

**Mieczysław Wallis**  
**REMARKS ON SYMBOLS**

Originally published as "Uwagi o symbolach," *Studia Semiotyczne* 7 (1977), 91–99. Translated by Magdalena Tomaszewska.

---

The term "symbol" is one of the most ambiguous terms in philosophy, aesthetics, and the theory of art. Some use it interchangeably with the term "sign." Others use the term "symbol" in the sense in which I use the term "conventional sign." As regards my opinion, by 'symbol' I understand a sensually perceptible object, present in nature or produced by man, which evokes in a recipient a thought about another object different than itself — an object sensually perceptible, partially perceptible or sensually imperceptible — physical or mental, real or imaginary, concrete or abstract, empirical or transcendental — neither on the basis of similarity in appearance as in the case of an iconic sign, nor on the basis of a custom or convention as in the case of a conventional sign, but on the basis of some other often vague link between it and the object symbolized. For example, the lion evokes a thought about strength and courage, the flame — a thought about revolution, struggle of light and darkness at sunset — a thought about struggle between Good and Evil. There is no similarity in appearance between strength, courage and the lion. However, the link between them is not only a matter of a custom or convention: it is not possible to replace the lion as a symbol of strength and courage with e.g. the fly. Similarly, there is no similarity in appearance between revolution and the flame. However, the relationship between them is not purely conventional: it is not possible to replace the flame as a symbol of revolution with e.g. still water.

Let's elaborate on the link between a symbolizing object and the symbolized object. It seems that there are a few different cases.

Sometimes the link consists in a certain, perhaps distant analogy. The struggle of light and darkness is a symbol of the struggle between Good and

Evil because there is a certain analogy between what is light and bright and what is good, and also between what is dark and gloomy and what is evil. There is a distant analogy between expansionism, impetuosity and the destructive and purifying force of the flame, and expansionism, impetuosity and the destructive and purifying power of the revolution, and this analogy causes the flame to be understood as a symbol of revolution. The snake biting its own tail is a common symbol of eternity: the analogy consists here in the lack of beginning and end.

Sometimes the mentioned link is based on metonymy: a symbolizing object is a part of the symbolized object. The cogwheel is a part of the world of technology and is often used as a symbol of this world. Sometimes a symbolizing object is not so much a part of the symbolized object as its abbreviation, a condensed equivalent. This is how Sigismund's Column, Warsaw's element with a strong emotional tinge, is sometimes used as a symbol of Warsaw.

Sometimes the link between a symbolizing object and the symbolized object is based on metaphor. In the film *The General Line* by Eisenstein, a rusty typewriter symbolizes fossilized bureaucracy.

Finally, sometimes an object that has a certain property to a significant degree becomes a symbol for this property. The dog is a symbol of faithfulness in medieval art, because the dog has this property to a significant degree.

Usually symbolized objects are by no means more significant than symbolizing objects. Christ is more significant than his symbols — the lamb, the eagle, the lion; the revolution is more significant than the flame; the world of technology is more significant than the cogwheel, Warsaw is more significant than Sigismund's Column. It can be claimed that symbolizing objects derive their significance, their emotional value from the objects they symbolize.

How do symbols originate? No object is a symbol by itself. In order for an object to become a symbol, somebody needs to feel it as a symbol, to think of it as a symbol. Let's call this intellectual activity, by means of which somebody constitutes a certain object as a symbol, a "symbol-creating act." This act may remain an internal property of the symbol creator. Thus, for example, a sawn fragment of a railway track used as a paperweight can be a symbol of the world of technology for the owner and only for the owner of the paperweight. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, prince Andrew, when going to the Rostovs' estate in early spring, notices a bare leafless oak. On the return way he barely recognizes the oak: it is covered with luxuriant leaves. Prince Andrew feels this change as a symbol of change that took place in

him, a symbol of internal revival that occurred in him during the stay at the Rostovs'. Let's call symbols of this type, which are only an internal property of an individual, "monosubjective."

Mostly, however, somebody who creates a symbol somehow communicates it to others. A poet or a painter introduces in their work e.g. a certain object as a symbol. An individual monosubjective symbol becomes then an individual "intersubjective" symbol. The albatross, a powerful bird when in its element but unable to walk on the ground, as a symbol of a poet in Baudelaire's poem; a split pine tree as a symbol of the internally split hero in the last chapter of Żeromski's *Homeless people*; a man without a heart as a symbol of the destroyed city in Zadkine's statue in Rotterdam: these are examples of intersubjective symbols that are individual creations of a particular artist.

