Fables and Symbols—I.[1]

by Roger Sharrock

Whatever future judgments may be on our contemporary Western culture and education, we cannot be accused of denying a major, even a predominating role, to the life of the artistic imagination (though when one turns from stated aim to present practice, in primary schools and elsewhere, the position may be less satisfactory). In the last forty years philistinism has quietly died after a few rear-guard actions and many whimpers; the ultimate success of the opponents of censorship in the cases over *Lady Chatterley* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* was due in the first place to this triumphant anti-philistinism and only secondly to a climate of increasing moral permissiveness: the argument that carried the day with people of all shades of ethical opinion was that the artist could get away with it.

The high claims made for poetry and the imagination by the Romantics and their successors have led us into a position where poets and novelists have been studied in a manner formerly thought suitable for moral teachers. Arnold's plea for a poetry of the emotions which would provide a substitute for religion was a landmark along the way. Arnold declared that 'the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry'[2]: the increase in the authority granted to the insights of the artist has often advanced in a ratio with the declining authority of dogmatic belief. When art goes beyond representation, whether in stories, reflections on life, or visual imitations, it makes use of symbols; symbols are associated with the ritual of religion and are inseparable from the central acts of Christianity; in the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist form and meaning are unified in a manner analogous to the unity of the organic symbol as it has been analysed by Romantic and post-Romantic critics from Coleridge onwards: 'a symbol . . . is characterized by the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general. Above all by the translucence of the eternal in and through the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible, and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity, of which it is the representative.'[3] In a discussion of symbolism all roads lead back to Coleridge sooner or later, and I

[1] This article is based on a paper originally given as one of the Blackfriars-Pusey Lectures at Oxford in the Michaelmas term, 1968, and since considerably revised.

[2] 'On the Study of Poetry', in *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (1888).

[3] R. J. White ed., *Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey*, 'The Statesman's Manual', pp. 24-5.

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shall be returning to his important, if hardly transparent, definition.

It seems desirable to look afresh at the relation between literary symbolism and religious symbolism by beginning with an examination of the assumptions on the subject that have grown up during the twentieth century. For in the last forty years the relation has received an enormous amount of attention. The nature of this attention has ranged from the researches of biblical scholars and theologians to broad speculations on the general character of symbolic thought such as are met with in the work of Ernst Cassirer. Edwyn Bevan's *Symbolism and Belief* (1938) was concerned with the development of the chief images for the divine in the Old and New Testaments. In doing so his book touches suggestively on what may be termed the semantic history of some of the great images that are common to poetry and to various religious cults. Bevan traces the links, for example, between the primary concrete meaning of the words for 'wind' or 'breath' in both Hebrew and Greek and the derived meanings which come to be applied to the prophetic spirit, the Holy Ghost, the spirit that bloweth where it listeth. In a work contemporary with Bevan's book, C. S. Lewis studied the growth of medieval allegory from the embryonic tendency to personify moral abstractions in late Latin poetry.[1] If we look at the situation thirty years on, critical treatment of symbolism and the symbol has abounded, and though structuralism is now a more fashionable catch-phrase, Professor Northrop Frye is to be found expounding with great zest and learning the view that a complex structure of myth and symbol underlies all the great literary forms and is indeed their defining characteristic; comedy is the myth of spring, romance that of summer, tragedy of autumn, and winter is perhaps unexpectedly reserved for irony and satire.[2]

Before attempting to follow so many others, and trying to say what a symbol is or what religious and literary symbols may share, I start out from a consciousness of the large body of assumptions shared by these differing modern treatments. Literary critics and theologians with an interest in the creative process recognize a common borderland though they may disagree on how to mark out the actual boundaries. Also to be noticed is the recurrence of the same types of argument and example: the invocation of the archetypes of Jung in order to underpin a general theory of symbolism is one familiar feature of such discussions; a Jungian analysis of a number of English poems was first attempted by Maud Bodkin in her *Archetypal Patterns in English Poetry* (1934); the late Victor White, O.P., in his *God and the Unconscious* and other books used the Jungian archetypes to build a psychological basis for Christian belief.

