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Symbolism as the Language of the Imagination

by

Jules Cashford



William Blake

SYMBOLISM AS THE LANGUAGE OF THE IMAGINATION

There is an old Irish Fairy Tale which begins like this:

One day something happened to Fionn, the son of Uail; that is, he departed from the world of men, and was set wandering in great distress of mind through Faery. He had days and nights there and adventures there, and was able to bring back the memory of these. That, by itself, is wonderful, for there are few people who remember that they have been to Faery or aught of all that happened to them in that state. In truth we do not go to Faery, we become Faery, and in the beating of a pulse we may live for a year or a thousand years. But when we return, the memory is quickly clouded, and we seem to have had a dream or seen a vision, although we have verily been in Faery. It was wonderful, then, that Fionn should have remembered all that happened to him in that wide-spun moment...but in this tale there is yet more to marvel at. ¹

If we condense this narrative into an image of a state of mind we have a story of a moment of Imagination: the departure from the known, the encounter with the new and strange, the becoming one with what is found, and the re-remembering, the putting together of the vision into a new whole. And what happens to us when we hear what happened to Fionn is that we also are set wandering away from the world of men, that is, from the literal frame of mind in which limits are set and predictions can be made; and, far from this world, we must become Fionn who has become Faery and, like him, must hold the 'wide-spun' moment before our eyes. The tale asks us to participate in two worlds simultaneously: the eternal world of Faery, where all things are possible, and Fionn's world, a man like us who has finally to return to his life in time. The wonder of the tale will depend on our being able to hold both worlds together without sacrificing one to the other. William Blake called this 'double vision':

For double the vision my eyes do see,
And a double vision is always with me.
With my inward 'tis an old man grey,
With my outward, a thistle across my way. ²

The inward and the outward eye - these might seem to be two ways of seeing, two eyes, but for Blake this is one act: it is a seeing and a feeling together, seeing the thistle so intensely that he feels its/his inward nature, so that the old man grey is the image of his feeling for the sparse, grey spikiness of the thistle - an image born of an identity between them which dissolves the difference between people and plants, spirit and matter. There is a union of what those of 'Single Vision and Newton's Sleep' would separate into two things and turn back

into one.³ But the old man grey cannot replace the thistle, because without the thistle the old man grey is no more and, in the exactness of Blake's perception, if the thistle is not felt for it is hardly seen, if seen at all:

The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way...But to the Eyes of the man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees.⁴

Because of this relation between being and seeing, Imagination cannot be treated as a separate faculty or function of the mind which thinks in images.

We use the term 'Imagination' in many varied and imprecise ways, often indistinguishably from daydream, fantasy, fancy, even illusion, and it is easy to forget that throughout history those who were closest to Imagination - poets, artists, and visionaries - have believed it to be the deepest and sometimes the only source of knowledge. This knowledge exacts a total commitment, in contrast to knowledge gained by reasoning alone which is knowledge *about* something, not knowledge which changes you or which you have to change to know.

We have lost the simplicity of this distinction, but in Greek the term for knowing mathematics, *episteme*, was quite different from the term for knowing a person, *gnosis*, from which the Gnostics took their name - and this is the way imaginative truth is won: through relationship, love and inspiration.

Carl Jung and James Hillman, like Blake, Samuel Coleridge and W.B. Yeats, also reinstate Imagination as the origin and ground of life. When Jung writes that 'Psyche is image'⁵ and Hillman says that 'All existence is structured by imagination,'⁶ they are calling for a 'poetic basis of mind,'⁷ and so implicitly inviting us to see poets as psychologists as of course they always have been. But a conclusion which follows from their work is that the language of the poets - the subtle and tacit language of image, symbol metaphor and, still subtler, pause, rhythm, placing, tone - can bring us closer to the reality of the psyche than that other, more direct way of talking - through concept, statement and amplifying idea. For without the bewildering presence of an image we might be tempted to explain what is irrevocably mysterious. Here the Tree is speaking in this poem by the Spanish poet Lorca, called 'Song of the Barren Orange Tree':

Woodcutter.
Cut my shadow from me.
Free me from the torment
of seeing myself without fruit.

Why was I born among mirrors?
The day walks in circles around me,
and the night copies me
in all its stars.

I want to live without seeing myself.
And I will dream that ants
and thistleburrs are my
leaves and my birds.

