

SYMBOLISM IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH RELIGIOUS LYRIC¹

DOROTHY M. HIGNETT

I HAVE imposed rather narrow limits on the scope of this short article, to make possible a close examination of a few poems, rather than deal in a more general way with the subject. I have chosen to examine some examples of Middle English lyric poetry written between the thirteenth century and the fifteenth century. My selection has been confined to the religious lyrics, omitting the secular lyrics of the period. This choice may of course reflect a personal preference, but it should not, I think, misplace the correct emphasis, since most of the lyrics extant from this period are religious: for every one secular lyric there are three or four religious lyrics, and moreover the religious lyric has been neglected to some extent in favour of the secular love-lyric, as many of these are among the more obviously attractive features of Middle English literature. The secular lyrics are nevertheless highly conventional, and, especially in the thirteenth century, lean heavily upon French tradition.

By 'symbolism' I have understood that which may have a meaning over and above the literal meaning, in those contexts where the literal meaning is itself of primary importance or where the poet intends the literal meaning to be at any rate part of his aim and effect. Personal symbolism as we understand it today was not a conscious feature of the medieval poet, who was working within a well-defined world of conventional religious symbols. Any attempt to read personal symbolic meanings into the literal language of the Middle English poet may be seriously misleading.

The first intention of the Middle English poet was to communicate, and this is especially true of writers of religious verse. Nine-tenths of the poems of known authorship in Middle English are by clerics, who saw in this medium an excellent vehicle for homily, instruction at a popular level, and exhortation to devotion. We must bear in mind that the preachers and the poets were often one and the same. When the Middle English poet makes use of symbolism, its application and interpretation

¹ This paper was first given as a contribution to a Symposium on 'Symbolism in the Middle Ages' of the Medieval Society at Manchester University on February 12th, 1959.

are usually obvious. He will tend to rely on the natural symbol, on the homely and commonplace, on the self-evident in its context, and on the symbol which refers to common contemporary experience, knowledge and beliefs, so that we should turn for our interpretation to the bestiaries, lapidaries, herbals, to the symbolism of numbers and emblems such as Lady Fortune and her wheel and the five leaves of the lily. Above all, we should turn to the Scriptures, the liturgy, and the patristic writings.

The first two examples I have chosen are homiletic and didactic in intention, and both date from the thirteenth century.

Erthe toc of erthe erthe wyth woh;

erthe other erthe to the erthe droh;

erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh.

Tho hueede erthe of erthe erthe ynoh.

(*The Harley Lyrics*, No. 1. ed. G. L. Brook. Second edition, Manchester 1956.)

I interpret this stanza as follows: 'Mortal man took from the earth the fruits of the earth (earthly goods) by toil; the earth added other earth (man's mortal dust) to the earth; man laid his mortal clay in an earthen coffin. Then had man had his fill of mortal life.'

This cryptic stanza depends for its point and effectiveness on the play upon the word *earth*, and upon all the symbolic interpretations of the word which were available to the mind at this period. The symbolism is scriptural and liturgical in origin, and the theme is that of the preacher: 'remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return'. The three interpretations of the word *earth* as man, the world, worldly goods, originate in Genesis ii, 7, 'and the Lord God formed man out of the slime of the earth'; iv, 17, 'cursed is the earth in thy work; with labour and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life'; iv, 19, 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return'.

It is the prevailing theme of the middle ages, stated more directly in the *Poema Morale*, vv. 325-326:

We should all of us think time and again

what we are, and whither we shall, and whence we came.

Later versions of the *Earth upon Earth* stanza tend to explain the symbolism at some length, sacrificing the concrete and gnomic economy of the original for didactic purposes.

The second poem again illustrates the preacher's use of the commonplace and obvious symbol:

*If man him bihoct
 inderlike & ofte
 (how) arde is te fore
 fro bedde te flore,
 (how) reuful is te flitte
 fro flore te pitte,
 fro pitte te pine
 that neure sal fine,
 i wene non sinne
 sulde his herte winnen.*

(*English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, No. 13. ed. Carleton Brown. Oxford 1932.)

A literal translation runs: 'If man took thought inwardly and often how hard it is to pass from the bed to the floor, how grievous it is to go from the floor to the pit, from the pit to torment that never shall end, I think that no sin would master his heart.'

