

Izydora Dąmbska SYMBOL

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The word "symbol" (Gr. *σύμβολον*, Lat. *symbolum*) has many senses. Originally, symbol was understood as an identification sign, especially one created from two pieces of one object (e.g. a ring) divided with this purpose in view. Later, it could refer to any type of signitive objects — Goclenius writes: "Symbola accipiuntur pro indiciis significantibus animo aliquid, ut loquuntur, intimantibus."¹ The term "symbol" also covered certain legal acts, agreements and ritual professions of faith. This sense has survived till today in such Polish names as "symbol apostolski" (*the Apostoles' Creed*; Lat. *Symbolum Apostolorum*), "symbol nicejski" (*the Nicene Creed*; Lat. *Symbolum Nicaenum*), "symbol trydencki" (*the Trent Creed*; Lat. *Symbolum Tridentinum*).² Also, contemporary semiotics offers various conceptions of symbol. There are logical and mathematical symbols in science, quality symbols in technology and industry, religious symbols, symbols in poetry and art, symbols and symbolism in night dreams. A number one is the symbol of truth in Boolean algebra, and the symbol of an object's high quality in technology. However, it is also said that the Cross of Lorraine became the symbol of the Resistance in France, while a skeleton has been a symbol of death for ages. There are symbols that are emotionally neutral (introduced

¹*Lexicon Philosophicum Graecum*, Marchioburgi 1615: 215.

²The relationship between this sense of the term "symbol" and the sense we shall discuss further in the considerations to follow, was observed by C. G. Jung who wrote: "Ein solches Breviarium fidei führt von der Psychologie her betrachtet mit Recht den Namen 'Symbolum', denn es ist ein symbolischer Ausdruck ein anthropomorphes Bild gesetzt für einen nicht rational [...] zu deutenden transzendenten Tatbestand [...]" (1949: 364)

in order to improve certain cognitive operations, for better communication of information, simpler reasoning, etc.) but also such that are used, while designating objects, to communicate certain values and evoke axiological experiences. What they all have in common is that they were designed or agreed to have a specific semantic function, that is to indicate or refer, in a more or less specific manner, to other objects. Such a broad understanding of symbol, in which it is difficult to differentiate symbols from other signs, is used by E. Cassirer. He names symbol "a clue to the nature of men," since "in language, in religion, in art, in science, man can do no more than to build up his own universe — a symbolic universe that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience" (Cassirer, 1963: 23, 221).

Cassirer does not define the sense of the term "symbol", however, on the basis of his argumentation it is visible that he tends to call "symbol" any signitive way of referring to reality by the subject (Cassirer, 1922).

Also Ch. W. Morris understands symbol in a broad sense in *Signs, language and behavior* (1946), but attempts to elaborate on the notion on the grounds of his general pragmatic — behavioral theory of signs. It is worth noticing here that he himself changes the scope of the term "symbol" that he established in an earlier work from 1938, i.e. *Foundations of the theory of signs*. (The two works are quoted here as *Writings* from the volume *Writings on the general theory of signs*). In the earlier work, Morris, while differentiating indexical signs and characterizing signs on the grounds of semantics, included symbols NEXT TO iconic signs in the latter group. Thus, he regarded them as signs denoting the referent on the basis of semantic convention and not, as in the case of iconic signs, on the basis of properties that an object needs to have to be denoted by such signs. Therefore, discussing symbols, Morris meant certain conventional linguistic signs.³ Whereas in his work from 1946, he divides all signs into signals and symbols and broadens the sense of this notion by regarding as symbols all linguistic and non-linguistic (i.e. pre- and post-linguistic) denotative signs

³Cf. Morris 1938: 37. This work by Morris is, to some extent, a continuation of semiotic research of Ch. S. Peirce who also juxtaposes iconic and conventional signs, and characterizes symbol as "a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object" (Peirce 1960, §249, 1960: 143). And adds: "A Symbol is a Representamen, whose Representative character consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretant. All words, sentences, books, and other conventional signs are symbols" (1960: 165). Cf. also "To Lady Welby on signs and the categories" (Peirce 1958: 228).