Woodcutter.
Cut my shadow from me.
Free me from the torment
of seeing myself without fruit. ⁸

Imagination, or the Poetic Genius, Coleridge writes, ‘brings the whole soul of man into activity,’⁹ and requires, therefore, that the whole soul of man be brought into activity to understand it, for anything less than this is in some part an abstraction, and so ultimately untrue. This is why for Blake, and Yeats after him, Imagination or ‘Art’ is ‘The Tree of Life’ in the Garden of Paradise, while discursive knowledge or ‘Science’ is ‘The Tree of Death’¹⁰ because it is barren of the one who knows it. Even ‘cold philosophy,’ as Shakespeare puts it, is suspect to the poet. Yeats writes that he ‘thought that whatever of philosophy has been made poetry is alone permanent.’¹¹ And Kabir, the fifteenth century Sufi Mystic, ‘talks of only what he has lived through. If you have not lived through something, it is not true.’¹²

It is difficult to talk about the Imagination conceptually, since we are by definition far from it when we talk *about* it. It is, perhaps, a power so ultimate that only images can call it forth, so we have, in a sense, to ask the Imagination to imagine itself. The Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary may be, in one of its infinite meanings, an image of the divine visitation of Imagination to a soul prepared to receive it - closed to all that is not God. The different postures of the Virgin in all the Annunciation pictures dramatize, in this sense, how we meet the other world: the particular kind of imaginative encounter that is being enacted.



Fig. 1. Annunciation. *The Mystic Lamb*. Jan van Eyck. 1432. St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent.

In Jan van Eyck's *The Mystic Lamb*, the Angel looks at Mary directly but she does not need to look at him to see him - so deep the trance of her inward gaze, her hands closed across her breast, the dove hovering over her head: 'Who am I that I should build him an house?' the book, open beside her, reads.



Fig. 2. Annunciation. Fra Angelico. Convent of San Marco, Florence. 1440-5.

The Virgin of the gentle monk, Fra Angelico, bows to the angel in all humility as a gift of the grace of God, and they meet, not through the gesture of outstretched hand, but each enfolded in their own mystery, arms clasped across the body, in mutual recognition of the divine presence which unites them.



Fig. 3. The Cestello Annunciation. Sandro Botticelli. 1489. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

By contrast, Botticelli's Virgin seems to dance her acceptance to the Angel kneeling before her, gently inclining towards him – their outstretched hands almost close enough to touch – a ritual dance of affinity.



Fig. 4. Annunciation. Leonardo da Vinci. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1470.

Leonardo da Vinci's Mary is arresting because she, uniquely, is able to look steadfastly into the Angel's face, the gesture of her hand answering the Angel's own gesture of greeting almost on the same plane, accepting and replying to him. While the Angel's head is slightly bowed, the Virgin's demeanour is commanding, fearlessly open to what will come. Like Yeats, in his poem 'Byzantium,' she could be saying: 'I hail the superhuman; I call it death-in-life and life-in-death,'¹³ and this seems to be an exact image of what we know of the mastership of Leonardo's mind.

Imagination is imaged here as the seed of birth, the archon of life: ‘Jesus, the Imagination,’ as Blake says.¹⁴ Imagination, or the Poetic Genius, is Blake’s First Principle:

That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. Likewise, that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius, which by the Ancients was call’d an Angel & Spirit & Demon.¹⁵

Blake’s use of the word ‘Demon’ here – on a par with Angel and Spirit – may be initially confusing because the term ‘demon’ has long accrued to itself pejorative overtones – all of which Blake happily overlooks. The English term ‘Demon’ derives from the Latin *Daemon*, a translation of the Greek *Daimon*, which in turn comes from the verb *daiesthai*, meaning to divide or distribute destinies or fortunes, itself derived from Proto-Indo-European *da*, to divide. Originally, ‘daimon’ was a Greek term for a tutelary spirit who watched over a person or a place and, when turned inward, became the inner voice of a person’s spirit guide, an *angellos*, ‘messenger,’ within, bringing perspective and guidance from beyond the person’s own point of view. Daimons were sometimes thought of as the Souls of people from the Golden Age – just as Indigenous people today still listen to the voices of their Ancestors. But in the 2nd century AD the Early Roman Christian Church reversed its original meaning and allocated to this untameable free spirit a negative character, such that the new term ‘demons’ became suspect influences drawing the souls of sinners away from the pure doctrine of the Church. This was one of those crucial changes in the history of western consciousness, for it limited and, for many, destroyed *access* to the depths and complexities and, crucially, the wisdom, of the inner life deeper within - what we might now call ‘the Psyche’ – both the Personal and the Impersonal - the Archetypal - Psyche. Ironically, it was the original Greek of the *New Testament* which brought the term ‘*daimon*’ into the Judaeo-Christian sphere of influence, after which this supremely creative Greek idea was absorbed into the Judaeo-Christian concept of an evil spirit, such that, implicitly, it became a sin to ‘think for oneself.’