In this short poem the interpretation depends upon no intellectual frame of reference other than the homely and everyday, the common experience of everyone. The interpretation of the symbolism is made obvious from the context in which it is used. Again, later versions of this stanza tend to explain and expound what is expressed here in symbolic terms. Such short homiletic verses as these give the preacher an opportunity to drive home, in easily remembered form, the lesson of Ecclesiastes: vanity of vanities, and all is vanity. The poet depicts in concrete terms the sickness, death and burial of man, and at the same time, provides himself with an opportunity for an allegorical interpretation—'ghostly for to understand'—referring to the spiritual sickness of the soul, its fall from grace, and final perdition. The preachers in their sermons also use the symbolism of common things to point their moral. They were, as Evelyn Underhill has said, at home with particulars.

Moralizing poems such as these are common in Middle English, but the finest examples of the Middle English religious lyric fall into the category of devotional rather than homiletic verse. By the following examples I hope to show that, although these lyrics are more artistically conceived, the poet has the same desire

to communicate and his symbolism is equally obvious of interpretation.

*Nou goth sonne vnder wod,—
me reweth, marie, thi faire Rode.
Nou goth sonne vnder tre,—
me reweth, marie, thi sone and the.*

(*English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, No. 1.)

'Now the sun sinks below the wood,— I pity, Mary, thy fair face. Now the sun sinks below the tree,— I pity, Mary, thy son and thee.'

In this poem the description of the setting sun is placed in the context of the crucifixion by the reference to Mary and her Son. From this context the natural scene draws its obvious symbolical interpretation: the setting of the sun is the death of Christ. The pictorial symbolism is subtly reinforced by verbal correspondences, as, for example, the identity in sound of the words *sonne* and *sone*, the physical sun and the Son of God, which are the traditional symbols of life, physical and spiritual. There are the complex associations of *tre* and *wod*; the tree is the cross on which Christ died, the symbol of death, but also, in the Christian tradition, the new tree of life, as well as the wood of the forest. The darkness of the forest after the sun has set is the darkness of the spirit without Christ.

In poetry of this kind, the symbolic interpretation is suggested by the parallelism of syntactical construction, by the repetition of alternating lines, rather than by any explicit statement. Here it is relevant to mention that this kind of parallelism is common in religious poetry, and it suggests the biblical language of the psalms of David. In addition the immediate inspiration for this lyric, as for the first example, is scriptural. In the manuscript in which the lyric is found, it is immediately preceded by a reference to the Canticle, i, 5, *quia sol decoloravit me*: 'the sun hath altered my colour'.

To illustrate further the importance of context in the interpretation of symbolism, we have only to look at those religious poems which have taken over the literary conventions of the secular lyrics, applying them with a new significance which is dependent on the new context. This is illustrated by the two examples which follow, both of them opening stanzas of religious lyrics. The first is a spring song on the passion:

When y se blosmes springe
 ant here foules song,
 a suete loue-longynge
 myn herte thourhout stong,
 al for a loue newe,
 that is so suete ant trewe,
 that gladieth al my song.

.....
 (The Harley Lyrics, No. 18.)

‘When I see blossoms spring and hear birds singing, a sweet love-longing pierced my heart, all for a new love, that is so sweet and true, that fills all my song with joy.’

The second is a spring song on the redemption:

Somer is comen & winter gon,
 this day biginnith to longe,
 & this foules euerichon
 Ioye hem wit songe.

.....
 (English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century, No. 54.)

‘Summer has come and winter gone, the day begins to lengthen, and these birds one and all rejoice with song.’

In these lyrics the conventional opening of the secular lyric with a description of spring and the song of the birds is applied in the context of the passion and resurrection, symbolically representing the time of our spiritual rebirth, the new life purchased at Easter after the winter of our life of sin; the new day of the resurrection dawns after the long night of the passion. The love-longing is the mystical love of God stated in secular terms; the conventional wound of love, the pierced heart, now recalls, not Ovid, but the sword that Simeon promised would pierce the heart of Mary, and the lance that pierced the side of Christ: this is the perfect love to which the poet aspires.

The symbolic application of the description of spring in the religious context is not common in Middle English lyric poetry, but we have seen it already in the sixth century in the Latin lyrics of Fortunatus. In particular, the description of spring which opens *Ad Felicem Episcopum De Pascha* serves as a prelude to a poem on Easter. The Middle English lyrics seem to belong to the same tradition, showing the subordination of imagery to concept, with

a functional, not merely decorative, use of descriptions of the natural scene.

Some writers have shown a tendency to ignore or overlook the importance of tradition and of liturgical and scriptural symbolism in these lyrics, in favour of mythic or ritualistic interpretations. The following lyric may serve as an example:

*At a sprynge wel vnder a thorn,
ther was bote of bale, a lytel here a-forn;
ther by-syde stant a mayde,
fulle of loue y-bounde.
Ho-so wol seche trwe loue,
yn hyr hyt schal be founde.*

(*Religious Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century*, No. 130. ed. Carleton Brown. Oxford 1924.)