The mentioned individual intersubjective symbols known to its audience remained the property of their creators, and were not incorporated as a means of communication used by a certain social group. However, sometimes individual intersubjective symbols can be adopted as a means of communication by a certain social group — a religious community, a political organization, a nation, a state. They become collective symbols, a part of tradition, the cultural heritage of a particular social group. Thus, for example, the hammer and sickle was a commonly adopted symbol of the alliance of the working class and the peasants in the Soviet Union.

Collective symbols are usually established through a custom or convention. In this respect they are close to conventional signs.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, one principal difference between symbols and conventional signs. A conventional sign is, in principle, arbitrary and can be replaced with any other sign. A symbol cannot be replaced with any other object.

Collective symbols are usually anonymous, that is their creator are unknown. For example, it is not known who was the first to use the Chinese figure "yin-yang" as a symbol of the universe. Only in exceptional cases it is possible to attribute a particular collective symbol to the author and the date of creation. Ilia Erenburg made a certain natural phenomenon a sign of a political transformation in his novel *The Thaw* (*Ottiepiel*, 1956).

---

<sup>1</sup>In the course of history symbols acquire new senses. The cross, initially an iconic sign of the instrument of Christ's death, then a conventional sign of Christianity, is also (through generalization) a symbol of faith, one of three theological virtues. Also, the cross — as a crossing of a vertical and horizontal line — is associated with different moral and cosmic symbolism, the same as the lotus in India and the bamboo in Japan. They become so to speak condensed equivalents of whole complexes of concepts and values, which, obviously, improves their usefulness in rites and pieces of art.

The symbol was widely adopted, especially in journalism. In this case it is possible to pinpoint the moment when a particular individual symbol whose authorship and the time of creation can be established became an anonymous collective symbol.

Symbols, as I understand them, are not signs. A sign is an object created physically or at least used in a particular situation by a certain living being. A symbol can be a certain natural phenomenon which is not created by a certain living being.

Signs have a three-fold function. They evoke in a recipient a thought about an object other than itself, they direct the thought of a recipient to the object other than itself, they are "transparent" (evocative function); they represent this object (representative function; an exception to this are dependent conventional signs which are used to create new independent conventional signs from old independent conventional signs); and express its author's or user's thought (expressive function). Symbols have the evocative and representative function, while the expressive function only in a certain special sense — that is, they express the thought of the one who was the first to make a particular object a symbol, the one who constituted it as a symbol through a symbol-creating act. The lion as symbol of strength and courage expresses the thoughts of an unknown individual who in a distant past made this animal a symbol of strength and courage.

A symbol can be represented by an iconic or a conventional sign. Such an iconic sign representing a symbol is called 'symbolic sign'. A symbolic sign is, for example, a dog engraved in a medieval tombstone sculpture of the wife. The sculpture of the dog is an iconic sign; the dog symbolizes faithfulness. Thus, it is a two-level representation.

Great religions, especially Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, developed rich and complicated systems of symbols. The literature and art — sculpture, painting, architecture, dance, theater, poetry — of the mentioned religions drew heavily on the repository of these symbols and used them as a powerful means of emotional action.

A rich system of symbols was created by medieval Christianity. It was related to the characteristic of the epoch symbolic interpretation of the reality given in experience. Almost all objects, not only animals, plants, precious stones and fantastic creatures, but also the four cardinal points, numbers, geometrical figures, colors, sounds and smells had a symbolic meaning. Medieval thinkers and artists understood and felt the surrounding reality symbolically, they saw symbols everywhere around them. It was believed that God created animals, plants and precious stones not only for the convenience

of humans, but also to make them symbols of particular persons or objects, the expressions of a unique language in which he spoke to humans. Hugh of Saint Victor (12<sup>th</sup> century) writes: "All visible things have their *symbolical* sense, that is, they are given *figuratively* to denote and explain invisible things [...]. They are *signs* of invisible things and *images* of those things which dwell in the perfect and incomprehensible nature of the Deity in a manner passing all understanding" (Tatarkiewicz 1970: 200). For Thomas Aquinas objects of perception are spiritual things taught in Scripture "by means of metaphors drawn from bodily things" ("spiritualia sub metaphoris corporalium") (Thomas Aquinas 2006: 16 [Question 1, Article 9]). Alain de Lille (Alanus ab Insulis, died c. 1203) presented the theory of symbolism in the poem whose first verse reads:

Omnis mundi creatura  
quasi liber et pictura  
nobis est, et speculum;  
nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,  
nostri status, nostrae sortis  
fidele signaculum.  
(“Every creature of the world  
is like a book and a picture  
to us, and a mirror.  
A faithful representation  
of our life, our death,  
our condition, our end.”  
(Evans 1983: 151))

Another, incomparably better, non-sensuous and super-sensuous world was accessible beyond, and so to speak through, the visible, audible, touchable, sensuously perceptible world. Even the most inconspicuous objects and the most common activities could direct thought to what was holy and divine. Any worldly love was to some extent a symbol of heavenly love. Bonaventura saw making the handicrafts as a symbol of a creative act of God.<sup>2</sup>

Symbols of medieval liturgy and art were established symbols. Their meaning was not only established by custom, but very often codified in

---

<sup>2</sup>“Bonaventura identified the handicrafts symbolically with the eternal generation and incarnation of the World” (Huizinga 1955: 208).

special treatises such as *Speculum Ecclesiae* by Honorius of Autun (12<sup>th</sup> century), *Mitræ* by Sicard of Cremona (beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> century), or *Rationale divinorum officiorum* by Wilhelm Durand (c. 1286), in numerous "bestiaries," "herbaries," "lapidaries."

An interpretation of these symbols in each particular case would be very easy if the set of symbolizing objects and the set of symbolized objects corresponded to each other unambiguously, if an object was always represented by one symbol, and if a symbol always represented one object. However, it was not so. One person could be represented by many different objects. Especially numerous were symbols of Christ, Mary and Satan. The symbols of Christ were: a lamb, the eagle, the ostrich, the deer, the dove, the lion, the peacock, the pelican, the bull, the unicorn, the phoenix, a bunch of grapes, gold, the diamond, the pearl, the rising sun. The symbols of Mary (who herself was sometimes a symbol of the Church) were: the fiery bush, the Lebanon cedar, the lily, the olive, the rose, the peony, the diamond, the pearl. Also, the following symbols, which appeared in the late Middle Ages and are present in the Litany of Loreto, can be added: the above mentioned rose (*plantatio rosae*) and cedar (*cedrus exaltata*), but also the sun (*electa ut sol*), the moon (*pulchra ut luna*), the star (*stella maris*), the gate of heaven (*porta coeli*) and the mirror without blemish (*speculum sine macula*).

The symbols of Satan were: the viper, the snake, the whale, the male goat, the bat, the dog, the frog, the toad, the crocodile, the hedgehog, the leopard, the bear, the fox, the wild boar, the monkey, the dragon, the basilisk, the sphinx, the centaur, the satyr, the siren (Réau 1955 : 79-100, 107-124; Molsdorf 1926: 75).

One object could symbolize different objects depending on context. And thus, for example, the pearl could symbolize the Word of God, the Heavenly Kingdom, Christ, the Host, Divine Mother, the soul (Delbrueck 1952: 142, 143-145;<sup>3</sup> Réau 1955: 137). The peacock could symbolize pride, vanity, immortality. By the early Middle Ages, it had been realized that one object could symbolize many different objects. John Scotus Erigena says that "the sense of divine utterances is manifold and infinite, (...) even as in one and the same feather of the peacock we behold a marvelous and beautiful variety of colors" (Gilbert, Kuhn 1939: 150).

One object could also symbolize different objects depending on interpretation. The Middle Ages developed a special theory of quadruple interpretation, that is literal, allegorical, tropological (moral) and anagogical (mystical).

---

<sup>3</sup>Delbrueck's article is based here, among others, on writings of the Eastern Fathers of the Church.

The origins of this theory can be found in Philo of Alexandria (1<sup>st</sup> century BC) and Clement of Alexandria (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC). Initially, it was used for exegesis of the Holy Scripture, but later was also applied to poetry and the fine arts (Nicholas of Lyra, 14<sup>th</sup> century). And thus, for example, a painting or a relief of a winged lion was an image of a winged lion in literal interpretation, an emblem of saint Mark in allegorical interpretation, a symbol of strength in a moral interpretation, and a symbol of Christ crucified in a mystic interpretation (Réau 1955: 62). One and the same object symbolized different objects here depending on the interpretation, and these different senses were not mutually exclusive.

