse sensibilité, la description objective, la poésie symboliste cherche à vêtir l'idée d'une forme sensible qui, néanmoins, ne serait pas son but elle-même, mais qui, tout en servant à exprimer l'idée, demeurait sujette. L'idée, à son tour, ne doit point se laisser voir privée de ses somptueuses simarres des analogies extérieures; car le caractère essentiel de l'art symbolique consiste à ne jamais aller jusqu'à la concentration de l'idée en soi. Ainsi, dans cet art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes; ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des idées primordiales.

According to Moréas, then, the Symbolist is an enemy of description and declamation who ever pursues the 'Idea' behind material forms. This 'Idea' is given by the poet through 'les apparences sensibles', which are perhaps symbolic images of 'des idées primordiales'. This almost amounts to saying that Symbols are conveyors of 'archetypal meanings'. The deepest realities were also the highest and the noblest; in pursuing such realities 'le Symbolisme' performed a high function. Moréas also recognized the impossibility of expressing this vision of reality directly: Reality could only be suggested through its earthly correspondences or analogies. And again,

The symbol was 'not the vision itself, but only its imperfect image or reflection'. The poet makes use of the Symbol to suggest to the reader the 'Idea' which came to him through vision. The symbol might evoke for the reader what could not be expressed directly or adequately in words. The 'symbole' thus became an important thing for the poet. This clarification about the nature of the symbol had to be made by Moreas because of the confusion, in many quarters, of symbolism with decadence.

The publication in 1884 of Verlaine's 'Les Poètes Maudits' had done much to bring several 'accursed' poets like Mallarmé, Corbière and Rimbaud to public notice. Verlaine had praised, aggressively and excessively, the 'decadent' or 'maudit' who opposes the civilization in which he lives. He took as typical examples the three contemporary poets Corbière, Mallarmé and Rimbaud. They were all, according to him, revolutionaries ( revoltes ).

Corbière was characterized by his scorn and power of mockery: 'Le Dédaigneux et le Râleurr de tout et de tous!'. Rimbaud's career had shocked and upset the society in which he lived, and the bold imagery of 'Le Bateau Ivre' had acted as a ferment on the poetry of his day. The essay on Mallarmé became 'Verlaine's opportunity to cast opprobrium on those critics and readers who had considered him insane and ridiculous'. The decadent poet was glorified by Verlaine for his opposition to society. The Symbolists, however, were not interested in revolt for revolt's sake. They looked upon the poet's revolt against society as something purposive: it was his way of steeling himself against bourgeoisie and triviality, against industrialism and naturalism. The symbolist evaded what Laforgue called 'la vie quotidienne' only because he had higher aims. The Symbolists were inspired by the quest for the highest truth. In their belief that reality was something other than the real world — 'la vraie vie est absente', Rimbaud had said — they touched on a new sense of mystery or mysticism: of this Mallarmé became the most subtle and persuasive exponent. This
mysticism had received clear expression, first, in the famous sonnet by Baudelaire on 'Correspondences', and then had been valued by all the Symbolists. This attitude, also partly shared by the 'Decadents', implied a revolt against Positivism: hence the confusion of Symbolist with Decadent. Only when the Symbolists began to resent their association with Decadence, which generally came to signify 'a kind of moral solitude of an artist, coupled with an exasperated and perverse form of mysticism', did they decide to establish and to insist on their separateness. Jean Moréas became the spokesman of this new tendency. In an article on 'Les Decadents', Paul Bourde had ascribed to the Decadents the characteristics of perverse mysticism, satanism and morbidity induced by morphine. Moréas protested against the association of these characteristics with the young and original poets who pursued the 'symbole'. Hence the insistence on the distinction of Symbolism from Decadence. Moréas later on formulated the aims of Symbolism more clearly and explicitly: he emphasized the dedication of the Symbolists to 'l'Idée' and not to any perverse principle.

The word 'symbole' had been used by several poets before this statement of Moréas appeared in 'Le Figaro Littéraire'. Baudelaire and Mallarmé had already proved to be great practitioners of Symbolism. The conception of Baudelaire that the Symbol revealed the hidden analogies of 'correspondances' between material and spiritual realities, had become quite popular. But Baudelaire had not made any distinctions between symbol and metaphor, or symbol and allegory. He had only said that the poet, in moments of vision, could see objects not as they appeared to the physical eye, but as symbols of deep, spiritual realities. The poet recorded or set down the realities thus perceived by his mind's eye. Baudelaire apparently gave no thought to form or language. The

6 Wallace Fowlie: 'Mallarmé', p.257.
poet created symbols which were analogies in words or images of spiritual realities. In this sense they were on the same plane as physical objects.

