

Introduction

The idea for this dictionary came to me while I was reading a student essay on Byron's "Stanzas Written on the Road between Florence and Pisa," which sets the true glory of youthful love against the false glory of an old man's literary renown. After a promising start the student came to a halt before these lines: "the myrtle and ivy of sweet two-and-twenty / Are worth all your laurels, though ever so plenty." His copy lacked footnotes, and he lacked experience of poetry before the Romantics. With disarming candor he confessed that he had no idea what these three plants were doing in the poem, and then desperately suggested that Byron might have seen them on the road somewhere between Florence and Pisa and been inspired to put them in his poem the way you might put plants in your office. I wrote in the margin that these were symbolic plants and he had to look them up. But where, exactly, do you send a student to find out the symbolic meaning of myrtle? The *Oxford English Dictionary* was all I could come up with, but I felt certain there must be a handier source, designed for readers of literature, with a good set of quotations from ancient times to modern. But there is no such book.

A dozen times since then I have asked colleagues and librarians if they knew of one. They were all sure they did, or thought "there must be one," but they could never find it. Several of them came up with Cirlot's *Dictionary of Symbols*, but that work, whatever it uses, is the last thing I would recommend to a student. It has no entry at all for myrtle. Under ivy it mentions the Phrygian god Attis and its eunuch-priests and then says, "It is a feminine symbol denoting a force in need of protection." One can hardly imagine the interpretations of Byron that would arise from those claims. Under laurel it names Apollo and mentions poets, but has nothing about fame, and it goes on about "inner victories over the negative and dissipative influence of the base forces."

Only slightly better are two recent ones: Hans Biedermann's *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them*, translated from the German, and Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant's *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, translated from the French. Both range widely but unsystematically over the cultures of the world, packing Mayan and Chinese meanings next to those from medieval alchemy. The latter book, much the larger, lacks an entry for myrtle; under ivy it discusses Dionysus, which is on the right track, but it says nothing about its uses in Roman poetry that lie behind Byron. Neither book quotes widely from poetry or prose fiction.

If no adequate dictionary exists, but everyone thinks it does (because it must), that seemed a good reason to write one. It was also a reason not to write one, for if even the Germans have not produced one, as it seemed, it might be beyond mortal powers. After all, anything can be a

symbol, and a comprehensive dictionary might require thousands of entries. After some hesitation, however, I decided the thing can be done, and the present book is the result.

Its title is somewhat misleading. It would be more correct, if ungainly, to call it *A Selective Dictionary of Traditional Western Literary Symbols and Conventions, Mainly in Poetry*, and I shall follow the terms in that hypothetical title as I describe the book's features.

It was only by drastically limiting the range of possible symbols, of course, that I could proceed with it. Yet it is more comprehensive than one might think. This dictionary covers only traditional symbols, those that have been used over many years by many authors. Most entries begin with the Bible or the classics and trace examples through to fairly recent writers, with an emphasis on British literature, and especially on Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Romantics; they also typically include a few examples from Italian, French, Spanish, German, or Russian literature (especially from Dante and Goethe). The tradition is more stable than I had first guessed, at least until the twentieth century; nightingales and cypresses carry with them their ancient associations, and even where they are invoked in new ways those connotations may still be in play. There is no need, moreover, to take up the significance of the lathe in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the pistols in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, the mysterious sound in Act 2 of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, the madeleine in Proust, or the leaden circles of sound from Big Ben that permeate Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. These must be worked out by the reader in each case, and no dictionary on a reasonable scale could help much. What readers need to know, in any case, are the traditional symbols, the routine furniture of literature over thousands of years, which often appear without explanation, and which gradually gain in connotation as the tradition lengthens and alludes to itself. Whether it informs the meaning of an individual work is often a subtle question – Does it matter that the bird that seeks “your cradle narrow / Near my Bosom” in Blake's “The Blossom” is a sparrow, with its associations of lust? Or that the tree that Akhmatova especially liked but is now a stump was a willow, with its suggestion of maidenhood or fruitlessness? (“The Willow”) – but the question cannot even be entertained without a knowledge of the tradition. I do not know how many of these traditional symbols there are, but the number cannot be very large, and I am hoping that a book with 175 of the most important ones, along with cross-references, will be complete enough to constitute a useful reference work.

