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Comparisons with Coleridge
M. Jadwiga Swiatecka
Excerpt
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INTRODUCTION

There is a story told of an au pair girl who, on attending a Christmas service with her English employers, was puzzled by the phrase 'Mary was great with child'. This was easily and satisfactorily explained to her, but the explanation served only to add to her bewilderment when at a subsequent party she heard the father of the family described as 'great with children'.

I find myself in the same predicament of puzzled incomprehension with respect to the term 'symbol' and its cognates. Just when I think I know what the term means, I come across it in a context which destroys my confidence. I used to think that this was because, like the au pair girl, I had not really grasped the idiom. While this may still be true, I now think that the fault lies at least as much in the imprecisions with which the terms are used, and in the confusions which surround the concept. This book is an attempt to indicate what some, at least, of these imprecisions and confusions are, and why it is important that they should not be overlooked. It is therefore also a plea that, in the age of semiotics which seems to be upon us, more careful attention should be paid to the way these terms are used for, I submit, at present they are too often "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".

What these confusions and imprecisions are in general I indicate in the next chapter. But my more particular examples I choose from the fields of literature and theology in the nineteenth century. For it was, roughly, at the beginning of that century that the effects of historical and scientific research began to throw serious doubts on the literal understanding of Scripture (and hence, also, on theological statements). One consequence of this was that the language of Scripture, and

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theology, began to be more widely regarded not as scientific or historical, but as a form of poetry. At the same time, however, with the rise of the ‘Romantic’ movement, Aristotle’s theory of art as ‘imitation’ was being extended and replaced in such a way that poetry could no longer be regarded as a mirror held up to nature.¹ The question, then, of how, if not literally, or as faithful copies, any theological or literary language forms represented the truths which they attempted to convey became of increasingly greater moment. By the end of the century, the growing dissatisfaction with the ‘copy’ theory of knowledge, in view of the realization that *all* that we know is known, and therefore conveyed, from a particular standpoint, led to the suspicion that even scientific language was not literal. As a consequence, today we are prone to say – too easily – that all language and all knowledge is ‘symbolic’. But unless we know what we mean by this term, we have said no more than that language is somehow not literal. To determine more precisely what this ‘somehow’ means, attention to the use of the term ‘symbol’ and its cognates by those who were beginning to grapple with these problems is instructive. In any case, an attempted analysis of twentieth century usages would have been too diffuse to be valuable, such is the proliferation of these terms.

One misconception about the use of the term ‘symbol’ in the nineteenth century must be cleared up at the outset. Because of our own, twentieth century, inclination to use the terms associated with it so profusely, writers on nineteenth century authors too often give the impression that these terms were equally prominent in the works which they review. Thus, for instance, W. A. Madden, in his doctoral dissertation on ‘The Religious and Aesthetic Ideas of Matthew Arnold’ writes that

Arnold has successfully made a transition from the old world of religious faith in an absolute, to the new world of scientific relativism. Arnold has managed to accept the historical dialectic without losing a centre, a point of rest, from which to master the outer spectacle and to control the inner dialogue which this dialectic uncovers. The centre, the point of rest, is the symbol – the poetic incarnation of the moment seen in the light of the imaginative ideal of beauty. (p. 115.)

And again,

Rational ideas as ‘notions’ under the dominion of the Time-spirit,

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relative and changing, are transformed by the imagination into symbols, which are historical variations on the permanent, the eternal human emotions. (p. 116.)

From such statements it would seem that the term ‘symbol’, and with the meaning ascribed to it here, must be a significant one in Arnold’s works. But it is not. Arnold uses the word and its cognates hardly at all, and in those few (perhaps half a dozen) instances, only in passing. In these instances, moreover, the term ‘symbol’ for him means nothing like “the poetic incarnation of the moment seen in the light of imaginative beauty”. This is disappointing, and it is a disappointment many times repeated in reading through both nineteenth century literary criticism and the documents of religious controversy, if one is interested in discovering what the terms when actually used meant to those who used them, rather than in designating as ‘symbolic’ some notion of language which the writers themselves described in quite other terms. For such, often improper, attribution is itself the cause of much current confusion.