Sometimes one object could symbolize not only different but even contrary objects with different values. What we can discuss here is not only the polysemy but the ambivalence of symbols. Thus, the lion could symbolize both Christ and Antichrist, both God and Satan. The snake usually symbolized the devil, but sometimes could also symbolize Christ. The peony could symbolize both Divine Mother and "vile delight" (*caduca voluptas*). The green color could be both the color of hope and the color of Satan. Only the context provided interpretative clues for a particular symbol in each case.

This ambivalence of certain symbols was realized by medieval thinkers. In the treatise *De bestiis* Hugh of Saint Victor claims that animal symbols can be interpreted both positively and negatively. The lion can symbolize both Christ (in the Book of Revelation 5, 5: "Ecce vicit leo de tribu Juda") or Satan (in the First Epistle of Peter 1, 8: "Diabolus tamquam leo rugiens circuit, quaerens quem devoret").<sup>4</sup>

In paintings and sculptures of the early and mature Middle Ages iconic signs, which represented symbols, usually formed a special class and were treated schematically thanks to which they were easily recognized as such. In the art of the late Middle Ages, especially in early Netherlandish paintings of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which was hungry for reality, this explicit symbolism was replaced by a symbolism which Erwin Panofsky called "concealed or disguised symbolism" (Panofsky 1953). Iconic signs which represented symbols, were treated extremely realistically, equally to images of all other objects. Very often scenes of Annunciation extremely realistically depicted a bowl and a towel: symbols of the moral chastity of Mary. In Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* the single candle burning in the chandelier symbolizes Christ. The contrast of Roman and Gothic buildings in religious paintings symbolized

---

<sup>4</sup>Cf. the following claim: "Leo propter aliquam similitudinem significat Christum et diabolum" (Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Quodlibetales* VII, Article XIV, ad 4; quoted after Gombrich 1963).

the antithesis of Judaism and Christianity. All these symbolic meanings were, however, concealed for the uninitiated.

The concealed symbolism originated in the Trecento, culminated in the Netherlandish painting of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the paintings of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, and disappeared from sacred art after the Council of Trent. However, a rich concealed symbolism was present in Flemish and Dutch still life of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the centuries to come this symbolism started to decay. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the above mentioned still life was interpreted only realistically — as masterpieces depicting fragments of reality — bunches of flowers surrounded by butterflies, cups of golden liqueurs, plates with oysters, sliced pieces of lemon. It was only in the 1930s when the symbolic meaning of objects depicted in this still life was rediscovered. A bunch of flowers symbolized the passing of things. The bird or the butterfly — the soul. The apple was a symbol of the original sin, the bread — of Christ's body, wine — of Christ's blood that shed on the cross, the glass or the decanter — of the source of life. The caterpillar symbolized the worldly life of man, the chrysalis — death, the hatching of a butterfly — resurrection. The laurel symbolized fame, the evergreen ivy — immortality. The initiated in this symbolism learned the Christian teaching about the original sin, redemption and resurrection in the paintings which are only masterpieces depicting flowers, food and vessels for today's uninitiated audience.

The symbolic meaning of many iconic signs fades with time, and even falls into oblivion. The iconic sign which represents a certain symbol survives only as an iconic sign or becomes an ornament. The erudition and perspicacity of Emil Mâle, Erwin Panofsky and their followers to retrieve from oblivion many symbols of medieval Christian art. The rich Flemish and Dutch symbolism of still life of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as mentioned above, started to decay in the centuries which followed. It was rediscovered only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> Only few realize today that the so called star of David — a sign used to disgrace Jews during the Hitler occupation, and now the state emblem of Israel — was at first a symbol of the universe, or the holy marriage of Heaven and Earth, to be more precise. The triangle whose apex was at the top symbolized

---

<sup>5</sup>"Since about 1935 countless works of art of the Flemish and Dutch 'realistic' schools have been interpreted in a new way, and the deep symbolic content underlying them has been brought to light. Writings of Panofsky, Millard Meiss, Charles de Tolnay, Meyer Schapiro, Wolfgang Stechow, Julius S. Held, J. G. van Gelder, H. van de Waal, and Hans Kaufmann have created a new concept of early Flemish and Dutch art" (Białostocki 1963: 778).