[1]Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, pp. 151-205; C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, pp. 44-111.

[2]Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).

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Another recurring element in the literature of the subject is the appeal to anthropological evidence. Half a century ago Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* seized the imaginations of poets and critics alike. It is ironical for such a sturdy rationalist, who at the end of his work comments that from the lake of Nemi one can hear the bells of Rome, that the bells of Rome were heard only too clearly by some who drew very different conclusions: T. S. Eliot was not the only one to see Frazer's testimony to the recurrence of a primitive mythical pattern throughout widely differing cultures as evidence not for scepticism but for an intellectual reappraisal of traditional belief as satisfying deep unconscious needs. That unforgettable figure of the priest-king stalking the grove with drawn sword, waiting to be murdered by his successor, made its barbaric impact on an intelligentsia that was hungry for barbarism and anxious to immerse itself in the destructive element, much as the rhythms of Stravinsky's *Sacre* fell on the ears of a generation waiting to receive them. A few years after the publication of *The Golden Bough*, Jessie L. Weston explained the symbolism of the Grail cycle in French medieval romance in terms of fertility ritual (*From Ritual to Romance*, 1919). Virginia Woolf was introducing into her novels symbols which suggest the supremacy of the generically human working through unconscious inheritance over the individual personality—the intermittence of the lighthouse beam, or the subordination of the single person to unitary process in the image of the waves; T. S. Eliot made obeisance in the direction of Lévy-Bruhl's work on the pre-logical mentality of savage peoples; now, in our own time, the anthropologists are still being called as expert witnesses, Lévy-Bruhl has been succeeded by Lévy-Strauss on the primitive mind, and Shakespearian scholars have been demonstrating the symbolic pattern in *King Lear* which reveals Lear as a sacrificial priest-king.

The widespread acceptance of some connection between religion and the symbolism employed by the poet leads one to inquire whether it is really a necessary connection. In spite of genetic explanations, anthropological (the base of the primitive mind) or literary-historical (Coleridge), we do not, if we are Christians, have to posit any necessary link between our religious beliefs and the symbols or metaphors which we meet in poetry. To be sure, we meet some of the same images in poems as we do in the Bible and the liturgy. It may be illuminating to compare the wind of the Spirit which blows through the upper room in Acts with the restoring breeze that brings new life to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner:

> But soon there breathed a wind on me,
> Nor sound nor motion made:
> Its path was not upon the sea,
> In ripple or in shade.

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It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek
Like a meadow-gale of spring—
It mingled strangely with my fears,
Yet it felt like a welcoming.

Yet we should have to go outside our knowledge of poetry or of ordinary life for evidence that the creative power of the poet and what is alleged to be divine inspiration have a common source. For some of us it is easier, it is even necessary, to look for a figure in the carpet, and to be led on to recognize a general pattern of meaning behind the scatter of particular images; some of us are Platonists by nature. I suspect that the crux in the debate, or rather the crux about the absence of communication between Christians and secularists at present (except in forming the sort of political common front where, confronted with sin or causes of sin they are, in Calvin Coolidge's phrase, 'agin it') lies in the rejection by the secularist of the idea of any subjective need for the ordering of experience. I speak of course of those who make a genuine and total rejection, not of those who may be called 'secularist' by believers but who are falling back on religious substitutes like 'humanism'. In any case, I am at this point anxious to check my own Platonist inclinations. I do so because it seems as well to try to communicate to as many people as possible in the same language; it would be possible, but hardly useful, to awaken the stock responses of a cosy in-group by surveying the scholarship of symbolism from the inside without considering its questionable frontiers.

One has to be on one's guard against the immense unquestioned prestige of the literary symbol in the modern age. Mary McCarthy has an anecdote of an American student in a creative writing class in a liberal arts college: after writing a short story he took it to his instructor for him to put the symbols in. Prestige throws up camp followers and it is not fair to judge a movement by its camp followers. It would be to labour the irony to point out that by all the canons of the modern movement the symbol should be intrinsic, intimately related to the main theme,[1] and here it is treated as interesting appendage. Styles decline from their own impetus: baroque dramatic swirl degenerates into rococo twirls and flourishes. In bracing myself to resist the tendency to go with the stream, to be easily contemporary, and easily Platonist, I find that I am remembering Bishop Butler as well as Mary McCarthy: 'Things are as they are, why then should we be deceived?' Why should poets and men say one thing when they mean another? Or why should a truth that is vital employ intermediaries?