that are not signals.⁴

However, there is today a tendency in semiotics, based on ordinary semantic intuitions, to narrow the scope of the term "symbol," and to juxtapose it with other types of signitive entities. This is also the line of considerations in the present article which is aimed at elaborating on two separate, but important from the point of view of contemporary semiotics, senses of the term "symbol," and which focuses especially on the second one. In order to characterize these senses it is necessary to ascertain data concerning the notion of sign. The term "sign" is used either in a narrow or broad sense. A sign in a broad sense is any object perceived by somebody which can stand for each person something different than itself but which semantically indicates or denotes this something. What is a sign, thus understood, can be a certain state of affairs or a process signaling certain information (e.g. an index), as well as certain objects indicating other objects. Signs in this broad sense, let's call them $Z(I)$, divide into denotative signs and informative signs. Denotative signs (that is certain gestures, voices, iconic signs, symbols) considered in separation are more or less indeterminate, and have a denotative function only in a certain structure (i.e. a situational or verbal context). Such structures (that is indices, signals, maps, sentences, etc.) can be called informative signs. However, in a narrow sense, the term "sign", $Z(II)$, refers only to what creates the class of denotative signs in a broad understanding of $Z(I)$, that is to certain objects whose sense can stand for other objects. Below I shall use the narrow understanding of the term "sign" to introduce a preliminary distinction between a simple and a complex denotation of a sign. Sign Z in semantic structure Σ has a simple denotation when it denotes an object (or objects) that is not a signitive element in this structure. The semantic structure is an ordered set which is comprised of: sign Z in a particular sense, object or objects O , relation of indication $\rightarrow : \Sigma = F(Z, O, \rightarrow)$. Thus, in the case of a simple denotation, Z indicates O , but O does not indicate anything different than itself. In this understanding, even when O belongs to objects of sign nature, it does not indicate anything different than itself in the semantic structure with a simple denotation. (It does not, of course, exclude the polysemy of sign Z which in another sense can have a different simple or complex denotation). On the other hand, a complex denotation is characteristic of sign Z used

⁴This behavioral definition of sign reads: "Where an organism provides itself with a sign which is a substitute for the control of its behavior for another sign signifying what the sign for which it is a substitute signifies then this sign is a SYMBOL [...]. When this is not the case, then the sign is a SIGNAL (Morris 1938: 100).

in semantic structure Σ when sign Z in a particular sense denotes object P which is different than Z but which has a signitive function and indicates another (different than itself) object or objects P' , which are then indirectly denoted by S . The restriction that object P is not identical with S excludes linguistic words used in material supposition as signs of themselves from the scope of signs with a complex denotation, and thus excludes e.g. the case when the word *dog* denotes the name *dog* which in turn denotes the animal.

In a certain conception of symbol, a symbol can be the first element of a complex denotation of sign Z , that is, it can be the object which being denoted in formal supposition by Z itself has the semantic function of indicating another object, which is then INDIRECTLY denoted by Z . It has been stated that a symbol CAN BE, and not that it IS, denoted by Z , in order not to exclude situations when an object, which is in principle asemantic, receives the function of indicating another object, for example when somebody looking at a winter landscape "sees" it as a symbol of death. However, from the point of view of intersubjective semiotic research, what is of interest here are symbols expressed by means of verbal or iconic signs with a complex denotation.

Before we focus on discussing the notion of symbol in which a symbol can be a signitive element of a complex denotation of a sign, first we need to discuss the understanding of "symbol" as a certain type of sign with a simple denotation. This understanding is characteristic of such conceptions of sign in which "symbol" stands for certain simple conventional signs used in science and technology. In such a use, symbols are simple expressions in formal language of certain sciences (e.g. logics or mathematics), and conventional signs that denote norms or qualities of products of technology. A set of this type of signs, called symbolics, and rules for operating signs, constitute the grammar of a particular symbolic language, the "ars characteristica seu symbolica" as Leibniz (1903: 521) called it when he planned, inspired by the language of algebra, to create a universal precise symbolic language for science. This idea of Leibniz is partly carried out today by different systems of mathematical logics, whose formal language, which consists of stable symbols (functors and quantifiers) and variable (sentence and name) symbols and rules for operating them, finds wide application in various semantic models.

However, there is yet another understanding of symbol, which is closer to both common intuitions and intuitions of the representatives of humanities, which, as highlighted earlier, can be characterized by means of the conception of a complex denotation discussed above.

This conception will serve to analyze the question about the conditions that object O denoted in semantic structure Σ by sign Z needs to meet in order to itself indicate, as SYMBOL S , another object different than itself called a symbolized object $O(s)$. For a characteristic feature of object O in this case is something that can be called its duality: it can be asemantic or semantic (when it is a symbol).

