

CHAPTER 1

The Concept of the Symbol

We all know what a symbol is because we effortlessly understand how to use it in normal conversation.⁵ Academically, however, the word is used in many ways, reflecting various theoretical and disciplinary premises.⁶ There seems to be a basic semantic undercurrent from whence it flows into rather different specifications, but what is this core meaning? As a topic of its own, *symbolism* has attracted increasing interest over the last centuries in various branches of culture studies. As Julia Kindt rightly remarks, “the analysis of symbols has become an integral asset in the toolbox of social anthropology and the interdisciplinary study of religions alike” (2012, 63). Inasmuch as the present study shares an interest in the same field of investigation, it is in line with this trend, yet with a focus on that which remains unsaid in Kindt’s own perspective, as well as in the analytical perspective of many others, namely the meaning and constitution of symbolism as such. The topic, therefore, is *symbolicity* before symbolism. In my endeavor to close in on this symbolicity, i.e., the constitutive aspects of symbolism, I will approach it from various angles, including semantic, historical, psychological, and phenomenological points of exposition.

To begin with, however, it seems reasonable simply to ask what contour of the concept ‘symbol’ we might glean from the range of meanings accorded to it. Consulting the first part of the definition given in Webster’s *Encyclopedic Dictionary*, we learn that a symbol is “something used for or regarded as representing something else”. In ancient times, however, a similar definition, that is, *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, was conventionally used of the *sign*. In modern

5 One might compare Wittgenstein’s point concerning the use of the word of God (1970, 59).

6 See for instance the short but excellent overview in Yiheng Zhao (2023), and a comprehensive exposition in Todorov (1984), which, however, deals entirely with the significance of symbolism in semantic theory.

theories of language, it is generally acknowledged, though, that although the meaning of ‘sign’ and ‘symbol’ may overlap, they are not synonymous. According to the system-theory of Calogero Benedetti, a sign represents its source, whereas a symbol replaces it while maintaining an invariant core of meaning (1988, 54). Or as the anthropologist Victor Turner conceives the difference: “We master the world through signs, ourselves by symbols” (175, 159). These may be fine points in many contexts, but not in all (my case study in alchemy, **Chapter 6**, being an obvious example).

Another qualm is that the above definition of symbolism fails to account for the borderline case, where the word ‘symbol’ is a symbol for what a symbol is. How is *this* symbol-as-a-word supposed to represent something other than the distinction within itself between type and token? Instead of being a substantial difference, it is merely a difference between the abstract and the concrete version of the same thing (a problem that was recognized by the ancient Stoics).

In the semiotic terminology of Charles Sanders Peirce, our whole language consists of signs, which he, in fact, designates as conventional *symbols* (the irony being that this designation is itself conventional).⁷ Be that as it may, one may still wonder what this doubling of ‘symbol’ (as a symbol) entails? As we know from Bertrand Russell, among others, it creates logical problems in set theory, when a set of elements, called symbols in mathematics, is a member of itself. Obviously, a set of birds is not itself a bird, so we do have sets that are not members of themselves, but how about a set of all those sets that are not members of themselves? Either this set is not a member of itself, or it is a member of itself. Yet, both possibilities contradict themselves. If the set is not a member of itself, *then it is, according to its own definition, a member of itself*. But *as a member of itself* it also contradicts its own definition. To regard the word ‘symbol’ as a symbol comes close to the same logical *aporia*. One may try to take recourse to a typological discrimination such that the word ‘symbol’ belongs to the entire group of words being symbols, whereas ‘symbol’ in the overall,

7 “A *Symbol* is a sign,” Peirce writes, “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” (1998, 143); likewise Elias (1991, 17 ff.). Peirce’s definition of ‘symbol’ is adopted in modern semiotics with a tendency to underline the arbitrary connection between symbol and original (i.e., referent), cf., for instance, Piotr Sadwoski (2009, 39 f.) about symbolic communication.

classificatory sense also covers a whole range of other tokens as, for instance, emblems and various non-linguistic entities. To put it differently: in praxis, the word ‘symbol’ refers to concrete symbols which, contrary to the term, have a certain meaning content apart from belonging to the formal class of symbols and apart from solely indicating themselves. In that sense the ‘symbol’ refers to *something more* than its own definition, namely whatever it is that fills it with (cross- or extra-linguistic) meaning, and in this sense, we can understand the first part of the Webster-definition. However, it does not change the fact that the very term ‘symbol’ covers both a word and a classificatory concept, so that as an element it belongs to the set called by the same name, even though it may *also* in actual use point to something else. This is bewildering, which among other things means that Webster’s initial definition needs further elaboration. The dictionary does provide that, and we will return to the matter a little further below.