The disappointment has, however, this advantage. It has meant that in the pursuit in which I have been engaged, which is – I must repeat – to discover what the term ‘symbol’ and its cognates meant when actually used in the contexts I have suggested, the cases for study have largely selected themselves. Coleridge, Carlyle, Newman, Inge, Tyrrell and MacDonald are here firstly because they use the terms significantly (though sometimes ambiguously) in relation to the way in which language functions in conveying truth or truths in literature and, or, theology. Omissions, as in the case of Arnold, but also of, for instance, F. D. Maurice, have been dictated by the fact that the terms under scrutiny do not appear significantly in their work, however surprising this may seem to us.

The choice, however, is not quite as fortuitous as this might make it seem. The inclusion of Coleridge needs no justification, not only because of his stature as poet and writer, but also because he is said to have ‘popularized’ the term ‘symbol’² and because it has been asserted that in any consideration of symbolism, all roads lead back to him.³ These statements themselves are questionable, as I shall show, but they indicate why he must be taken as a starting point. Carlyle and Newman, like

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Coleridge, are sufficiently important nineteenth century writers to deserve inclusion if their uses of the relevant terms warrant this, as Carlyle's certainly does. Additionally, there is at least some question of how far the ideas of either might have been influenced by their older contemporary, Coleridge, and this has been a further motive for including Newman who, important as he is, does not use the term 'symbol' as often as might be thought. Moreover, recent distinction and conflation between his use of the term 'symbol' and that of Coleridge⁴ illustrates neatly the kinds of confusions which must be avoided if the concept is to be helpful in contemporary discussions which involve such comparisons. George MacDonald, far removed as he is from the importance of either a Newman or a Carlyle, is included also because of his – in this case acknowledged – indebtedness to Coleridge, and also because his two 'fantasies for grown ups', *Lilith* and *Phantastes*, are now being seen as conscious attempts to embody in literary form (in some sense, therefore, in 'symbol') a theological content, and even, perhaps, to create through such embodiment new theological insights.⁵ Inge and Tyrrell fall outside this link of indebtedness to Coleridge; it is doubtful if Tyrrell ever read him, and while Inge certainly did, he was equally certainly suspicious of his thought. They both belong, moreover, more purely to the theological rather than the literary sphere, and are probably not familiar to those who may have a wide acquaintance with the other authors mentioned. But Tyrrell's connection is with Newman, whom he cited as a progenitor of ideas for the development of which he was suspected of heresy, and in which the vocabulary of symbolization played no small part. Inge, while he distrusted the movement to which Tyrrell belonged, himself made use of the terms at about the same time, so that a comparison is interesting in any case; but also, while on the whole repudiating Coleridge, he wrote in the same Platonist tradition, which itself is capable of various interpretations. All six authors are therefore linked more or less directly, and the meanings with which each uses the terms in question are brought into sharper relief when juxtaposed with each other, and when seen more particularly in relation to those of Coleridge, which I use as the basis of comparison. His concept of 'symbol' is central to his philosophy and, in spite of its shortcomings, emerges as by far the most consistently used, the

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most thoroughly thought through, and the most challenging because capable of further development. This view may not be surprising, but the analysis serves to show clearly where even present day thinking on the whole topic of symbolization needs to be extended, deepened and clarified.

Because, for the purpose of this investigation, I have wanted to make comparisons between more than two or three authors, and between closely inspected uses of the term 'symbol' and its cognates, particularly in relation to Coleridge, who therefore – as indeed he deserves – receives the closest and most extended attention, I have not been able to pursue all possible lines of investigation. As far as the authors treated in this book are concerned, I may seem, for instance, not to have paid due attention to all the changes in Newman's thought, and to have underplayed his Aristotelianism and his indebtedness to Butler. To do full justice to his thinking – which, as Charles Kingsley discovered to his cost, often prompts the question "What then did Newman mean?" – would have needed a different kind of book, and the subject has, in any case, received recent attention.⁶ I have deliberately taken note only of that context which is directly relevant to his (as I have said) infrequent use of the term 'symbol', and I think sufficiently so to show significant ambiguities. It could be that further enquiry would show other divergent – or convergent – aspects of meaning, but this would not, I think, affect the argument. I regret, however, that I have not been able to pursue some comparison between Newman and another disciple of Bishop Butler, H. L. Mansel, who became Dean of St Paul's (1861–1871), and of whom, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, Newman approved. But even here I hope that I have given sufficient indication of the important consequences of imprecision.