The contrast is given through Socrates’ own ‘spirit-guide,’ whom he called his ‘*Daimon*’ and sometimes his ‘*Daimonion*’ – which is often translated as ‘prophetic voice’ or ‘sign.’ His Daimon held the power of first principles over him, since it was to his Daimon that he referred his decision whether to live in exile or die in Athens, and he accepted that decision as binding.¹⁶ Two and a half thousand years later, Jung was introduced to a winged being in a dream, whom he called Philemon, and whom Socrates and Blake would call his daimon. Jung

painted his own portrait of Philemon and they continued their discussions while walking together in the garden. Philemon told him that our thoughts, many of them, come as messages, not always seeded by ourselves. He said - Jung said - that I 'treated thoughts as if I generated them myself, but in his view thoughts were like animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air.'¹⁷ This inspired Jung to expand his own conception of psychic reality into a radically new form, and opened up his own particular way of relating to the different levels of the psyche – freeing his own Imagination.

* * *

Images of wind, fire and lightning, as well as multifarious winged beings, are all images which have in some moment tried to capture the elusive, invisible, fleeting, magical or divine power that we call Imagination, and whose inaccessibility to our ordinary understanding is already contained in the tantalizing nature of our images of it. What else is the story of Prometheus who stole 'bright-faced fire' from the gods and gave to mortals a divine privilege for which he was punished, and whose punishment reflects the irrevocable consequences of our own opening into a sacred realm? Aeschylus has Prometheus say:

But hear what troubles there were among men, how I found them witless and gave them the use of their wits and made them masters of their minds...For men at first had eyes but saw to no purpose; they had ears but did not hear. Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their long lives and handled all things in bewilderment and confusion. They did not know of building houses with bricks to face the sun; they did not know how to work in wood. They lived like swarming ants in holes in the ground, in the sunless caves of the earth. For them there was no secure token by which to tell winter nor the flowering spring nor the summer with its crops; all their doings were without intelligent calculation until I showed them the rising of the stars, and the settings, hard to observe. And further I discovered to them numbering, pre-eminent among subtle devices, and the combining of letters as a means of remembering all things...But greatest was this: in the former times if a man fell sick he had no defence against the sickness, neither healing food or drink...until I showed all men the blending of mild simples to drive out all manner of diseases. It was I who arranged the ways of seercraft, and I first taught what things come true from dreams; and to men I gave meaning to the ominous cries, hard to interpret. ...I set in order the omens of the highway and the flight of crooked-taloned birds...and what manner of life each led...One brief word will tell the whole story: all arts that mortals have come from Prometheus.¹⁸

The range of Prometheus' gifts, their detailed and practical application, tell us that Imagination is not only for poets, or perhaps, more precisely, reminds us that the origin of the

word and idea of 'poetry' lies in the Greek word *poesis*, which means 'making.' John Keats took this further:

Call the world if you please 'the vale of soul-making.' Then you will find out the use of the world...I say '*Soul making*' - Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence - There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions - but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself... how then are Souls to be made?...How, but by the medium of a world like this? ¹⁹

Imagination, then, divines the essence in anything, transforming whatever it lights upon into an art. It is a way of knowing which is also a way of being. As the Sufi poet Rumi writes:

If your knowledge of fire has been ascertained from words alone,
seek to be cooked by fire;
There is no intuitive certainty until you burn:
if you desire that certainty, sit down in the fire. ²⁰

Imagination as the phoenix. 'Beautiful things,' Robert Browning says, 'have lain burningly on the divine hand.'²¹

The Ibis bird of the Egyptian god Thoth, the winged sandals of Hermes, Plato's poet who is 'a light and winged and holy thing,'²² the bird and butterfly wings of angels and fairies - these images of flight, lightness and speed of movement embody the escape of the Imagination from the earthbound organization of the will, suggesting, in the contrast, an intrinsic opposition between Imagination and will which these simple rhythms of Blake's poem enact:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sun rise. ²³

And Yeats says that when the mind is 'liberated from the pressure of the will (it) is unfolded in symbols.'²⁴

A Romantic image of the strangeness yet sudden intimacy of the Imagination is the Aeolian lyre or wind-harp, named after Aeolus, Greek god of the winds, whose music is evoked by the wind playing through its strings, drawing into harmony the outer motion of Nature and the inner emotion of humanity. Shelley speaks of a 'power which visits with its breath our

silent chords at will,' and awaits his inspiration with an invocation to the 'Mother of this unfathomable world':