Plato's answer was of course that the poets deceived because they were able to deliver only the shadow of a shadow and could

[1]Cecil Day Lewis, *The Poetic Image* (Clark Lectures, 1947), perhaps because it is a not very original though attractive treatment, may be mentioned as a typical statement of the contemporary tendency to give central importance to the symbolic image.

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not therefore avoid missing the truth. When the Platonic argument was revived by the English Puritan opponents of the new theatres, Sidney was able to turn it against itself in defence of poetry by stating that the poet 'nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth . . . I think none so simple would say that Aesop lied in the tales of his beasts; for who thinks that Aesop wrote it for actually true were well worthy to have his name chronicled among the beasts he writeth of'.

In Sidney's view the poet is tested, exonerated and approved on the strength of his ability to produce fictions: fiction seems to be a more comprehensive term than symbol; it can include an invention or a tale, what might nowadays be termed an imaginative structure, and can comprehend schemes other than the plots of what is called fiction in a narrower sense. In spite of his attack on poetry in *The Republic* as the imitation of an imitation, Plato elsewhere employed the μυθος or myth as a means for communicating philosophical insights. Fable, a word from the Latin word for μυθος, might serve even better than fiction to describe such an invented tale or structure which imparts to a body of thought or action a recognizable shape.

The notion of a 'shaping spirit' (Coleridge's phrase) behind the poet's invention of fables or fictions is found in the speech of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Theseus equates lunatics, lovers and poets, but then goes on to give a more sympathetic exposition of the imagination and its 'shaping fantasies, that apprehend, more than cool reason ever comprehends':

> And, as imagination bodies forth
> The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.

The stress is on the shaping and forming of material. But the passage also refers to the meaning of the fable, what it bodies forth; and this is startlingly described as the forms of things unknown, an airy nothing. We are led by Shakespeare, as we are not led by Sidney's formulations, to modern discussion of the nature of the poetic symbol. The value of Sidney's argument is limited by his need to win debating points against his Puritan antagonist. Working through the invention and imagination, poetry is persuasive in a way that neither ethics nor history can be:

> He beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margin with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness; but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion . . . and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner.[1]

But Shakespeare makes Theseus say that the imagination is not merely a cheer-leader to engage our emotions in life's contests, but

[1]Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford, 1966), p. 40.

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that it is a sign for something which could not otherwise be conveyed —that in modern critical jargon, the vehicle carries a tenor—yet what it conveys is the unknown, or even nothing, an airy space as empty as that into which Prospero's actors disappear in the fourth act of *The Tempest*:

> These our actors
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air.

This paradoxical view of our imaginative experience being grounded on precisely nothing is, from one point of view, a way of saying what Plato says in a different accent: the artist's chairs and apples are not the chairs and apples of the phenomenal world, and there is a sense in which we do not have to care about the deaths of Othello and Desdemona. However, Shakespeare's lines seem to probe much more deeply into the nature of the imagination than this; they suggest a view of imaginative activity very different from the traditional one, still found in Hume, according to which it is the faculty of producing mental pictures of past perceptions.[1] The difficulty with this view is that it offers no means of distinguishing images and perceptions; in confusing them, or rather in treating the image as mere copy, it ignores the crucial importance of the intention of the imaginer. Even the image that 'summons up the past' in all its vividness, as in the recollections of Proust or the childhood scenes of Wordsworth, is defined precisely by its vividness, by that vividness of nostalgia and recall willed by its creator. As Sartre says, 'An image has no persuasive power, but we persuade ourselves by the very act in which we form an image'.[2] Shakespeare recognizes the intentional power of the imaginer, and in saying that he builds out of nothing he gives him his freedom. In imagining, the mind acts in a sphere which is liberated from causal determination. The schizophrenic claims reality for his obsessions; Troilus believes Cressida will be true to him. That is why the lunatic and the lover join the poet. 'Imagination is the mind itself so far as it is free.'[3] And to will an image like this to be real is at the same time to reject an aspect of reality, to pick and choose. The poet builds out of non-being, and so justifies both the strictures of Plato and the praise of those like Sidney who recognize his myth-making power.