What we can say, already, is that every word, being a symbol, can be divided, as Gottlob Frege has shown, between its referential meaning (*Bedeutung*) and its linguistic meaning (*Sinn*). The famous example is that Hesperus and Phosphorus are different names for the same planet, appearing alternately as a morning star (Phosphorus) and as an evening star (Hesperus). Thus, whereas the linguistic meaning (*Sinn*) of the names differs, they refer to the same object (and therefore have the same *Bedeutung*). Crudely put, we have language on the one hand, and reality on the other. However, language actually does the job of *referring* to both, which is already the case in Frege’s own distinction.⁸ It becomes especially clear regarding the words ‘symbol’, ‘word’, and ‘language’, which refer to (*bedeuten*) their own meaning (*Sinn*) as well as to a given object (either internal or external to verbal language, and external, for instance, when speaking of the language of Dolphins or of music). So, a crude distinction between language and reality will not work. Language is part of reality in many ways, the intricate depths of which has been a returning question in the

8 In order to make his distinction work, Frege *refers* the meaning of, say, Phosphorus to a linguistic rule that distinguishes it from Hesperus, just as when one refers to two meanings (*Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, respectively) of the word ‘morning’, that is, whether the interpretation of the word solely depends on the sentence of which it is a part, or whether it depends on actual ostention. Even if this surely signifies two dimensions of meaning, it goes without saying that these are, ultimately, interdependent. Reference implies meaning, and meaning implies reference.

history of philosophy, from Platonists and Stoics to Peirce and the later Wittgenstein's labored musings (just to pick a few). So where do we find the real content, the real meaning, of a symbol? In language or in an extra-linguistic sphere of meaning, or in a tricky combination of the two? The answer may be anything but straightforward.

The tension between the word 'symbol' and a given symbol (whatever it is) remains troubling on a logical and semiotic level, and one might, pragmatically, cut to the point and stipulate the meaning of 'symbol' as depending on the act of ascribing *meaning to something that does not have meaning in itself*. This goes both for language, and for any object regarded as symbolic. A word such as 'symbol' is nothing *in itself* but a sound or a graphic sign. Yet, it magically opens a world of meaning by way of ascription, that is, by the very act of joining word and object (be it even a logical object in mathematics). But of course, it is not the case that we first have words and then fill them with meaning. Meaning and language have developed together and have become part of each other, at least to a great extent. Pry them apart and you will end up unable to express anything! However, if it seems that meaning is thereby reduced to linguisticity, this is not quite the case. The evolutionary co-dependency of meaning and language creates a system, but every system rests on something other than itself, something that it cannot account for as well as something that it creates as a residual product.⁹ More importantly for the present investigation, it also becomes related to something which, because it cannot be grasped by language, thereby gains a reality it did not have before. When language reaches its own limit, the void beyond that limit begins to 'be felt' by language itself, as it were, and by its human users. Besides, signs and sounds in their physical presence are not meaningful themselves, and only constitute *a vehicle* of meaning.¹⁰

To put it another way, word and meaning are simultaneous creations, but not the same thing. When meaning is used in the sense of reference, which, all else being equal, should be one of language's most basic and original functions, language can still not be *defined* by its propositional content, as Wittgenstein later came to realize. Words can be used in many ways, and it is always cru-

9 As I read Benjamin, he expresses a similar thought (SW, I, 66).

10 In Zhao's definition a sign is therefore "a sensory entity to be regarded as carrying meaning" (2023, 5).

cial, for analytical purposes, to consider the performative dimension of utterances.¹¹ In daily communication, this is what we have learned to do automatically all the time. In propositional use, words scratch at the surface of things; they make a canvas of the world, the inscriptions on which belong to the same fabric. However tightly woven, though, this canvas is not without interstices. We communicate by means of language, but we also communicate, for instance, via eye contact or touch. What we see and what we sense will almost instantly attract verbalization, but that does not mean that what we saw and sensed was a linguistic entity, just that it was not merely an image projected from the back of our brains.

Looking at a painting, or listening to music, one may sense that it *means* something, which it is difficult to put into words, because in essence, it is non-verbal. Does this mean that I employ the term ‘meaning’ metaphorically? Or *if* we say that visual and musical art have a language of their own, do we then use ‘language’ metaphorically? Can we come up with a sufficient answer to what the meaning of meaning is? In this respect, a seminal work within semiotics is Ogden’s and Richards’s work *The Meaning of Meaning*, in which they propose that the most viable definition of meaning is “that which is actually related to a sign by a chosen relation” (1923, 186) and, further, that symbols are best understood from a “theory of Meaning dependent upon the theory of Signs” (ibid.). However operational these definitions may be in analytical terms, they build upon the conventionality of our language and use of signs. Convention is not watertight, however, and verballity does not equal perception. Even from the point of view of literary theory, Tzvetan Todorov professed to “always add the adjective ‘verbal’ to the substantive ‘symbolism’ because, like so many other people”, he believed “that a nonverbal symbolism exists” (1983, 15).¹² I confess to being among those other people. But the point I specifically want to make hinges on the alleged power of cultural and linguistic determination. To repeat: as soon as a set of rules is in place, something will always irrupt at the

11 Thus, Tzvetan Todorov argues for the significance of “indirect meaning” in discursive utterances irreducible to the empiricist criteria of propositional truth-conditions (1983, 14).