In his own poetry, Baudelaire was a better Symbolist than in his theory, and had great influence on later poets. His sonnet on 'Correspondances' owed much to the mystic tradition begun by Swedenborg. Baudelaire was not however the first French writer to be influenced thus. Honoré de Balzac had shown great interest in this sort of mystic philosophy. In his story of 'Seraphita', he had written of men who grasped "the invisible bonds by which the material worlds are attached to the spiritual". Gérard de Nerval, who can be regarded as the first Symbolist poet, had not only believed in this mysticism, but had tried to live up to it. In his visions, he claims to have had access to spiritual realities. Nerval, crossing and re-crossing the borders of sanity, perhaps found it easy to make correspondences between things in the material world and their spiritual counterparts. In his poems he made free use of these correspondences, and this perhaps enables him to give us, in his sonnets, a new way of writing. As Arthur Symons remarks:

... for the first time in French, words are used as the ingredients of an evocation, as themselves not merely colour and sound, but symbol. Here are words which create an atmosphere by the actual suggestive quality of their syllables, as according to the theory of Mallarme, they should do.

Nerval, like Baudelaire, believed in mystic realities which lay beyond human reason. He found in his more inspired moments, 'the hidden links of distant and divergent things'. We find that he often traced resemblances 'where others saw only divergences'. In 'Le Reve et la Vie', Nerval speaks about the visionary moments when:

I ... saw, vaguely drifting into form, plastic images of antiquity, which outlined themselves, became definite, and seemed to represent symbols, of which I only seized the idea with difficulty.

But little did Nerval realize that in this discovery of the Symbol embodying hidden and secret essences, he was initiating in poetry a new approach to

reality. Baudelaire carried forward what had been achieved by Nerval. He made bold experiments in his poetry, though he was not always successful in theorizing and in critical examination of his ideas.

It was Mallarmé who first understood the true value of Baudelaire's achievement. By 1884, several young poets were groping for new literary ways; these poets grouped themselves round Mallarmé, whom they acknowledged as their leader. Mallarmé was living in a small flat on the Rue de Rome, and the famous Tuesday evenings were attended by such poets as Gustave Kahn, Stuart Merrill, Jean Moréas, Henri de Régnier and Vièle-Griffin. In course of time still younger writers were introduced and profited by Mallarmé's teaching, and among them were André Gide and Paul Valéry. All those writers recognized and respected, in their own ways, the rising importance and value of Symbolism.

Aesthetic interest in defining the aims of symbolism became greatest, however, in the years immediately following the challenge of Moréas. Several attempts were made to clarify the aims of Symbolism. By 1887, when Symbolism had become better known there appeared a clearer attempt to express the intentions of the Symbolists: this was René Ghil's 'Traité du Verbe'. The book was 'a kind of hymn to the magic word of SYMBOL and the hieratic name of Mallarmé'. Perhaps the most important thing about the book was the two-page preface written by Mallarmé. In this preface we find Mallarmé's views about the primitive power of language, and of the role of dream and song in poetry:

Un désir indéniable à mon temps est de séparer comme en vue d'attributions différentes le double état de la parole, brut ou immédiat ici, là essentiel. Narrer, enseigner, même décrire, cela va et encore qu'à chacun suffirait peut-être, pour échanger la pensée humaine, de prendre ou de mettre dans la main d'autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie, l'emploi élémentaire du discours dessert l'universel reportage dont, la Littérature exceptée,

The Symbolist attempts to go beyond narrative and description, beyond discourse, to a suggestiveness of language which would evoke for the reader the 'essence' or 'idea' behind things. The 'word' freed from its normal associations, from its direct referential quality, attains a mysterious power which brings it close to dream and music. This theory of the suggestiveness of words came from a 'belief that a primitive language, half-forgotten, half-living, exits in each man.' Symbolism, by making use of this exceptional language, could know the hidden world of reality behind things: such knowledge was considered a spiritual acquisition. The contemporary conflict of Science and Religion, and the Symbolists' opposition to the former, makes several writers look upon Symbolism as an essentially mystic endeavour. This aspect of Symbolism seemed to be a natural outcome of the conditions in which Symbolism grew and the spiritual aspirations it had. 'One can easily understand how in a literary trend which proclaimed mystery, dream and idealism, and in which was the implicit renunciation of materialism and science, the idea of mysticism found its way.' In the conflict of Science and Religion, Symbolism was not a mere supporter of one side, and it would therefore be wrong to regard mysticism as an integral element of Symbolism; here was an attempt to bring about a reconciliation of the contradictory claims of the two, by way of a new approach to truth. In 1889, Edward Schuré published a volume entitled 'Les Grands Initiés', and in the preface pointed out that though Science and Religion had been in conflict throughout the nineteenth century there was hope of a reconciliation in their similar aspirations. Mallarmé's position was examined: as Schuré was a poet, too,
he was in a position to show how Mallarmé's aestheticism was gradually tending towards the mystical, without being religious.

Whatever their differences the Symbolists united in their endeavour for a sense of purity, and a striving towards a higher reality which would ultimately lead to the absolute. Mallarmé's effort to attain to a pure expression of poetry, and his belief that behind the appearance of things there is a hidden world of reality testify to the existence of, and a search for the Absolute. The Symbolists mainly thought of attempts to make correspondences between symbols (objects and images) and their meaning, imply that reading of the symbols 'constitutes a species of cognition different from that of ordinary practical discourse'. The various definitions of the Symbol given during the best period of symbolist theorizing attempt 'to make the central feature of a literary symbol, and the source of its special aesthetic value reside in the fact of its making a reference to something else, some ... order of experiences different from the ordinary'.

