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It was suggested in the first part of this essay that in the modern period concentration by critics and others on the importance of the poetic symbol has had consequences that are unexpected and sometimes unfortunate. We are constantly being told in the most intellectually refined ways that the poet's function is different from that of the moralist or the philosopher; however, constant repetition is bound to suggest that the poet's role bears some analogy to theirs.

I want in this second part to look at the history of the literary symbol and the changes in its involvement with religious symbolism and belief. In doing so it will, I think, become obvious that just as the post-Romantic critic has, by exalting the symbol run the danger of simply offering, with a ritual gesture and a whiff of incense, a paraphrasable content, so the modern theologian has tended to reduce and translate symbolism on the assumption that what is for salvation must be expressible in immediate historical and social terms (Christian Marxism, aspects of the translated liturgy, the New English Bible, etc.). It is to be suspected that this is another version of the fallacy which would see the image as a mirror-image of some ordinary human experience.

First of all, it is well to distinguish between the exact or scientific symbol and the suggestive or complex one. An algebraic symbol is equivalent to a precise term or set of terms. Blake's Tyger, Melville's White Whale, or T. S. Eliot's fire and rose in *The Four Quartets*, cannot be confined in this manner. It is better to distinguish between suggestive symbols like this and signs where there is an exact equivalence with another term. But having taken this elementary step we are then faced with the need to discriminate between different kinds of suggestive symbols. D. H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature* says of Moby Dick: 'Of course he is a symbol. Of what? I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That's the best of it.' And Lawrence also says in one of his letters that while much of his own symbolism is intentional, some of it escaped his notice until later. This reminds one of the frequent statements made by T. S. Eliot later in his career to the effect that once written his poems were in no way limited by his intentions, but were open to the reader to interpret as he thought fit. A similar defence of multiple meaning is made by W. H. Auden in *The Enchafed Flood*, his investigation of Romantic iconography: 'A symbolic correspondence is never one to one but always multiple, and different persons perceive different meanings.'

This openness, this free, problematic character attributed to the symbol, is a development wholly of the modern period, or more accurately is post-Romantic. So is the belief in multiple symbolism if this is presented as a theory of relative meaning, limited only by the sum of the associations of all the readers, which Eliot and Auden seem to be maintaining. Medieval and Renaissance symbolism is often complex and contains multiple layers of significance; but these are dependent on the layered, complex nature of the medieval world-view, not on a subjective free-for-all in which the reader can play any number he likes. The symbolism may not operate like algebraic signs but it does have reference. At the beginning of the *Inferno* Dante finds himself astray in a dark wood where he is confronted by three wild beasts, a leopard, a she-wolf and a lion. The beasts may stand for the stain of sin (the leopard's spots), the power of Rome (an echo of the birth circumstances of Romulus and Remus), and that of the Holy Roman Empire. There may be dispute between the commentators but it is confined within the strict limits of probable significance; the symbolic beasts are referential, but that does not derogate from their primary narrative function as dangerous animals confronting a benighted traveller at a point where the road forks. It is as when Blake writes

The Son of Morn in weary night's decline,
The lost traveller's dream under the hill.

the lines in their context apply to Urizen, the fallen god who has brought about the split in mankind's original nature, but the evocation of the lost traveller's dream of a home seen with paradisaical nostalgia enables the passage to draw on what may be called natural symbolism; novelty of vision blends with our familiar response to known circumstances. Dante's gloomy wood likewise provides a universal image for men isolated from community and unsure of any harmonious relationship to nature; it is only in the last hundred years that this image has been succeeded in poetry by that of the impersonal modern city (Baudelaire, *Le Cygne*; Robert Lowell, *The Mouth of the Hudson*).