'At a well-spring beneath a thorn-tree, there was a remedy for sorrow, a little while ago; beside it stands a maiden, fast in the bonds of love. Whoever desires to seek true love, it shall be found in her.'

It has been suggested that this 'mayde', who is certainly Mary, has an 'unmistakable affinity' with 'the spirit of the fountain', and that the lyric illustrates how 'the imagery of the songs of the earlier religion was being adapted to Christian meanings' (John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry*, p. 64. Faber & Faber 1957). This kind of interpretation seems unnecessary if we recall the story from the apocryphal gospel of St James the Less (whose stories delighted the pious but uncritical audiences of the middle ages) in which the blessed Virgin is depicted beside the well at Nazareth where, it is said, the angel of the annunciation first appeared to her. The remedy for our sorrow is to come through Mary, the handmaid of the Lord. Mary is frequently associated with a well in medieval times. She is the 'well of grace'. But the poem may also refer symbolically to the spring of water and blood flowing from the pierced side of Christ as he hung, crowned with thorns, on the cross, with Mary at his feet. This is the remedy for our sin, continually renewed in the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. In medieval art we find depicted the tree, which is the tree of life, and at the foot of it springs the well of saving grace. It is in this context that the poem should be read, and a deeper knowledge and understanding of scriptural and liturgical symbolism should help us to read these lyrics correctly.

My last example is an exquisite and deservedly popular lyric from the fifteenth century:

*I syng of a mayden that is makeles,
kyng of alle kynges to here sone che ches.*

*he cam also styllle ther his moder was
as dew in aprylle, that fallyt on the gras.*

*he cam also styllle to his moderes bowr
as dew in aprylle, that fallyt on the flour.*

*he cam also styllle ther his moder lay
as dew in aprylle, that fallyt on the spray.*

*moder & mayden was neuer non but che—
wel may swych a lady godes moder be.*

(*Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, No. 81, Songs of the Nativity, ed. Carleton Brown. Oxford 1939.)

'I sing of a maiden that is matchless, king of all kings to her son she chose. He came as still where his mother was as dew in April, that falls on the grass. He came as still to his mother's bower as dew in April, that falls on the flower. He came as still where his mother lay as dew in April, that falls on the spray. Mother and maiden was never none but she—well may such a lady God's mother be.'

This lyric is sometimes, and I feel mistakenly, read as a Christmas or nativity lyric. But in fact it is a celebration of the annunciation. The symbol of the rising dew (Judges vi, 37-38) is an accepted figure or type of the blessed Virgin receiving in her womb the Word incarnate. St Ambrose and St Jerome, favourite reading of the middle ages, both make this point. The first stanza reflects the words: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word'. Hence the difficulty of reconciling the April dew with the winter nativity no longer exists, nor need the symbol be explained away as no more than the influence of the secular lyric. The annunciation is a spring theme, for, according to Christian tradition dating from the third century, the world was created at the spring, Adam fell in the spring, and Christ was conceived, died and rose again in the spring. It is not necessary to regard the blessed Virgin as a 'spring goddess' or an 'earth-

mother'. The symbols of the grass, the flower, and the spray are essentially liturgical. The rising of the dew on the grass symbolizes the incarnation of the divine Word through a mortal mother, for all flesh is grass (Is. xl, 6). The rising of the dew on the flower symbolizes the incarnation of the divine Word in the perfection of mortality, for the Virgin is *flos florum*. The rising of the dew on the spray symbolizes the incarnation of the divine Word from Mary of the stem of Jesse: and there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse: and a flower shall rise up out of his root (Is. xi, 1). The accumulation of praise in the lyric, rising to a climax, suggests the repetition and accumulation of praise in the litanies.

By drawing attention to these few examples of the religious lyric in Middle English, I have tried to show that the poet's aim is to communicate, not to conceal; that the literary forms and conventions he uses are traditional, and that the symbols he employs depend for their effectiveness on their commonplace, homely nature, on the explanatory context, or on a framework of intellectual references which we may have since lost. It is for us to recover, as far as we can, this body of associations, and I suggest we may profitably start with the scriptures, canonical and apocryphal, the writings of the Fathers, and the liturgy.



JUSTICE IN THE TEACHING OF ST THOMAS

MATTHEW RIGNEY, O.P.

THE purpose of this article is to see with St Thomas some aspects of the moral movement of man towards his creator, those aspects namely that have to do with his fellow travellers on the way to God, man's positive contribution to human social living. And this human social life, being human, should be rational; yet, as St Francis of Sales observes in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, seldom do we meet rational animals who are reasonable! There is so much injustice in the world, in spite of reason's dictating to us that the good things of this world