Pellisier's definition of the symbol is fairly typical:

Pour être un poète symboliste il n'est pas nécessaire de faire proprement ce qu'on appelle des symboles ; il suffit d'exprimer les secrètes affinités des choses avec notre âme. Mais une poésie qui a ces affinités pour objets sera le plus souvent symbolique ; car dès que nous les suivons avec quelque teneur, elles revêtent la forme du symbole. Qu'est-ce donc que le symbole ? Distinguez-le, de la comparaison et de l'allégorie... Le symbole a pour caractère essentiel d'éclorer spontanément, sans réflexion, sans analyse, dans une âme simple qui ne distingue même pas entre les apparences matérielles et leurs signification idéale.

The Symbolists' attitude towards art received great support from another brilliant exponent in a young and enthusiastic literary critic, Charles Morice. His 'La Littérature de tout à l'heure' (1889) is a serious attempt to understand Symbolism as an aesthetic movement in its relation to the past, and to indicate its trends. The poet, as interpréter of beauty, constantly strives to renew great traditions. Morice made high claims for the poet, and though he did not claim to represent or give exclusive support to any group, the Symbolists felt his writing was a fair

reflection of their attitudes. Morice gave a high position to art — even higher than that of philosophy — because of its power to reveal the deepest truths. 'L'art n'est pas que le révélateur de l'infini, il est au poème un moyen même d'y pénétrer. Il y va plus profond qu'aucune philosophie.' After this pronouncement of Moréas, Symbolism received great attention from poets and critics alike. By the last decade of the century, almost all the elements usually associated with Symbolism had been experimented with, though these elements had not been always brought into a synthesis. As Kenneth Cornell says:

The importance of 1891 in the history of Symbolism is that by that date all its inherent elements had been presented. In form, the double acceptance of free verse and syllabic count was present; rhyme and assonance, or even blank verse had received their consecration in print. The idealism, the suggestion, the synthesis of senses, the indirect statement of the emotions, the use of symbol to express the emotions had all been amply demonstrated. The efforts to find new musical effects had been multiple, and, if not always successful, had indicated most of the possible paths to follow.

It was in this year, 1891, that one of the most satisfactory accounts of Symbolist aesthetics appeared: this was written by André Gide, a budding writer and an ardent admirer of Mallarème. Gide was at that time a devoted follower of Symbolism; he wrote,

Les apparences sont imparfaites, elle balbutient les vérités qu'elles récèlent; le poète, à demi-mot, doit comprendre, puis redire ces vérités. ... Le poète qui sait qu'il créée, devine à travers chaque chose, et une seule lui suffit, symbole, pour révéler son archétype; il sait que l'apparence n'est que le prétexte, un vêtement qui le dérobe, et ou s'arrête l'œil profane, mais qui nous montre qu'elle est là. Le poète pieux contemple, il se penche sur les symboles, et silencieux descend profondément au cœur des choses. Et quand il a perçu, visionnaire, l'Idée, l'intime Nombre harmonieux de son Être, qui soutient la forme imparfaite, il la saisit, puis, insoucieux de cette forme transitoire qui la revêtait dans le temps, il sait lui donner une forme éternelle, sa forme véritable enfin, fatale — paradisiaque et cristalline.

Here is evidence of the remarkably keen insight Gide had into the nature of Symbolism, and the high aims that a poet who followed it could have before him:

13 Charles Morice: 'Le Littérature de tout à l'heure', p.36.
15 André Gide: 'Le Traité du Narcisse'.
'Le Traité du Narcisse', from which this passage comes, was directly inspired by Mallarmé. Gide echoes the great poet when he says, elsewhere in the book: 'Le Paradis est toujours à refaire'. The perfect beauty that Adam had seen before the fall in Eden always remains to be recreated. It is always just below the appearance of things, waiting to be discovered by the poet. All things in nature strive to regain their lost form: 'Tout s'efforce vers sa forme perdue'. The poet is one who looks for and sees Paradise: 'Le poète est celui qui regarde. Et que voit-il? — le Paradis'. Paradise is everywhere, only the appearance of things is imperfect. The poet is one who re-creates an ideal and simple world. To the poet, a symbol is everything that appears, and everything reveals to him its archetypal meaning. A contemplation of things enables the poet to enter into the heart of things, and to comprehend the eternal verities. After this, the poet is able to give an eternal form to the object, and he is able to create a symbol which embodies l'Idée. It is thus that symbolic poems have the power to reveal truth.