There are, of course, very many other areas of interest relevant to the meanings of the term 'symbol' which I have scarcely touched, or not touched at all. One obvious one is the functioning of the term in the aesthetic theories of the French 'Symboliste' poets; another is its use by Emerson and his American contemporaries; a third is a comparison between Goethe and both Coleridge and Carlyle. The first and last of these would require an expertise in French and German greater than I possess; and like these, the American scene might deserve a study of its own. What I have attempted is necessarily

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limited since its purpose is to examine detail. Like archaeological digs the pursuit is at times exacting, appearing to concentrate only on minutiae, and one may often be tempted to raise one's eyes from one's own patch of ground to wider and more enticing scenery round about. But the sherds that are unearthed are often exciting and revealing. If my task here has been only to uncover a general outline of the foundations which underlie the complex structure of meanings attendant on the vocabulary of symbolization, and to have cleared one corner from its tangle of thorny growth, such preliminaries are necessary and can prove rewarding.

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1

THE CONCEPT OF 'SYMBOL'

Our Present Discontents

“The word ‘symbol’,” wrote C. S. Peirce at the turn of the century, “has so many meanings that it would be an injury to language to add a new one.”¹

Since then the word has acquired such popularity, both in everyday speech and as a field of philosophical enquiry, that it is hardly possible to suppose that such injury has been avoided. Indeed, a number of writers have remarked upon the term’s ubiquity, its practically indefinite extension, and the bewilderment to which such width of applicability can give rise. Martin Foss, H. H. Price, S. K. Langer, Brand Blanshard, F. W. Dillistone² have all, in various ways, indicated the term’s diffusion and consequent diffuseness. Nevertheless, few of those who use the term ‘symbol’ or its cognates, even as central to the content of their exposition of a given subject, make any attempt to indicate the meaning they attach to them. One of the editors of the papers for the 13th Symposium of the Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, held in New York in 1952, whose general topic was *Symbols and Values: an Initial Study*, had occasion to remark in his introductory chapter that, out of forty-five papers submitted, only four undertook seriously to say anything about the nature of symbols and their use,³ and if one glances through any collection of papers on symbols or symbolism the same lack of definition is soon evident.

Yet the implied assumption of univocity of the terms in question seems open to challenge on all sides. For one meets the term ‘symbol’, for instance, as a designation of widely heterogeneous entities; from hunger-cramps to Christ; from letters of the alphabet to ‘the universe’; from dreams to

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mathematical formulae and their components; from the coloured shapes which compose our perception, to creeds and *King Lear*; – a variety which includes actual objects, language constructs, historical events, and indeed everything and anything. And this range of references makes it difficult to give clear focus to the other connected terms, such as 'symbolism', 'symbolization', 'symbolical' (even 'symbolific') when no indication of their particular use is given.

Sometimes, of course, the context is itself an indication of the author's general meaning, or of the class of things to which his use applies. At other times a definition is given which delimits that use for the purpose in view. Thus D. G. James's categorical statement that

The symbol is not something which stands for another thing: it is the way the object is given precision to our minds . . . it is a way of seeing the object which comes to clarity for us only in the form of symbol (*Matthew Arnold and the Decline of English Romanticism*, p. 46),

can be taken to apply to literary symbols only; whilst Ernest Nagel is careful to couch his definition thus:

By a symbol I understand any occurrence (or type of occurrence) usually linguistic in status, which is taken to signify something else by way of tacit or explicit conventions or rules of usage. ('Symbolism and Science', in *Symbols and Values: an Initial Study*, p. 44.)