I have tried to be copious with quotations and citations in each entry, risking redundancy, in order to give a sense of the history of a symbol and the range of its contexts. Simply to give definitions of symbols would have made for a short book but a misleading one, for often only a listing of examples can convey what a symbol has meant. I have aimed, too, to interest the scholar or experienced reader as well as to help the beginning student. There are doubtless important omissions within many of the entries – indeed until the moment I yielded the manuscript to the typesetter I was continually turning up material that I wondered how I had missed – but I have done my best within strict word limits to

Introduction

include interesting variations as well as the most typical senses.

That all the references are to western literature, counting the Bible as one of its prime sources, would not seem to require a defense, but more than one colleague has questioned my “western-centric bias” and urged that I undertake a truly multi-cultural dictionary of the all the world’s literary symbols. It sounded like a wonderful project, but not for me, or for any one mortal. Two days reading through Chinese and Japanese poetry in translation gave me a glimpse into what it might entail. The swallow, I learned, is seen as a harbinger of spring, just as it is in western poetry: the thirteenth-century poet Chiang K’uei ponders the time “When swallows come to ask where spring is.” But another common image for spring, plum blossoms, is not common in western poetry. Since plum blossoms often appear amid late-winter snow, they are tokens of hardiness and courage as well as forerunners of spring (somewhat, but not quite, like the almond blossom in the west); one commentator suggests that they represent the promise of the perfect beauty of the cherry blossoms that come later. In England, however, if we may trust Ben Jonson, it is “The early cherry, with the later plum,” that mark the usual order (“To Penshurst” 41). The cuckoo, or rather the bird translated as “cuckoo” in English, seems not to be the same species as the European bird, which is known for laying its eggs in other birds’ nests. The oriental “cuckoo” is known for its beautiful song and its straight flight. In the call of the cuckoo the Chinese heard *kui k’ü*, “go home”; in Japanese, its charming name *hototogisu* may be written in characters that mean “bird of time”; in both cultures the bird suggests homesickness. It is also associated with the moon. All of this is quite the opposite of the harsh song of cuckoldry! And so it goes. There are close similarities to western usage, not surprising since we all live in the same world, and there are sharp differences, not surprising either since fauna and flora, not to mention human culture, vary from place to place. The task of working out the details in a comparison of just two traditions would be daunting. It would be difficult even to decide whether to enter the two “cuckoos” under one name or two. I hope nevertheless that scholars expert in other languages will undertake to produce dictionaries like this one for each tradition, if they do not exist already, so we might look forward to a systematic study of “comparative metaphoric.”

This is a dictionary of symbols in literature, not myth, painting, folklore, dreams, alchemy, astrology, the Tarot pack, the Kabbalah, or the Jungian collective unconscious. Myths come into it, of course, insofar as they take literary form, but no proper names have entries. The reader who misses them can easily find several excellent dictionaries of classical mythology. That there are also excellent books about iconography in European painting allows me to omit citations from that tradition, both the Christian symbolism seen in countless paintings of the Annunciation, the Crucifixion, the martyrdom of saints, and the like, and the emblem books of the Renaissance. By “literature” I mean for the most part the “high” literature of the standard western canon. To modern eyes this tradition may seem an elite affair, in contrast not only

to proverbs and ballads but to fairy tales, popular plays and songs, seasonal rituals, and other kinds of folklore, from all of which this dictionary might have drawn more than the few examples it has. The limits of space (and time) must be the main plea against having done so, but one should remember that a great deal of Greek literature was “popular” in its day, as were Shakespeare and many other writers, and many bits of folklore live on in them that have died out among the folk. I have also tried to include a few references to less well-known writers. Those with a particular interest in women, African-American, Latin-American, or “post-colonial” writers may find them underrepresented, but this dictionary does not seem the right place to argue for a new canon. It is my sense, too, that at least through the nineteenth century, women, blacks, and other “others” did not use symbols in ways notably different from the dominant tradition. As for alchemy and the other mystical traditions, they have certainly found a place here and there in literature, but except for a few references I have had to leave out the often difficult and lengthy explanations they would require.