12 Further along in the same text, Todorov asserts: “Meanings evoked indirectly are meanings like any others; they differ only in their mode of evocation, which is precisely that of the association of something present with something absent” (15).

edges.¹³ And what are rules in social human interaction other than changeable restrictions?

Returning to the symbol as a term, what we have achieved by suggesting a minimal and pragmatic definition – that is, the ascription of meaning to something that is not in itself meaningful – is merely to water down the meaning of ‘symbol’ to become almost synonymous with ‘word’ and ‘sign’ (in this regard, see **Appendix 1**). And although Peirce classified words as symbols, his intention was obviously not to claim that symbols were nothing *but words*.

What we may be entitled to say about the meaning of symbols, then, is that we are dealing with a semantic stretch from a strict classificatory use of the word (as in semiotics, logics, and mathematics) to a fuller meaning evoked, for instance, by certain sayings, emblems, and icons. In quotidian use, a symbol may not mean much more than a token of something else (as captured in Webster’s first definition). But what then differentiates a sign from a symbol? Although, in many cases, ‘sign’ and ‘symbol’ may actually be used interchangeably as previously stated, the concept of the former seems too poor to encompass the range of meanings associated with the latter. Thus, Edward Sapir distinguishes between “referential symbols” and “condensation symbols”, where the former include “oral speech, writing, national flags, flag signaling, and other organizations of symbols which are agreed upon as economical devices for purposes of reference” (1934, 493). The latter consist of “highly condensed forms of substitutive behaviour for direct expression allowing for the ready release of emotional tension in conscious or unconscious form” (ibid.). While I endorse the ritual aspect of symbolic meaning, implied by this phrase, I shall widen the scope of its playground, as it were. In short, what in many cases makes the symbol more than a sign is not confined to the social situation alone but is also entailed in the direct relation between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. The function of symbols may have sociological, semiological, phenomenological, and psychological implications. And in general, symbols, invested with an emotional value, carry a surplus of meaning with them.

13 I acknowledge an inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari with respect to their rhizomatic notion of ‘lines of flight’ within a certain territorialization (1999, 9; 30 ff; 138).

In a religious context, which is the primary subject of the present investigation, the term ‘symbol’ is widely used as a condensation of some larger complex of meaning as, for instance, the cross in Christianity, the crescent-and-star in Islam, the mandala or the iconic and sonorous *aum* (or *om*) in Hinduism and Buddhism, not to speak of the universal use of talismans, which obviously exceeds the significance of mere signs. So, the question is: What is this surplus of meaning that distinguishes a symbol from a mere sign?¹⁴

I shall make it clear from the outset that the aim of this study is not to reach a definition of ‘symbol’ or ‘symbolism’ that may be satisfying in all cases (if such a definition is feasible at all), but to get to a notion of the meaning-potential implied by its many uses in a religious context. It bears repeating that my interest concerns not merely the symbolic, but the symbolicity of the symbolic.

For one thing, the word ‘symbol’ symbolizes, or redoubles, its own meaning (or indeterminate meaning) by referring implicitly to an open range of uses. The ‘symbol’ even differs from ‘word’ (if only in degree perhaps) by its variety of uses, from monovalent to polyvalent contents of meaning. The term carries within it the history of these uses, which may point to something deeply interesting about a semiotic flexibility, normally counteracted by conceptual, informative – or cognitive – language. The most significant meaning-potential of ‘symbol’ seems to lie in its vagueness. The adaptational capacity of “Ultimate Sacred Postulates”, as Roy Rappaport calls them, seems among other things to rest on this property of flexibility-prone vagueness (1999, 265). This does not entail a poverty in meaning, as one may be inclined to think (cf. Sperber, **Chapter 14**), but rather the opposite (Todorov 1984, 244-46). Not only may we be entitled to use the word ‘symbol’ as a *terminus technicus* for something that, in a religious context, has no strict boundaries, semantically speaking, but that is also how it is often used, not least by the religious participants themselves (Rappaport 1999, 88 f.). That being said, religious symbols also work to demarcate a boundary; they frame a horizon for those who belong to a certain semantic community, that is, those who realize their own identity in light of the value and truth-content of these symbols.

14 I speak here of the ‘sign’ as a rather unequivocal token of meaning such as when a non-smoking sign informs a potential smoker not to smoke in the surrounding area.