Frequently, however, such delimitations are not made and are impossible to arrive at from a given context. Thus, to the same collection as Nagel's article, Dorothy D. Lee contributes an essay⁴ whose thesis is that "the symbol is *in fact* a part of a whole" (p. 73, my italics) and it is not clear that she means to limit this in any specific way. Moreover, some definitions tend to create puzzling anomalies. Thus Nagel's definition compels him to speak, somewhat curiously, of the world 'bald' as a symbol of the class of those who are bald: while it excludes a large number of things which are normally designated 'symbols'; and definitions like Jung's, that a symbol is

the expression of an intuitive perception which can as yet neither be apprehended better nor expressed differently (*Contributions to Analytic Psychology*, p. 232),

exclude the signs of mathematics and logic to which the term 'symbol' is equally firmly attached.

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Anomalous as this might be, it would not be confusing if there were some agreement that there are at least two more or less equivocal uses of the term 'symbol'. Instead, there are repeated attempts to produce a definition which will cover all cases. Even Alfred Schutz, who notes the heterogeneity of the term 'symbol' and 'symbolization', eventually says

If we try to find the common denominator of the various theories on significative and symbolic relations . . . we may say that the object, fact, or event called sign or symbol refers to something other than itself. ('Symbol, Reality and Society' in *Symbols and Society*, ed. Bryson, p. 143.)

This 'over-all' definition appears to exclude the kinds of symbols James was attempting to specify, as well as the symbols which pure mathematicians manipulate. And the same may be said of Blanshard's

the symbol is a means or vehicle that helps us fix our thought on something beyond it. ('Symbolism' in *Religious Experience and Truth: a Symposium*, p. 48.)

The same criticism of a failure to be as inclusive as is intended can be levelled at S. K. Langer's definition of symbol as "any device whereby we are led to make an abstraction";⁵ similar but more serious here, since her central concern is an all-inclusive definition, and she offers this as a consequence of comparing the symbolic relation in logic and in art. It is difficult to see how this definition can make sense of the term 'symbol' as applied to *King Lear* or *The Tempest* without stretching the words "device" and "abstraction" beyond warrantable limits. Her later, more tentative, reformulation of this to

Any device whereby we make an abstraction is a symbolic element, and all abstraction involves symbolization (*Philosophical Sketches*, p. 63),

is not much more illuminating in this respect. For she has to admit that "there may be many ways of making abstractions and therefore many kinds of symbols", which leaves us with the original puzzle. Besides which she reveals herself wedded to Nagel's definition as the one which designates "genuine symbols", and she thus relegates works of art to the second-class citizenship of "quasi-symbols".

Unfortunately there are a number of writers who take pre-

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cisely the opposite view, of whom E. I. Watkin may serve as an example since he, like Mrs Langer, is concerned with the "philosophy of form".⁶ For him it is the conventional symbol which is not a true symbol, and a genuine symbol is a significant form expressive of an ideal or spiritual being whose reflection it is on the physical plane.

This may be thought odd, but to think it is an illicit departure from central, formal, well-established use is to ignore history. And Mrs Langer's "poor epistemologist" can hardly complain about what seems to him an encroachment of the jungle upon his tidy garden, since he himself is responsible for many of the seeds from which that jungle has sprung. It is disingenuous of H. H. Price to think that the "stretched" sense of the word 'symbol' as used in the Symbolist Theory (of thinking) is not potentially confusing, and that "when someone is told for the first time that thinking is symbolic cognition he knows at once what kind of theory he is being asked to accept . . ." (*Thinking and Experience*, p. 147.) To excuse the philosopher for distending words on the grounds that such distension occurs in barrack-room and bar is to make him more than usually redundant.

In view of the difficulties of arriving at a satisfactory definition to cover all cases of prescribed or actual usage, without having recourse to qualifying adjectives like 'illicit' or 'quasi-' which serve only to hide an inbuilt exclusiveness; and considering the hesitation to admit that the term 'symbol' is simply equivocal, it is surprising that none of those who have tried to deal with the problem have considered this chameleon word with explicit reference to Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances, i.e. the idea that any set of things may share a group of common characteristics, though there may be no one trait which is common to all. However, those, like Philip Wheelwright,⁷ who, while beginning with some very general statement about the nature of all symbols, concentrate rather on indicating the differences which such an initial description covers, might be considered as applying such a principle in effect.

But even then difficulties arise. There is the tendency, first, to give the name 'symbol' to the whole class designated by the original wide statement, using it, as it were, as the surname of the whole clan, and then to apply it exclusively to some groups