This dictionary depends on no particular definition of “symbol.” I have chosen to err on the side of generosity rather than exclude something one might want to know, and many instances come closer to metaphor, allusion, or even motif than to symbol strictly defined. I also include some conventions, commonplaces, or “topoi,” the standard ways a thing has been represented. So I include dawn, death, dream, nature, and certain other subjects not so much for what they have stood for as for what other things have stood for them.

For several reasons the great majority of examples is taken from poetry. Nearly all the oldest western literature is in verse, and until the modern era the poetic genres were the most prestigious and most frequently published. Poetry tends, too, to be denser in symbolism than novels or stories, though there is plenty of symbolic prose fiction. It is much easier, too, to scan poetry for key words or ideas than to scan prose, as there are concordances for most poets (in book or electronic form) but very few for novelists. I have been able to find fifty occurrences of a symbol in a dozen poets in a few minutes, but for novelists I can mainly rack my memory or that of colleagues. I have nevertheless included quite a few prose examples, helped at times by scholarly studies of one symbol, yet in the end I don’t think it would make much difference to the range of entries and meanings within entries if there were no prose examples at all.

Sometimes the entries are rather long. Readers may find more about the nightingale than they strictly need for understanding a passage by Shakespeare or Keats. Most annotated student editions of classic works, either from limits of space or the wish not to seem intimidating, give only minimal information in the notes, and so they fail to convey the richness of the tradition and suggest instead that there is a code or algebra of literature. I also think it is interesting in itself to see many threads of nightingale meanings woven together in a long entry, and it lets one take a bearing on the whole history of western poetry.

This is not to say that whenever a nightingale appears in a poem it

Introduction

must mean all the things it ever meant, or that it must allude to all the previous appearances of nightingales. What Freud said about cigars is sometimes true of literary symbols: sometimes a nightingale is just a nightingale, or little more than a way of saying that night has come. On the other hand, most poets have absorbed the traditional language of poetry and assume their readers or listeners have done so too. The implied reader of most poetry is an expert on nightingales, even if that reader has never heard or seen one. If it is possible for a nightingale to make an “innocent” appearance after 2,800 years in western literature it must be under special literary conditions that somehow both invoke and erase the associations the nightingale has acquired, as perhaps Coleridge does in “The Nightingale” as early as 1798, or Wallace Stevens much more recently in “The Man on the Dump,” where the nightingale is included in the great garbage pile of worn-out poetic images. To repeat an earlier point, the ideal is to know the tradition and then decide in each case to what extent it is still in play.

Note on sources

There is one advantage, perhaps, in the incompleteness of this dictionary, and that is that readers, if they enjoy the existing entries but miss a particular symbol, can have the pleasure of researching it themselves. The best place to begin, in fact, is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which will at least give a few quotations. There are comparable dictionaries in French and Italian; the German one, begun by the Grimm Brothers, is wonderful but its citations are from editions now very old and rare. If you read a little German, you can make use of the great *Real-Encyklopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, edited by Pauly, Wissowa, and Kroll, in many volumes, which is an astounding work of scholarship, a kind of super-concordance to Greek and Latin literature. Even without Greek and Latin you can get something out of the two large Oxford dictionaries, which are generous with quotations; you will need to learn the Greek alphabet, but then you can track the citations in facing-page translations in the Loeb series published by Harvard University Press. A good university library will have concordances to the major poets; when you have found lines, say, from Shakespeare, go to one of the scholarly editions of the individual plays (Cambridge, Oxford, or Arden) and check the footnotes to the lines with your symbol: they may well give sources going back to the Romans. The great scholarly editions of Greek and Latin classics are usually bursting with references to sources and parallels. Also helpful are dictionaries of proverbs, especially Stevenson’s *Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases*, and indexes to titles, first lines, and last lines of poetry. I have listed several more works in the “General” section of the bibliography.