The writings of the French poets and critics on the Symbol all emphasize two aspects of the Symbol: its power to trace analogies, and its power to give us access to a reality deeper than that which we can observe with our normal faculties (i.e. the spiritual reality behind appearances). That reality is conveyed to the reader by means of images and symbols. Such a view, if
accepted without further modifications or qualifications, is likely
to lead to to a conception of poetry as 'something very little' better
than a kind of haphazard algebra, or at best some system of communication
whose nature is quite indifferent to the artist using it'. It may
also imply that the symbolist 'operation' is already complete before
the poet decides to put it into words. The absence of discussions
on linguistic points in the writings of the earlier symbolists like
Baudelaire and Maclaire, may lend support to this sort of misconception.
Since the symbolist poet is also conditioned by the requirements and
limitations of his medium, namely language, it would be unfair to
think that he did not give any consideration to the problems of
expression. Any such doubts are removed when we turn to later
symbolists like Mallarmé and Rimbaud. Mallarmé, in fact, is
preoccupied with problems of language. Mallarmé believes that
the poet receives inspiration from the words he uses, sharpening
his senses and lending him power to make better metaphors or
analogies:

...le tour de telle phrase ou le lac de un distique, copié sur notre conformation, aident l'élosion; en
nous, d'aperçus et de correspondances.

Though he gave the greatest importance to words, Mallarmé does not
abstract the word from its meaning, as is source of poetic worth;
and this is evidenced especially by his remark on the relation
between objects and 'states of mind':

Tout objet existant n'a de raison que nous le voyons... sinon
de représenter un de nos états intérieurs, l'ensemble des traits
communs avec notre âme consacré le symbole.

In Mallarmé's own poetry, words became pure symbols conveying essences,
and thus coming close to music, which Mallarmé held as the ideal of
expressive power.

16 A.G.Lehmann: 'The Symbolist Aesthetic in France'.
17 Stéphane Mallarmé: 'La Musique et Les Lettres'.
Another poet, Paul Valéry, perhaps the greatest of the followers of Mallarmé, recognized the importance of language to the poet, who finds it an inadequate instrument of expression. Language may serve the ordinary man admirably, but when it is put to higher uses it proves imperfect. The poet, however, is one who exploits the very resistances offered by language. He subjects words to an imaginative order, and creates a closed system of language, far removed from ordinary discourse. This symbolic system he has created is his poem. Valéry writes about this use of language as follows:

Le langage est un élément commun et pratique; il est donc un instrument nécessairement grossier, puisque chacun le manie, l'accommode selon ses besoins et tend à le déformer suivant sa personne. Le langage, si intime qu'il soit en nous, si proche que le fait de penser sous forme de parole soit de notre âme, ne s'en est pas moins d'origine statistique et de destination purement pratique. Or le problème du poète doit être de tirer de cet instrument pratique les moyens de réaliser une œuvre essentiellement non pratique... il s'agit, pour lui, de créer un monde ou un ordre de choses, un système de relations, sans nul rapport avec l'ordre pratique.

This conception of the separateness of the language of poetry lead to the idea of 'The Paradise of language'. This paradise is the state of language which represents a complete harmony of the different virtues of language. When a poem reaches this ideal condition, it will contain the essences of words. This would justify the concept of poetry as 'potentially the highest expression of reality'. The Symbolists' efforts to control language is thus closely bound with their attempts to symbolise reality.

Two things seem to emerge clearly from the French poets' attempts

18 Paul Valéry: 'Variété'.
to theorize about the Symbol:

1. The Symbolists' conviction of the existence of a reality, beyond and greater than physical reality, which could be approached by the poet only through the Symbol.

2. The conviction that the symbolist poem has a special value and status, as a form of knowledge, because of the truth it reveals.

In both these, Symbolism was reacting strongly to the growing power of science and of mechanistic philosophy in the nineteenth century. In 1848 had appeared a book which made high claims for science; it was Ernest Renan's 'L'Avenir de la Science'. Renan had regarded science as the only legitimate means of acquiring knowledge of reality. According to him, even the excessive power that religions had in the past was due to their quasi-scientific character, their ability to 'exercise' the human mind. With the publication in 1859 of Darwin's 'The Origin of Species', and in 1855 of Claude Bernard's 'Introduction à la étude de la médecine experimentale', the study of man seemed to have been brought closer and closer to that of the physical sciences. Now, even the highest beings in the universe could be explained by the 'mouvement mécanique' of the lowest.

From this time, a new attitude towards reality developed among a number of poets. They accepted the reality of matter, but whereas Science stopped at matter, concentrating its efforts on things which could be arranged into a system by means of reason, poetry sought the spontaneous essence of matter, which the mechanistic scientists did not deny, but refused to explore. The Symbolist poets did not deny the world of matter, the concrete objects of physical existence, but they reacted against the mode of grasping it, i.e. through reason and rational thinking. They were also opposed
to the identification of exterior nature with total reality. The Symbolist poet thought of himself as a captive trying to tear down the prison walls; the barriers of material or physical reality were the walls which had to be destroyed before he could have a vision of the greater reality that lay beyond. It was this attitude of his that set him against science. He maintained the position he had reached in spite of the challenge of science. But a change was gradually coming in the attitude of science itself. Symbolist theory received support from an unexpected quarter: science, which had been looked upon formerly as an enemy turned out to be a friend.