Dante's symbols are defined within certain boundaries, however much their poetic force may work with an energy of its own; as Coleridge says, 'the wheels take fire through the mere rapidity of their motion'. It is the same with multiple allegory in the medieval period. In *Piers Plowman* the figure of Piers the simple honest ploughman stands at different stages of the poem for the virtue of the active life in the world, for the Church in its pastoral role, and for Christ as Redeemer who suffered on the Cross in Piers' arms or livery (i.e. he entered into human life). The effect of this multiple allegory for many modern readers is to make of *Piers Plowman* a richly confusing poem, but the confusion is not unlimited and there are threads to guide one through it: each level of symbolism is clarified by its context. It would not be possible to come up with the interpretation

that Piers is Richard II (though incidentally one contemporary Chaucerian scholar has produced identifications of characters with historical figures which are quite as startling as that). There is not the openness which is found in the literary symbols of our own period and which is referred to in the passages quoted from Lawrence and Auden. The term allegory has been used for the symbols in Dante and Langland. There is a good case for considering allegory as a special mode of expression quite distinct from symbolism and it was eloquently put a long time ago by C. S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love* (1936). The allegorical image is a substitute for what it represents and consequently more intellectually conceived; the symbol is the only possible embodiment of what it represents. Allegory starts with an abstraction and produces a concrete image or fiction; the symbolist creates a concrete image which is the sole key to an aspect of experience individually conceived. When personifications are present, as they frequently are in allegory, it is easy to see that the symbolic figures function like this, morality creations like Conscience or the Seven Deadly Sins bringing abstract qualities to life. But it is possible for the qualitative distinctness of this life to be pressed too far. There is a line of symbolism, and somewhere along this line allegory and what I have called suggestive symbolism blur into each other. Thus among the rare specimens of modern allegory, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is as hard and definite as a medieval or sixteenth-century political fable—*Mother Hubbard's Tale* perhaps; but in Camus' *La Peste* the reference for the plague in Oran is to the German occupation of France only as an instance of the imprisonment of the human condition in general. The effect of this undefined cosmic background, the result of the replacement of faith by scepticism, is to keep the life of the book in the foreground; as in Camus' admired *Robinson Crusoe*, what goes on in the forefront of the action is far more fascinating than any reflections which may be aroused by the drift of the tale. And yet undergraduates and presumably others who should know better continue to discourse about *Robinson Crusoe* as a parable of the bourgeois mind.

As well as allegory, much purely traditional symbolism flourished in the stage of European civilization which lasted from the break-up of the Roman Empire to the scientific advances and new communications of the seventeenth century. The lion for courage, the rose for romantic love, the storm in greater nature signifying a storm in the little world of man—all these were fitted to the understanding of men who observed what Sir Thomas Browne called 'the ladder and scale of creatures', since a vast scheme of analogies comprehend all the persons and substances in the universe.

At the emergence of our modern world that universal harmony was dissolved. God said let Newton be, and, as Yeats remarked, took the spinning jenny out of Locke's side. To speak of the revolution at all is to take sides. The modern critical attempts to say

what the revolution meant in terms of dissociation of sensibility, loss of the organic society, and so on, themselves partake of the nature of symbolic fables. To Dr Johnson and the Augustans the analogical metaphors of the older poetry were far-fetched conceits. Things were what they were: why then should they have been thought to have been any thing else? The answer lies in that attempt to heal the split and restore the organic view of life, to employ one of our available fables for what happened, which we know as the Romantic movement. We come back now to that passage from Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual* quoted at the beginning of this essay. This most influential attempt to define the symbol (and to distinguish it from allegory) originates in a need to defend a symbolic way of thinking which Coleridge thought was in danger in the crisis of the modern world (the modern world and its crisis have been with us from the early nineteenth century onwards):

The histories and political economy of the present and preceding century partake in the general contagion of its mechanic philosophy and are the product of an unenlivened generalized understanding. In the Scriptures they are the living educts of the imagination; of that reconciling and mediatory power, which, incorporating the reason in images of the sense, and organizing (as it were) the flux of the senses by the permanent and self-circling energies of the reason, gives birth to a system of symbols harmonious in themselves and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors.

Here we have the ideas which recur in all discussions of the symbol and of the poem as unique object: the uniqueness of the symbol, the fact that it is not an exchangeable device like allegory where another image could always be thought up if the first would not do; then we have the distinction between reason and understanding corresponding to the sharp division in achieved art between the imaginative and the fanciful. The separation between intuitive truth and truth of fact (science) continues to be made by literary critics and apologetic theologians in the liberal epoch.