After many quotations from languages other than English I have given the last name of the translator. Except for a few historically important translations (e.g., Chapman, Dryden, Pope), I have used

Introduction

readily available modern ones; classical texts other than Homer and Virgil are generally from the Loeb, Penguin, or Oxford World's Classics versions. The brief unattributed translations are "my own," that is, they are usually so simple and inevitable as to be common property.

An asterisk before a word indicates that it is a hypothetical or unattested form.

A Dictionary of Literary Symbols

A

Absinthe *see* **Wormwood**

Adder *see* **Serpent**

Aeolian harp The aeolian harp (or lyre) or wind harp was invented by the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher and described by him in 1650. It is a long, narrow wooden box with a thin belly and with eight to twelve strings stretched over two bridges and tuned in unison; it is to be placed in a window (or a grotto) where the wind will draw out a harmonious sound. (Aeolus is the Greek king in charge of the winds; he first appears in Homer's *Odyssey* 10.) In the next century James Oswald, a Scots composer and cellist, made one, and it soon became well known.

It just as soon became an irresistible poetic symbol, first in English, then in French and German. James Thomson described the harp in *The Castle of Indolence*: "A certain Musick, never known before, / Here sooth'd the pensive melancholy Mind; / Full easily obtain'd. Behoves no more, / But sidelong, to the gently-waving Wind, / To lay the well-tun'd Instrument reclin'd; / From which, with airy flying Fingers light, / Beyond each mortal Touch the most refin'd, / The God of Winds drew Sounds of deep Delight: / Whence, with just Cause, *The Harp of Aeolus* it hight" (1.352–60). Thomson also wrote an "Ode on Aeolus's Harp." It was already so well known by the 1750s that the opening line of Gray's "Progress of Poetry" – "Awake, Aeolian lyre, awake" – was misconstrued; Gray added a note quoting Pindar's "Aeolian song" and "Aeolian strings" to make clear that he was referring to a mode of Greek music, not the wind harp. (To the ancients, however, "Aeolian lyre" might refer to Sappho and Alcaeus, whose lyrics were in the Aeolian dialect of Greek.)

In poetry any harp can become an aeolian harp if suspended in the open air. Alluding to Psalm 137, where the exiled Jews "hanged our harps upon the willows" by the rivers of Babylon, William Cowper ends his long poem "Expostulation" by calling on his muse to "hang this harp upon yon aged beech, / Still murm'ring with the solemn truths I teach" (718–19).

Among the English Romantics the wind harp became a favorite image, capable of many extensions. In "The Eolian Harp," perhaps the most extended poetic treatment of the subject, Coleridge is prompted by the harp's "soft floating witchery of sound" (20) to consider "the one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul" (26–27), and then speculates: "And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd, / That tremble into thought, as

Aeolian harp

o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?" (44–48). Coleridge may have been influenced by the associationist psychology of David Hartley, according to whom sensation depends on "vibrations" carried by the nerves to the brain, where new but fainter vibrations are created. Diderot, in *D'Alembert's Dream*, has a similar but more explicitly musical model of sensation and memory, as does Herder, in *Kalligone*.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge used the metaphor of the internal breeze or breath responding to the inspiration of a natural wind. So Wordsworth begins the 1805 *Prelude*, "Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze," where the breeze serves as a kind of epic muse; a little later he reflects, "For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven / Was blowing on my body, felt within / A corresponding mild creative breeze, / A vital breeze . . ." (41–44) and then likens himself to an aeolian harp (103–07). In "Dejection," Coleridge compares himself to an "AEolian lute, / Which better far were mute" (7–8).