By the end of the nineteenth century, symbolism began to receive attention from non-literary scholars, particularly from anthropologists and epistemologists. One of the great discoveries made by them was that myth and language were the outcome of certain needs of primitive man, and that they were modes of getting and communicating knowledge. There had been work pointing in this direction which had been done earlier by pioneers like Vico and Herder. Giambattista Vico, whose 'Scienza Nuova' developed a new point of view in aesthetics, maintained that poetry was a more ancient form of expression than prose. He finds within 'the origin of Poetry, so far as it has been discovered, the .... origin of languages and the origin of letters'. Vico also regards poetry as a form of primitive man's knowledge, which was gradually superseded as civilization advanced. J.G. Herder found in both myth and primitive language contributions to 'truth'. Poetry, according to him, obtained its special power from the fact that it preserved the dynamic qualities of experience which one finds in myth.
Herder derived language from myth. This view was objected to by Ernst Cassirer, who regarded language and myth as 'two diverse shoots from the same parent stem', the impulse of symbolic formulation. Cassirer's theories and the findings of anthropologists revealed that myth was not fiction but an avenue to truth. Though Cassirer did not depart from the view of science's superiority as a way of knowing truth, he at least recognized poetry and myth as valid approaches to truth.

In his 'Philosophy of Literary Forms', Cassirer regards art as a symbolic form, parallel in this respect to religion or science. Each of these forms builds up an universe that enables man to interpret and organize his experience; and, each is a discovery because a creation of reality. Although similar in function, the forms differ in the kind of reality they build. Whereas science builds it of facts, art builds it of feelings, intuitions of quality and the other distractions of our inner life — and in their degrees so do myth and language in its original, pristine form. The symbol, like the myth, tends toward a concentration on intuitive experience. Both give the immediate response to the intuition which suddenly confronts them. Like language in its primitive state, and like myth, the symbol is opposed to the logical or discursive mode of thought. The symbol is more interested in naming — giving a shape, a local habitation and a name — to a vision than in interpreting it. Whatever vision has been given shape to by the symbol is thenceforth 'not only real, but is Reality'. As Cassirer puts it: 'The potential between symbol and meaning is resolved. In place of a more or less adequate "expression" we find a relation of identity, of complete congruence between "image" and "object", the name and the thing'.
In 'Language and Myth' Cassirer has important things to say about the reality represented by the symbol, and its expression. He writes:

Myth, language and art begin as a concrete, undivided unity which is only gradually dissolved into a triad of independent modes of spiritual creativity. Consequently the same mythic animation and hypostatization, which is bestowed upon the words of human speech, is originally accorded to images and to every kind of artistic representation. The image, too, achieves its purely representative, specifically "aesthetic" function only as the magic circle with which mythic consciousness surrounds it is broken, and it is recognized not as a mythico-magical form, but as a particular sort of formulation.

Although language and art both become emancipated in this fashion from their native soil of mythical thinking, the ideal spiritual unity of the two is re-asserted upon a higher level. If language is to grow into a vehicle of thought and expression, of concepts and judgments, this evolution can be achieved only at the price of foregoing the wealth and fulness of immediate experience. In the end, what is left of the concrete sense-and-feeling content it once possessed, is little more than a bare skeleton. But there is one intellectual realm in which the word not only preserves its original creative power, but is ever renewing it; in which it undergoes a sort of constant palenogenesis at once a sensuous and a spiritual re-incarnation. This generation is achieved as language becomes an avenue of artistic expression. Here it recovers the fullness of life, but it is no longer a life mythically bound and fettered, but an aesthetically liberated life.

Language used in this way is symbolic. What the symbol expresses is 'neither the mythic word-picture of gods and daemons, nor the logical truth of abstract determinations and relations'. It represents a world apart, a 'realm of pure feeling'.

The symbolization of pure feeling does not mean the expression of the poet's personal feeling. 'Pure feeling' includes the poet's relation to objective, external reality. In the immediacy of symbolic experience, the two aspects of reality (inner reality and external reality) are fused into one: there is identity of subject and object. The reality referred to here, is therefore the complete reality. There is also a sense of intense concentration (similar to that in myth) in the reality presented: it is as if the poet has come upon a new world. And this reality is truth.

is why Cassirer says, 'We can know Reality only through symbolic forms; the question of what reality is apart from these forms becomes irrelevant'. Art is one of the legitimate ways of understanding and revealing Reality. True art is no mere imitation or copy of Reality; it is a revelation of Reality.

What would we know of the innumerable nuances in the aspects of things were it not for the works of great painters and sculptors. Poetry is, similarly, the revelation of our personal life. The infinite potentialities of which we had but a dim and obscure presentiment are brought to life by the lyric poet, by the novelist and by the dramatist. Such art is in no sense mere counterfeit or facsimile but a genuine manifestation of our inner life.