What decides if O is semantic as a symbol? In order to answer this question, we need to analyze a few examples from different areas of culture which deal with objects (usually called symbols) that are able to have a signitive function of indicating another object in systems with a complex denotation, not assessing whether every such object will be included in the set of symbols after the notion has been defined. In Pythagorean philosophy, the tetractys, that is an ordered set of the four first natural numbers (1, 2, 3, 4) is a symbol of perfection, and the number 10, that is the sum of these numbers, a symbol of the universe. In religious symbolism, a snake biting its own tail, denoted by an iconic sign, is regarded as a symbol of eternity. A unicorn is a symbol of chastity, and in Christian iconography is regarded as a symbol of the Virgin-Mother; a peacock in this iconography symbolizes immortality, and in Islam it is a symbol of the sun in zenith. A scepter symbolizes royal power, and a trowel is a symbol of freemasonry. In all of these examples a symbol is an object which can be denoted by a (verbal or iconic) sign, and simultaneously itself indicates another object called a symbolized object, becoming a specific type of sign.⁵ What follows is that sign Z in a structure with a complex denotation, despite the literal meaning thanks to which it denotes O , also has another, indirect meaning which indirectly denotes an object symbolized by O . Whereas symbol in this understanding differs from other signs in the previously mentioned duality, i.e. that it is, by nature, a certain asemantic, real or ideal, object but at the same time has the semantic function of denoting another object. This property of having the semantic function cannot be, according to some researchers, a result of convention, but has to always be sufficiently conditioned by a certain analogy between a symbol and a symbolized object. Such a stance

⁵Some researchers, e.g. M. Wallis (1970: 526), claim that symbols are not signs ("Symbols are no signs"). It results from a considerable narrowing of the notion of sign. I rather opt for the stance that all denoting entities, including symbols, can be regarded as signs. This stance is strongly represented by e.g. Ricoeur (1959: 64) who wrote: "Que les symboles soient des signes, cela est certain. [...] sont des éléments de l'univers ou de choses [...]. Il en est de même du rêve.

is taken by H. Delacroix⁶ and M. Wallis⁷ who also narrows the notion of symbol to the notion of a sensually perceptible object.

By agreeing with the thesis that the subject who spontaneously refers to an object as a symbol, and who thus creates or uses the symbol, in many cases, does so on the basis of a visible analogy between properties of the symbolizing object and properties of the symbolized object, I do not think that: firstly, it is the only possible relation between the objects which creates conditions referring to one of the objects as a symbol of the other — unless a very general and not sufficiently precise sense of the word "analogy" is applied. This is what e.g. Ricoeur does by referring to M. Blondel's opinion that "les analogies se fondent moins sur des ressemblances notionnelles (similitudines) que sur une stimulation intérieure, sur une sollicitation assimilative (intentio ad assimilationem)," and claims that it is not possible to "objectiver la relation analogique qui lie le sens second (symbolique) au sens premier (littéral) (...) le symbole est le mouvement même du sens primaire qui nous fait participer au sens latent et ainsi nous assimile au symbolisé sans que nous puissions dominer intellectuellement la similitude" (Ricoeur, 1959: 65).

What can be seen in Ricoeur's vivid but not sufficiently precise opinion is the observed difficulty of reducing the relation between a symbol and the symbolized to the relation of analogy in the common sense of the term. The term is also avoided by D. Durand (1963: 20) who discusses the relation that conditions symbolizing and writes: "[...] le symbole présuppose homogénéité du signifiant et du signifié au sein d'un dynamisme organisateur,"⁸ though the term "homogénéité" may also be misleading since symbols very often indicate objects belonging to a principally different ontic category (e.g. a concrete empirical object symbolizes a certain ideal or spiritual entity) or certain non-specified areas.⁹

Secondly, I believe that defining this relation is only a basis for establish-

⁶"Il me semble que symbole, au sens moderne emporte toujours l'idée d'une correspondance analogique naturelle et non conventionnelle entre la forme concrète et l'objet qu'elle symbolise" (Lalande, 1960: 1079).

⁷"By a (sic!) 'symbol' I understand a sensually perceptible object, produced or used by a living being or not, which is able to evoke in a recipient a thought neither on the basis of resemblance (...) nor on the basis of a custom or convention (...) but on the basis of some analogy between it and the object symbolized" (Wallis, 1970: 526).

⁸The quotation comes from *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres* (1969), p. XV. The dictionary is also a source of some examples.