Shelley has frequent recourse to the image (e.g., *Queen Mab* 1.52–53, *Alastor* 42–45, 667–68) and extends it in interesting ways. It is quietly implicit in *Queen Mab* 8.19–20: "The dulcet music swelled / Concordant with the life-strings of the soul." He develops an idea in Coleridge's "Dejection," where the raving wind is told that a crag or tree or grove would make fitter instruments than the lute, by imagining that the winds come to the pines to hear the harmony of their swinging ("Mont Blanc" 20–24); in his "Ode to the West Wind" he implores the wind to "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is" (57). In his "Defence of Poetry," Shelley explicitly likens man to an aeolian lyre, but adds "there is a principle within the human being . . . which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them."

The aeolian harp enters French poetry with André Chénier's *Élégies* (no. 22): "I am the absolute owner of my memory; / I lend it a voice, powerful magician, / Like an aeolian harp in the evening breezes, / And each of my senses resounds to this voice." It appears as similes in the influential romantic novels *Les Natchez* by Chateaubriand and *Corinne* by Germaine de Staël.

In Germany, Hölderlin in "Die Wanderung" ("The Migration") makes the link Shelley makes: "and the forests / All rustled, every lyre / In unison / At heaven's gentle touch" (trans. Sieburth). Goethe stages a brief "Conversation" between two Aeolian harps, male and female, and Schiller alludes to the harp in "The Dignity of Women." The song of Ariel that opens Goethe's *Faust, Part II* is accompanied by aeolian harps. Half a century later Mörike writes "To an Aeolian Harp," where the wind blows from the green tomb of "the youth I loved so much": "As the wind gusts more briskly, / A lovely cry of the harp / Repeats, to my sweet dismay, / The sudden emotion of my soul." The Russian poet Tyutchev hears a harp at midnight grieving like a fallen angel; for a moment we feel faith and joy, "as if the sky flowed through our veins," but it cannot last, and we sink back into "wearisome dreams" ("The Gleam", trans. Bidney).

Air

In America, Emerson praises the one sure musician whose wisdom will not fail, the Aeolian harp, which “trembles to the cosmic breath” and which alone of all poets can utter “These syllables that Nature spoke” (“The Harp”). Thoreau wrote “Rumors from an Aeolian Harp,” a song *from* a harp, not about one, and in *Walden* he employs the metaphor several times. As a theme or allusion, the harp seems to have lingered longer in America than elsewhere, appearing as late as 1888 in a poem by Melville, “The Aeolian Harp at the Surf Inn.”

Kircher noted that several sounds may be produced by one string, suggesting that the string is to the wind as a prism to light, breaking up a unified motion or essence into its component parts. William Jones developed the theory that “the Eolian harp may be considered as an air-prism.” That idea may account for the connection between the aeolian harp and the “Harp of Memnon,” which was thought to be concealed within a colossal statue of an Egyptian pharaoh and would sound when the first ray of sunlight struck it each morning. “For as old Memnon’s image,” Akenside writes, “long renown’d / By fabling Nilus, to the quivering touch / Of Titan’s ray, with each repulsive string / Consenting, sounded through the warbling air / Unbidden strains; even so did Nature’s hand / To certain species of external things, / Attune the finer organs of the mind” (*Pleasures of Imagination* 109–15). Amelia Opie mentions Memnon’s harp in her “Stanzas Written under Aeolus’ Harp.” Byron lightly alludes to Memnon, “the Ethiop king / Whose statue turns a harper once a day” (*Deformed Transformed* 1.531–32).

At least two composers have written music “for” an aeolian harp: the Romantics Berlioz, in his *Lélio* (opus 14b), and Chopin, in his *Etude* opus 25, no. 1.

Air *see* **Breath, Wind**

Albatross The albatross, of which there are several species, is a large web-footed bird with a hooked beak and narrow wings, found mainly in the southern oceans. The white Wandering Albatross, with a wing span of thirteen feet, is the best known; when it follows a ship it is a striking sight, and sailors have long considered it a bird of good omen.