Cassirer puts art on a footing of equality with science, by considering it as a mode of attaining knowledge of reality, but the phrase 'inner life' suggests that this is the area of reality that some art concentrates upon, science concentrating on 'concepts' which represent a part of our

The views of Cassirer on symbolic art are carried forward by Wilbur Marshall Urban. He has more specific things to say about the nature of the symbol, and its relation to reality. In poetry, language itself can attain symbolic power. The symbolist makes use of words to convey deeper meanings, for which purpose normal, discursive language proves inadequate. I.A.Richards observed about two uses of language: the 'scientific' or 'referential' and the artistic or 'emotive'. Urban sees a third function in language. He calls this the 'representative' or 'intuitive' or 'symbolic' function, when it can be made to convey an 'ideal' content. All three functions are necessary, if language is to convey meaning at all. Poetry makes use of words which not only denote things or express ideas, but also convey emotions. But words used in a line of poetry have a tendency to get modified in meaning by the context. This is due to the way they are arranged, and to the cumulative

20 Ibid., p.500.
effect they build up, which is different from the effect they create individually by themselves. It is this symbolic power of words that the poet makes use of. Words in poetry become metaphorical, and when this metaphorical power is exploited to give the ideal meaning, they become symbolic. Urban writes about this as follows:

All poetic symbols are...metaphors and arise out of metaphor. But a symbol is more than a metaphor.... The metaphor becomes a symbol when by means of it we embody an ideal content not otherwise expressible.... We use metaphor to illustrate ideas or assertions which are expressible wholly in abstract or non-figurative terms. The metaphor is a symbol when it alone expresses or embodies our ideal meaning.

Poetry, then, becomes symbolic in order to give us the Truth. Yet Urban insists, the poetic symbol is not 'merely a surrogate for a concept', but rather the way in which the 'ideal content' is apprehended and articulated: for, his content is not fully amenable to rational interpretation and discourse; unlike the 'content' of science. It is not possible, therefore, 'to interpret poetry by substituting literal for symbol sentences', or by substituting 'blunt truth for symbolic truth'. We cannot, that is, find out fully what the poem says; we can only know what it is. This attitude of Urban's comes close to that of Richards when he remarks: 'It is never what a poem says that matters, but what it is'.

This creates a paradoxical situation; the poem reveals reality, but not fully. As Urban puts it:

Poetry says what it means but it does not say all that it means; in attempting to say this "all" it often ceases to be poetry. Does this mean that the best poetry remains symbolic, suggesting its meaning, but not stating it? Such a paradoxical quality was observed in the nature of the symbol by Carlyle when he wrote:

In a Symbol there is concealment and yet revelation; hence, therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together comes a double significance.

@1 Wilbur Marshall Urban: 'Language and Reality', pp.470-471.
22 Ibid., p.500.
There is a residual meaning in the Symbol, which cannot be explained or expressed in discursive language. Even if the poet tries to state in explicit terms all that he wishes to symbolize, he might not be successful, because in symbolist poetry there cannot be 'literal expression, but only another kind of symbol', nor should we 'seek the blunt truth, for the so-called blunt truth has a way of becoming an untruth'. The Symbol, therefore, instead of attempting to express the 'blunt truth' aims at an 'ideal content': Urban does not tell us what this content is. The content symbolized may be an artistic or religious experience, or a transcendental concept.

There is no such ambiguity in the concept of Symbolism as formulated by Susanne Langer. The Symbol, according to her, articulates and embodies a piece of 'virtual life', a 'semblance' of truth. In a symbolic work of art, we are confronted with a virtual order of experiences which have immediately apparent values, without any demonstrable reasons for the good or evil, importance or triviality, even the natural or supernatural characters they seem to have. For, illusory events have no core of actuality that allows them to appear under their many aspects.

Truth is denied to the symbol since it expresses only illusory events. This is similar to I.A.Richards' view of poetry as 'pseudo-statement', only Science giving us reality. The Symbolic poem, in such a view, may be treated as a piece of fiction, attempting to give only an aesthetically satisfying order or pattern.

Such a position would not be acceptable to the Symbolist, who claims to have access to realities of a higher order than those known to Science. At the same time, it cannot be denied that a poem may appear unreal when measured by the standards of Science or even of practical, everyday life.

There have, however, been attempts to answer this problem. The reality we get in a symbol may not have any correspondence to with fact or truth as we know it.

25 Susanne Langer : 'Feeling and Form'.
in ordinary life, yet it may have a status of its own.
The view that such an independent reality can be the legitimate aim of poetry was held both by Yeats and Allen Tate. The latter distinguishes three types of poetry:

1. The kind that appeals through abstract ideas, a poetry that looks 'from explanation to action'.
2. The kind that exists in revolt against the dominion of science, a poetry that gives us the emotion known as 'romantic irony'.
3. The kind that has no 'practical utility', a poetry that presents, as in a play like 'Macbeth', a situation neither true nor false which exists merely 'as a created object'.

The first two kinds arose as a result of science; they put themselves in competition with science by claiming to be an approach to reality. It was, however, the third kind of poetry that Yeats wished to see. His concern with symbolism implied an effort to 'recover the soul of poetry'. Yeats hoped that a poetry might develop which would move us not because of the knowledge that it gives us, but because of the artistic experience it gives us, it would be a poetry 'to be contemplated and experienced because therein the phenomena of the world are captured, refracted, rather than reflected'.