⁹What is meant here is not polysemy characteristic of many symbols, but principal non-specification of a symbolic meaning.

ing a convention (in the sense of *usus*, agreement or decision) which makes it inevitable for a symbol to have an intersubjectively signitive character. Lack of recognition for such a type of convention sometimes makes it impossible to understand symbols used in other epochs or other cultures. This, of course, does not exclude the previously mentioned subjective situations in which certain objects are spontaneously referred to or created as symbols that show other ontic areas. Such situations are often motivated by the search for expression when conceptually precise reference is not possible. In such situations object *O* is a symbol when it shows and indicates, through its properties to the subject of cognition, a certain existential area that is especially significant in the subject's individual experience. Furthermore, mutuality or similarity of certain human experiences results in that symbols thus understood may appear spontaneously in subjective operations of many individuals, or may be shared by individuals (e.g. in poetry or a painting¹⁰), and become intuitively understandable. However, they may be so hermetic, so linked to somebody's unique experience, that even when shared with other individuals they are not understandable or regarded as asemantic, and thus lose their symbolic reference. However, if they become components of the information system, they lose their spontaneous nature and conventionality on the grounds of *usus*.

When Wallis juxtaposed symbols and conventional signs, his intention was probably to exclude objects that have a signitive function assigned not on the basis of analogy, but an arbitrary, randomly motivated decisions (as in the case of emblems or arbitrarily established state emblems), from the scope of the notion of sign. An example of a signitive object present in the semantic structure with a complex denotation which is not a symbol, could be the fish as a recognition sign for Christians because the sign was created on the basis of a convention which made use of the fact that the Greek name *ἰχθύς*, *ichthys* 'fish', is an acronym for *Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ*, *Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr* 'Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior'. In other cases of a complex denotation, the fish is, on the basis of a convention which makes use of an alleged analogy, a signitive sign symbolizing water, fertility or wisdom (Chevalier 1969: V). Thus, Wallis's claim about an unconventional nature of symbols most probably is based on a false identity between conventionality and arbitrariness. Conventions which make some objects function as symbols are not arbitrary, but originate

¹⁰The phenomenology of this type of symbols is in the interest of G. Bachelard (cf. *La poétique de la rêverie*, or *La flamme d'une chandelle*, or *La poétique de l'espace* and other).

from alleged (though difficult to define) kinship between a symbol and the symbolized.

Also, I do not think that it is necessary to define symbol as a sensually perceptible object. The sensually perceptible are symbolic SIGNS, and concretizations of many general objects, but what often, though not always, functions as a symbol is not the concretization but the idea (a white dove in general is a symbol for peace or, in another convention, the Holy Spirit, but not this or that particular representative of the species). Also, ideal objects are symbols which are sensually imperceptible by nature, e.g. the previously mentioned number ten — a Pythagorean symbol of the universe.

Another tendency in defining the notion of symbol focuses on the second element of the relation, that is on the symbolized object, and highlights either that it is always an object which is beyond perception or that it belongs to a transcendental, unknown, and clearly unconscious area.¹¹

The former idea seems to be wrong since it would involve excluding many symbolizing objects from the scope of the notion of symbol, e.g. in the religious iconography of saints (the eagle as a symbol of saint John the Evangelist) or star constellations in astrological symbolism. The latter idea, though a result of an interesting analysis of functions of unconsciousness of the human mind which operates with symbols when it comes to conceptually vague or hidden matters, would also involve excluding many signitive objects commonly recognizable as symbols that indicate things available for cognition, from the scope of the notion of symbol, e.g. symbols of virtues and vices known from medieval iconography. However, it seems that symbolized objects are usually characterized by certain axiological properties, they are important, emotionally unneutral, or cognitively significant for the creator or user of the symbol, which in turn is reflected in properties of symbols as means of expression, and in their affective dynamism.¹²

Thus, perhaps, the closest to common intuitions would be to understand symbol as an asemantic object in one of its aspects, and in the other aspect — as an object with the semantic function of the type that makes the object an expressive sign that denotes another axiologically qualified object thanks to their kinship. However, when it comes to a precise definition or an intersubjective use of a symbol, then the indication of another object occurs in the system of a complex denotation on the basis of a convention which is not random but motivated by an impression of special kinship between certain properties of a symbol and the properties of the symbolized.

¹¹This approach is represented by C. G. Jung (1923: 601ff).

¹²"Le symbole est chargé d'affectivité et de dynamisme" (Chevalier 1969: XV).

It is clear that even this formulation — as any other in the case of words with unspecified scope — and especially, to use Wittgenstein's expression, in the case of family concepts — is only of a preliminary nature. It seems, however, that this formulation distinguishes among denotative signs a class of signitive objects which under the name of "symbols" are of central interest to many humanities disciplines: anthropology (P. Ricoeur), religious studies (M. Eliade), ethnology and sociology (C. Lévy-Strauss), psychology (C. G. Jung), aesthetics (S. K. Langer) and others. However, on account of making the conceptual apparatus necessary for these sciences more precise, and on account of the nature of the issue itself, in this understanding contemporary semiotics is expected to work out a coherent theory of symbol.

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