The first half of the name seems to derive from Latin *albus*, “white,” but the b was inserted into “alcatras,” from Portuguese *alcatraz*, used of the albatross, cormorant, frigate bird, or pelican, from Arabic *al-ghattas*, the white-tailed sea-eagle.

As early as the sixth century there are records of the bird following ships. The most famous albatross in literature is the one in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; since then “albatross” has come to mean a burden of guilt or sin. Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, chapter 42, has a memorable description of an albatross. Baudelaire, in *L’Albatros*, likens a poet, “exiled on the ground,” his wings clipped, to an albatross captured by sailors.

Almond The almond tree blooms earlier than any other – as early as January in Palestine, March in England; it is *prima omnium*, “first of all,” according

Amaranth

to Pliny (*Natural History* 16.103). It can thus symbolize spring's arrival, or more precisely a prophecy of its arrival.

The Lord asks Jeremiah what he sees, and he replies, "I see a rod of an almond tree." The Lord says, "Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it" (Jer. 1.11–12). Rather mysterious in English, this passage depends on a Hebrew pun on "almond" (*shaged*) and "hasten" (or "watch," "be diligent") (*shoged*): almonds are watchful, hastening to blossom. "'Tis a fair tree, the almond-tree: there Spring / Shews the first promise of her rosy wreath," as Letitia Landon writes ("Death in the Flower" 1–2). Shelley makes a "lightning-blasted almond-tree" which nonetheless scatters blossoms stand for the renewal of hope after the defeat of the prophetic French Revolution (*PU* 2.1.134–35).

Calderón brings out the notion of premature blossoming. Segismund wants no more false displays "that one gust / Can scatter like the almond tree in flower, / Whose rosy buds, without advice or warning, / Dawn in the air too soon" (*Life is a Dream* 3.3.2330–33; trans. Campbell).

The rod of Aaron is made from an almond tree; when it alone among all the other rods flowers and yields almonds, it is a sign of the Lord's favor: Aaron is chosen to be priest (Num. 17.1–10). This passage lies behind artists' use of an almond-shaped aureole, the mandorla (Italian for "almond"), behind representations of Christ and Mary, the chosen ones.

The white blossoms of the almond tree suggested hair to the author of Ecclesiastes: "the almond tree shall flourish" means "their hair shall turn white" as they grow old (12.5). In the last part of "Of the Four Ages of Man," Anne Bradstreet explains, "Mine Almond tree, grey hairs, doe flourish now" (417).

Amaranth The amaranth or amaranthus is an eternal flower. The word is a "correction" of the Greek participle *amarantos*, "unfading"; taken as a noun naming a flower the ending was respelled as if it were *anthos*, "flower." Lucian describes a fresco painting of a flowery meadow in spring which, as a painting, is thus "eternal spring and unfading (*amarantos*) meadow" ("The Hall" 9). Peter uses it twice in his first letter: through the resurrection we are begotten again to an inheritance "that fadeth not away" (1.4), and we shall receive "a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (5.4). Milton's angels wear crowns woven with amaranth, "Immortal Amaranth, a Flow'r which once / In Paradise, fast by the tree of life / Began to bloom, but soon for man's offence / To heaven removed" (*PL* 3.353–56). Milton made it so distinctively the flower of Paradise (lost) that Tennyson has a painter describe a flower that "only blooms in heaven / With Milton's amaranth" ("Romney's Remorse" 106).

In English poetry, then, it became symbolic of Paradise or eternity and of the Christian hope of salvation. So Cowper writes "Hope . . . / On steady wings sails through th'immense abyss, / Plucks amarantine joys from bow'rs of bliss" ("Hope" 161–64). Wordsworth claims that the imagination has the power "to pluck the amarantine flower / Of Faith" (sonnet: "Weak is the will of Man"). The Prometheus of the non-Christian Shelley "waked the legioned hopes / Which sleep within