The French Symbolist poets, however, had claimed of the highest order for their writings, and would not have, therefore, accepted a position like that of Yeats, which has no cognitive commitment. The French Symbolists were sure that the aesthetic experience of the poet could give him access, somehow, to the high truths that only mystics had reached so far. Mallarmé may have been a little different in this respect, but the aesthetic experience of 'le néant' to which he appealed was in itself something of the mystic order. It is not, however, surprising that Yeats' philosophy
aspired was in itself something of the mystic order. It is not, therefore, surprising when we find Dr. C. M. Bowra characterizing Symbolism as fundamentally mystical. He writes that Symbolism ... may be seen in the apocalyptic poems of William Blake; and mystical literature is almost inconceivable without it. But whereas most earlier Symbolists had been concerned with the facts of religious devotion, Mallarmé and his successors were concerned with a special aesthetic experience which he interpreted as a saint might his visions of God.

A similar view is taken of the close relation of Symbolism with mysticism, by Hugh L'Anson Faucett, a writer who shows a deep insight into the aims of Symbolism. The inclusion of spiritual and meditative elements in Symbolism gave it a new force; the reality of physical objects was not denied as some of the mystic poets of the past did. Faucett writes about this happy blend of the material and the spiritual:

To communicate a supernatural reality through images drawn from the world of sense, but transformed so as to evoke the inward and the invisible was the Symbolist's aim.... (Symbolism) renewed the relation between .... the immediate sense of things and the enthranced contemplation of things.[27]

If Bowra and Faucett have seen mystical elements in Symbolism, Kenneth Burke sees something magical in Symbolism. Burke regards the Symbol as 'a verbal parallel to a pattern of experience', in its use of language to reveal the unknown, Symbolism becomes magical.

Kenneth Burke expresses his view thus:

The magical decree is implicit in all language; for the mere act of naming an object or situation decrees that it is to be singled out as such-and-such rather than as some-thing-other. Hence, I think that an attempt to eliminate magic in this sense would involve us in the elimination of vocabulary itself as a way of sizing up reality. Rather what we may need is correct magic, magic whose decrees a about the naming of real situations is the closest possible approximation to the situation named.[28]

Burke finds in 'the naming of real situations' the most important function of Symbolism; there he gives us, in a broad way, an idea of the real nature of

27 Hugh L'Anson Faucett : 'Poets and Pundits'.
28 Kenneth Burke : 'Philosophy of Literary Forms'.
Symbolism. The 'real situation' is given by the symbol, which can be a verbal or imagistic pattern. We have here arrived at the conception of language as a symbolic mode of expression, giving us 'the closest possible approximation to the situation named'. This conception is quite different from the Romantic view of language as a mere instrument of expression, the vehicle of personal ideas or emotions. It is also different from the Realist's view of language as a mere recording instrument, something like a photographic film. A writer like Zola wanted simply to 'feel nature' and render it as it is'. The realist held that the artist accumulates objective facts and that out of these will arise a work of art; the 'facts' themselves establishing the form. So the poet need not pay special attention to language. The Symbolist, however, is attentive to the peculiar and unexpected forms delivered to him by a medium that shapes the data of experience, because he takes the view that language itself may give access to reality. This view of language as a large measure creative of meanings is a view held by many modern critics. Even I.A. Richards takes this position in one of his later books:

Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together. They are the occasion and means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavour to order itself. That is why we have language. It is no mere signalling system.

Language thus has an unusual importance in the creative act. To consider the poem as a piece of language is to consider it as a symbol. The symbol thus can be said to have an independent existence of its own; it is distinct from the personality of the author, and from the real world which surrounds him. It also brings to birth a new meaning or 'reality'. Hence the symbolist's insistence that the symbol is no mere stylistic device. The symbolist attitude

towards literature has an epistemological background. In fact, we may regard symbolism in modern literature as the symbolist theory of knowledge put into practice. But the literary theorist is more radical in his views than the philosopher of symbolism. Cassirer did realize that discursive language tends away from the condition of symbolism, and he did regard poetry as bringing about a regeneration of the creative power of the word through 'a sort of constant palingenesis', but he was ultimately loyal to reason. Truth for him is the province of conceptual science, and poetry, however valuable, is 'a world of illusion and fantasy'. Literary theory could not accept this position. It went farther than symbolist theory.

The ability that language, like myth, has of apprehending reality directly, gives it greater power than logic. Poetry can have an intuitive understanding of truth: 'the poet's word is the first establishing of reality'. But it is also possible to claim that this reality that the poet gives is in no way inferior to what is given by science and rational thought. One can take as starting point the contrast between logic and creative symbol (art) as modes of getting knowledge of reality: poetry could be taken as the norm, and logical statement would appear as fantasy. The literary symbolist regards poetry as peculiarly symbolic in that poetry holds to the creative speech from which logic tends to depart. From this point of view, 'the symbolic status of literature constitutes a positive victory over logic, the reinstatement of "concrete fact" in the face of abstract fiction'.