By making us aware of the intentional power of the fable, Shakespeare, in the line of Plato and Sidney, directs our attention to the creative freedom of the poet. This way of looking at the creation of symbols can remove our original doubts about the substitution of one thing for another. When the symbol is not a redundant

[1]Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, I.i.I.

[2]Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris, 1940), p. 127. I am indebted in this paragraph both to what Sartre says on the role of intentionality and to the comments on *L'Imaginaire* by Anthony Manser in his *Sartre: a Philosophic Study* (1966), pp. 20-38.

[3]*L'Imaginaire*, p. 236.

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intermediary, but a new thing created from nothing, our scepticism may be removed. But, on the whole, critical attention in the twentieth century, in the wake of the symbolist and post-symbolist movements, has been directed to the explication of symbols. This, however sensitively performed, tends to imply a reconstruction or translation of poetry into terms expressive of a relation to the ordinary world, and not as in Theseus' speech a view of it which tries to remain faithful to its relation to non-being. Imaginative writers who use symbols may indeed be using them to get beyond the limitations of ordinary language and therefore to suggest possibilities outside the range of ordinary experience. But a critical attitude to poetry that gives a predominant role to the symbol seems bound to be weighted towards explication; and if the symbols are not easily explicable, or if the critic has in any case a pre-disposition to dwell on the mythic, non-referential power of poetry, he will tend to refer the symbol, not to its claim for human freedom in a determinist void, but to worlds of value outside poetry—for the symbolic reference must be found somewhere—and he will probably look to morality or religion. Thus paradoxically: the great movement in the arts from the epoch of the French symbolists to the beginning of the second quarter of the twentieth century was characterized by the development and refinement of the integral symbol, or in present terms, the intentional image, from Baudelaire's albatross to Joyce's epiphanies; yet in its reception by readers and critics this movement has often produced an undue bias towards meaning and content. Poetry becomes applied psychology, applied sociology or applied religion. Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, a convenient example of late symbolism coming at the end of the period, is usually interpreted by film critics in this way; the snowstorm and the rosebud are hurried over rather than absorbed, and the critic moves from the image which speaks as art, not as device, to psychoanalysis and the character of William Randolph Hearst—subjects which give most people more to talk about.

Another example of distortion of the symbol into non-poetic terms which return it to the phenomenal world from which it has escaped, may be found in some contemporary treatments of Shakespeare's last plays. A pattern of purgation and regeneration has been detected by some scholars in the rediscovery of lost daughters, the reconciliations and forgiveness of wrongs done, that are common in varying ways to *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Yet the vision Shakespeare presents in these plays is not a religious vision, though it may dispose us to think of the religious implications if we are Christians. What we have are imagined settings and characters depicted with extraordinary clearness. The sea and the storm are primary and not standing for another thing; what they are of course may be rich and strange enough. The differences between the mature Hermione and the girl Miranda

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are more important than what they have in common; so is the difference between the two girls Miranda and Perdita, because of the special innocence imposed on the former by her isolation in the island: Miranda would not be able to offer flowers to the visitors to the island with the lightly bantering charm Perdita shows to Polixenes and Florizel. Nor would Perdita ever be able to say anything comparable to 'O brave new world that hath such creatures in it', since her innocence is of a different kind. To reduce these individual characters to a common formula of regeneration through innocent youth is to impose a stereotyped pattern of values from outside the plays Shakespeare has created.

It can be seen, then, that though the symbolic, fable-making imagination is the necessary mode in which the poetic mind functions, modern interpretation of the symbol often seems to be driving us in a different direction. The interpreters present a view of the poet as himself somehow interpreting human life and social development. But to make a fable is primarily interesting as an ideally pure assertion of human freedom; it might be thought that this is more honourable than providing a kind of algebraic substitute for theology or philosophy.

[*To be completed next month*]

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