Heaven, while the triangle whose apex was at the bottom symbolized Earth. Also, when looking at a silhouette of a tree in a Kurpie cut-out, we do not usually realize that the silhouette originally represented the tree of life (*arbor vitae*), one of the symbols of the universe. The palmette (a small palm tree), was also a symbol of the tree of life at first but became only an ornament on numerous Renaissance and Classicist buildings.

Contrary to symbols whose meaning were established by custom or convention, there are vague symbols which have a whole gamut of meanings and enable various interpretations, symbols aimed at evoking a certain mood. Such symbols can be found especially in the symbolic poetry and fine art at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Examples of such vague symbols are: the drunken boat in the poem by Arthur Rimbaud, the shot duck in Henrik Ibsen's drama *The Wild Duck*, the golden horn in Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Wedding*, fantasy characters in Arnold Böcklin's or Jacek Malczewski's paintings, the golden dragonfly in Józef Mehoffer's *Strange garden*. Sometimes such symbols are even more vague, less noticeable. Examples of such vague symbols in the mentioned symbolic poetry are: the twilight, the dusk, the fog, the road, the journey.<sup>6</sup>

The need to create and use symbols is deeply rooted in human mind psyche. Unusually many things, processes, matters, both in nature and in the human world are felt symbolically. We sometimes feel that the contrasts: high — small, big — small, wide — tight, closed — open, light — dark, etc. are symbolic. We feel rising and falling in space as a symbol of moral rising or falling, or climbing or falling down the social ladder. The dying of nature in autumn is felt as a symbol of passing away, the waking of nature in spring — as a symbol of revival and resurrection.

Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China, antiquity, Christianity developed a multitude of symbols which, by savoring magical practices, religious rites, ceremonials, dance, theater, the fine arts, poetry, immensely enriched all these areas.

To conclude, I attempted to differentiate between signs and symbols — two significant areas of human creation which direct the thought of a recipient to objects different than themselves. If there were to be one term to encompass "sign" and "symbol," I would propose the word "sem." Semiotics, then, would be a study of sems, that is signs and symbols, it would deal with

---

<sup>6</sup>My distinction of established and vague symbols more or less corresponds to Stanisław Ossowski's distinction of signs, semantic equivalents and symbols that suggest certain moods (or, in other words, of symbols of clear interpretation and symbols aimed at vague interpretation) (Ossowski 1966: 178-180).

the "sem-sphere," which would divide into the sphere of signs — "sign-sphere" — and the sphere of symbols — "symbol-sphere."<sup>7</sup>

### Bibliography

1. Białostocki, Jan (1963) "Iconography and Iconology." In *Encyclopedia of World Art*, vol. VII, 769—781. New York — Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
2. Delbrueck, Richard (1952) "Notes on the Wooden Doors of Santa Sabina." *The Art Bulletin* 32[2]: 139—145.
3. Evans, Gillian Rosemary (1983) *Alan of Lille. The Frontiers of Theology in the Later Twelfth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Gilbert, Kathrine Everett and Helmut Kuhn (1939) *A History of Esthetics*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
5. Gombrich, Ernst Hans (1963) *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*. London: Phaidon.
6. Huizinga, Johan (1955) *The Waning of the Middle Ages. A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
7. Molsdorf, Wilhelm (1926) *Christliche Symbolik der mittelalterlichen Kunst*. Leipzig: Hiersemann.
8. Ossowski, Stanisław (1966) "U podstaw estetyki." In *Dzieła: U podstaw estetyki*, vol. I, 177—184. Warszawa: PWN.
9. Panofsky, Erwin (1953) *Early Netherlandish Painting*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
10. Réau, Louis (1955) *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, vol. I. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

---

<sup>7</sup>The present article is a slightly improved version of the paper entitled *Remarks on symbols* which was delivered during the sitting of the Polish Semiotic Society, on 21 March 1975, in Warsaw.

11. Thomas Aquinas (2006) *Summa Theologiae. Questions in God*, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy*. Brian Davies, Brian Leftow (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
12. Tatarkiewicz, Władysław (1970) *History of Aesthetics*. Vol. II. *Medieval Aesthetics*. Cyril Barret (ed.), R. M. Montgomery (trans.). The Hague — Paris: Mouton.