Given the same alternatives to begin with, the Romantic poets of nineteenth century England made the same choice as the Symbolists, but the choice meant something quite different for them, and something
much less fundamental. The anti-rationalism of the Romantics was concerned more with subject-matter rather than with form. In their methods or technique the Romantics hardly made any improvements or changes. The Romantics did not, for the most part, challenge the essentially rational metaphysics which left literature only two possibilities; expression and description. The symbolists, on the other hand, redefine the whole process of knowing and the status of reality in the light of poetic method. They try to take both points of view into account at once, to view the subjective and each other by regarding both as functions of objective worlds as functions of the forms of speech in which they are rendered. 'This is the sum of their quarrel with reason'. Meaning, for them, is, as Susanne Langer puts it, 'a function of a term', not 'an external relation between word, thought and thing'. A function is 'a pattern viewed with reference to one special term round which it centers; this pattern emerges when we look at the given term in its total relation to the other terms about it'.

The Symbolism of modern literature is a deliberate experiment with alogical structures of multiple meaning. The modern analysis of metaphor and other poetic figures is an effort to define the complex structure of symbolism as distinguished from logic. Being concerned so much with poetic method, the symbolist is faced with the problem of the relationship between poetical and logical language.

Logical statement seems to entail a distinction between the speaker, his words, and what he talks about. In poetry we find no compulsion to refer to anything outside the poem itself. 'A poem delivers a version of the world; it is the world for the moment'. The language of a poem:

30 Susanne Langer: 'Philosophy in a New Key', p. 66.
is a symbolic medium in which subjective and objective elements are presented as an integral whole. Whereas 'two logical concepts, subsumed under the next higher category, as their genus proximum, retain their distinctive characters despite the relationship into which they have been brought', poetic structure depends upon fusion.  

Two poetic words, brought together in a metaphorical relationship, actually lose their distinctive characters in bringing to birth a new metaphorical meaning which is greater than the sum of the parts. Logical structure is mechanistic: the parts can be separated by analysis and added to form the whole; the whole is a sum of the parts. Literary structure is 'organic': the parts are inter-related and inter-active. The parts and the whole are also interdependent. The literary structure is metaphoric. Viewed from the logical standpoint it is paradoxical.

A logical statement rules out all qualities except those that have logical relevance; but a metaphor insists on including as many qualities as possible. When a poetic statement is paraphrased into statements, many logical contradictions appear. In many metaphors, the contradictory element is as strong as any 'basis of comparison'. Take, for example, Cleopatra's cry:

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,  
That sucks the nurse asleep?

Logically, the asp and the baby have nothing in common, but poetically viewed it is different. Apart from the rich 'context' the lines have in the play, they are full of suggestion. The asp draining out the life of the queen is doing for her, in the situation, a labour of love. She has therefore the tender feelings towards it of a mother towards her baby.

The element of paradox is to be found in all metaphor. The poetic function of metaphor is not mere decoration. 'It is not mere analogy; metaphor is, as I.A.Richards puts it, 'a transaction between contexts, ... a merging of contexts resulting in a new meaning'. Poetic language is basically metaphorical. The Symbolist exploits this element in language. It is not the question, with him,

31 Ernst Cassirer: 'Language and Myth', p.91.
of the poet having a thought which he expresses through language, but of language itself being used as a means of getting at the thought. That is why Auden asks, 'How can I know what I think till I see what I say?' That is, 'what I say' comes before 'what I think'. To the Symbolist language itself is a realm of meaning. It generates and shapes meaning; it subsumes both subject and object, which are functions of each other because both form aspects of the language through which they are expressed. This new conception of language is one of the most important developments in modern poetry that have been encouraged by Symbolism.

The multiple aspects of Symbolism make it difficult to indicate its nature within the limits of a formal definition. As we have seen, ever since Jean Moréas adopted the term 'symbole', there have been attempts to define and justify its use. But these attempts were, on the whole, sporadic and unsystematic. The poets whom we have come to know as the French Symbolists were more interested in experimenting with and using symbols than in any thorough-going investigation into the nature of Symbolism. Their attempts to say what symbolism is, though yielding many valuable insights into its nature and use, cannot form the basis for any coherent and critical account of it. On the other hand the carefully reasoned out arguments justifying symbolism that have been given by such modern thinkers as Cassirer, Urban, Whitehead and Kenneth Burke, though very helpful, have a tendency to remain too much in the realm of pure theory. The concept of Symbolism that we can form on the basis of all these investigations should however be useful in giving us a better understanding of Symbolism as it has been practised by the French poets of the nineteenth century and the great English poets of the present century. Though the antecedents of modern symbolism are traced back to the French movement, it would perhaps be truer to say that

it is the product of a larger revolution of ideas to which persons like Kant

32 W.H. Auden: 'Poets at Work', p. 174, ('Squares and Oblongs').
and Coleridge had made significant contributions. The former, in recognizing the possibility of a new and better way of approaching Reality than that provided to us by our rational thinking, paved the way for the philosophical revolution which encouraged Symbolism. Coleridge, with rare intellectual powers and a strong fascination for metaphysical speculation, arrived at many of the ideas which Symbolists discovered for themselves later. Perhaps because of the lack of direct relationship one would hesitate to call him a symbolist but his genius had given him independent access to Symbolism before it was ever formulated as a concept.