As he goes on to speak of the symbol which is a part of the truth which it represents, Coleridge touches on the analogy between poetry and religion. There is, he says in his somewhat grandiloquent language, a translucence of the eternal in and through the temporal. If we want a clearer and less hieratic exposition of the new Romantic insight into the relation of poetry and religion we have to go, curiously enough, to Coleridge's friend and collaborator Wordsworth. This is how he writes, not in the famous Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but in the later and unduly neglected *Essay Supplementary to the Preface* of 1815:

The religious man values what he sees chiefly as an imperfect shadowing forth of what he is incapable of seeing. The concerns of religion refer to indefinite objects, and are too weighty for the

mind to support them without relieving itself by resting a great part of the burthen upon words and symbols. The commerce between Man and his Maker cannot be carried on but by a process where much is represented in little, and the Infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity. In all this may be perceived the affinity between religion and poetry; between religion—making up the deficiencies of reason by faith; and poetry—passionate for the instruction of reason; between religion—whose element is infinitude, and whose ultimate trust is the supreme of things, submitting herself to circumscription and reconciled to substitutions; and poetry—ethereal and transcendent, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation.¹

It seems to me that Wordsworth here squarely meets the question we have been putting all along: why symbolism, if what is to be communicated is indeed *there*, is deeply felt and comprehended by the poet? The same applies to the communication of religious truth, if truth is thus and thus. His answer is that religious truth must be mediated, since it transcends common experience; and that in poetry the free imagination must voluntarily embrace its chosen images and fables. Truth is mediated, or accommodated; it is not conveyed or translated in the complete symbolic package of the modern exeget, literary or theological. It is a burden insupportable as a whole by finite minds but capable of resting on words and symbols. There is a suggestion at the end of the passage that the reason for this accommodation may be related to the central doctrine of Christianity, the acceptance of the fact of Christ's taking human nature; as this truth is commemorated in the Eucharist, it is both fact and symbol.² Art needs a body, and divine truth voluntarily takes on a body. What Austin Farrar says about the nature of prophecy may be relevant here: 'Poetry and divine inspiration have this in common, that both are projected in images which cannot be decoded, but must be allowed to signify what they signify of the reality beyond them.'³

I have tried in this essay, no doubt scappily and inadequately, by asking Butler's question, to take a fresh look at the modern supremacy of the image. There seems no purpose in exalting the integral importance of the symbol and then interpreting it away as if it were a disposable kit; and the same applies to the forms and symbols of religion. But the passages I have discussed from Shakespeare and Wordsworth show us that the imaginative symbol is chiefly remarkable as the free creation of the poet, and not as a state-

¹Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. E. de Selincourt, ii (1944) 412.

²M. M. Ross in his *Poetry and Dogma* (Rutgers University Press, 1954) has suggested that the change in imagery in the seventeenth century may be partly due to the eclipse of a Catholic view of the Real Presence after the Laudian period.

³Austin Farrar, *The Glass of Vision* (1948), p. 148. Cf. also 'images can be trusted to express only what he who speaks them intends by them', p. 46.

ment, however more entertainingly it may be expressed, of something we can learn about elsewhere, in the books of sociologists or philosophers or even theologians. Much Christian thinking at present in a period of *aggiornamento* is concerned with the substitution of newer forms for older ones. But when taken to extremes the tendency to search for contemporary equivalents shares in the illusion of the literary critics who want to tease out the unique symbol in order to establish the 'relevance' of the poet. Other-worldly is no longer a very good word, but it is worth pointing out, unfashionably, that if we want to live truth through the personal and social thing, the secular world can do that for us. Belief is something else, and more than a hope in shadows, though men may need symbols to complete the form of truth: one remembers the loving but light-hearted manner in which Alyosha refers to the funeral pancakes at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*:

'Karamazov', cried Kolya, 'can it be true what's taught us in religion, that we shall all rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, all, Ilusha too?'

'Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!' Alyosha answered, half laughing, half enthusiastic.

'Ah, how splendid it will be!' broke from Kolya.

'Well, now we will finish talking and go to his funeral dinner. Don't be put out at our eating pancakes—it's a very old custom and there's something nice in that!' laughed Alyosha.