Serenely now
And moveless, as a long forgotten lyre...
I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain
May modulate with the murmurs of the air... ²⁵

Coleridge's poem 'The Eolian Harp' invokes the unifying spirit of Imagination, that 'magical and synthetic power' which reconciles 'opposite or discordant qualities,' by discovering what he calls 'the all in each': ²⁶

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely fram'd
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each and God of all. ²⁷

There is an inherent joyfulness in the Imagination which recalls us to life. In Coleridge's 'Dejection Ode' we hear it again in the moaning wind-harp – 'the dull sobbing draft that moans and rakes / Upon the strings of this Eolian lute' - which senses the approaching storm of winds that 'might startle this dull pain and make it move and live,' and end this 'grief without a pang, void, dark and drear.' Coleridge understands dejection, or what some might call depression, as itself being the loss of Imagination: 'those thin clouds above'... 'those stars that glide behind them or between...yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew / In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue'... 'I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!'

But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.

It is, significantly, in the very process of struggling imaginatively to articulate his loss of Imagination that the winds come and he recovers his joy, as we see in the ecstatic rhythm of the closing lines to his 'Dear Lady':

...friend devoutest of my choice,
Thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice. ²⁸

Wordsworth also speaks of the revitalizing power of the Imagination in the image of a breeze which breathes life into matter in the manner of the original creation, becoming a tempest with an energy of its own:

For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven
Was blowing on my body, felt within
A corresponding mild creative breeze,
A vital breeze which travell'd gently on
O'er things which it had made, and is become
A tempest, a redundant energy
Vexing its own creation. 'Tis a power
That does not come unrecogniz'd, a storm
Which, breaking up a long-continued frost
brings with it vernal promises...
The holy life of music and of verse.²⁹

The affinities between breath, wind, spirit, inspiration, animation and soul are familiar from the Greek, Latin and Hebrew, and from the way we have inherited them, particularly in Jungian terminology. But this intertwining of sense and implication is not without significance since how are we, living, to place that which gives us life and then makes that life live? We can only wrestle with images, like Jacob wrestling with the Angel till he won his name. What is crucial is that these images of breath and wind, which bring before us at one time Imagination and at another the soul, affirm an alliance so deep that they might almost be, in Shakespeare's phrase, 'Two distincts, division none,'³⁰ suggesting perhaps that Imagination is the specific life of the soul, or the soul in its aliveness. Coleridge explicitly identifies them: Imagination, he says, is 'the soul that is everywhere and in each; and forms all into one graceful whole.'³¹ It is as though Imagination were the animating principle, and soul the principle of animation, the relation of flame to fire, as in this sonnet of Michelangelo's:

I know not if it is imagination
which makes the light that every man can feel.
Or if from mind or memory will steal
Some other glorious illumination.
Or maybe in the soul the searching fire
Of heaven still burns, and has the power to draw
Our thoughts into an ardent, fierce desire
For truth itself, the one compelling law.³²

In the Persian Sufi tradition of Sohrawardi, the Imagination is considered to be the organ of perception of the soul. Hillman writes, similarly, 'In the beginning is *poesis* - the making of soul through imagination...'³³

Perhaps we can now see why Imagination must speak in the language of symbolism, for Imagination speaks from the soul and of the soul and, like the messengers of God, it brings two worlds together as one. This may be why symbolism has been called the language of the Angels: it speaks to Earth of Heaven and, as it does so, brings Heaven to Earth. The root meaning of symbol in the Greek is *symballein*, which means to 'throw together,' and the essence of symbolism lies in this union of opposites; it constitutes, as Goethe says, a revelation sent outward from within, a 'synthesis of world and spirit, which truly assures us that the two were originally one.'³⁴ Symbolism has always this 'double vision,' and if we divide it, in order to find a meaning that we can handle, then we separate a symbol from its source and so lose the experience of the symbolic life of the soul where the whole world is a symbol. Here is Coleridge in 'Destiny of Nations':

All that meets the bodily sense I deem
Symbolical, one mighty alphabet
To infant minds; and we in this low world
laced with our backs to bright reality,
That we might learn with young unwounded ken
The substance from the shadow.³⁵

And later, 'in 'Frost at Midnight,' addressing his infant son:

So shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.³⁶

Everything is symbolic to the symbolic eye. When Blake says that 'To the Eyes of a man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself,'³⁷ he is talking of the way Nature is brought so intensely alive within the Imagination that it becomes, for us, also human:

...each grain of sand,
Every stone on the land,
Each rock & each hill,

Each fountain & rill,
Each herb & each tree,
Mountain, hill earth & sea,
Cloud, meteor, & star
Are men seen afar.³⁸

But when the symbolic life is lost, symbols appear like Angels to call us back, to make us leap into the dark unknown of our own nature. Yeats writes:

One is furthest from symbols when one is busy doing this or that, but the soul moves among symbols and unfolds in symbols when trance, madness or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own...(enabling) us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation.³⁹

Jung describes dream symbols as compensations for the loss of the symbolic life when thunder was still ‘the voice of a god’ and lightning ‘his avenging missile,’⁴⁰ such that the attempt to understand them brings us up ‘against the wholeness of the symbol-producing individual.’⁴¹ Similarly, all the Romantic poets talk in the Platonic tradition of symbols as recollections of truths half-forgotten, whose appearance compels a recognition of something already known, like a coming home to the soul. Coleridge reaches for this in his ‘Dejection Ode’:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!⁴²

The relation of symbols to the symbolic life means that anything can be a symbol, even a grain of sand, for a symbol is a particular way of experiencing anything, of seeing the ‘translucence’ of things:⁴³ Translucence, or numinosity, requires a certain openness of mind, and even more, ‘a similarity of essence.’ In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge quotes Plotinus:

To those to whose imagination it has never been presented how beautiful is the countenance of justice and wisdom; and that neither the morning nor the evening star are so fair.... For in order to direct the view aright, it behoves that the beholder should have made himself congenerous and similar to the object beheld. Never could the eye have beheld the sun, had not its own essence been soliform,' (*i.e. preconfigured to light by a similarity of essence with that of light*) 'neither can a soul not beautiful attain to an intuition of beauty.'⁴⁴

We are accustomed to think that a symbol must always find its way into our consciousness through an image, and this is usually so, but when Blake says 'Everything that lives is Holy,'⁴⁵ this is a symbolic vision yet it carries no specific image: it is more an intensity of feeling, the source of images. Similarly, when we see events as synchronistic we are seeing them symbolically, but we are looking at an imaginal pattern which cannot be found in any of its images, separately or together. A Beethoven symphony may evoke from us an image, or many images, but its power over us may be in part because it frees us from the habit of reaching discretely for particular things. Writing to a friend, Beethoven says simply: 'A chorus came into my head.'⁴⁶ The muteness we intuit in a symbolic experience may then lie in the depths to which it has drawn us, where the feeling life has as yet no image of itself. In the mysterious realms of darkness Pluto keeps his face hidden:

'I refuse to name the gods,' D.H.Lawrence says, 'because they have no 'name,' I refuse to describe the gods, because they have no form nor shape nor substance. Ah! But the simple ask for images':

Then for a time at least, they must do without.
But all the time I see the gods:
the man who is mowing the tall white corn,
suddenly, as it curves, as it yields, the white wheat
and sinks down with a swift rustle, and a strange, falling flatness,
ah! the gods, the swaying body of god!
ah the fallen stillness of god, autumnus, and it is only July
the pale-gold flesh of Priapus dropping asleep.⁴⁷

Here, there is initially no image to put to a name nor a name to put to an image – it would be only *our* name, our act of naming, not the gods' own naming of themselves in appearing to us - but once we agree to do without images, then a living presence can begin to take shape before our eyes, and only when the god is wholly immanent in his images - when the one is the other and the other is the one - does Lawrence allow us, finally, to recognize him.

Yet there are images which have called to people across the centuries - snakes, flames, trees, eagles, roses, stars, circles and crosses – and these seem to lead naturally into the whole of life of which they are a part, and many ages of human sensibility have made them dear to us, and this path easier to tread. But unless we see them filled with numinous power at the moment of our apprehending them, then they are just images like any others. The point here is that when we call an image a symbol we are also saying something about our own state of mind. There has been a relation between the person and the image; we are saying something has happened. This is as much the case with our own inner symbols in dreams and visions and all around us, as with the symbols found in a work of art, or a work of art that from the pressure of its own invisible law suddenly emerges as symbolic. For the essence of an image is always there for us, only we are not always there for it. Yeats has the most beautiful description of symbols. He says they are ‘images that are living souls.’⁴⁸

There are also of course images without souls, the images Lawrence wants us to do without, but these are images of fancy, of single vision, associative images of memory, which gaze back upon us with our own eyes, and restate in different combination what we already know. As a pictorial way of thinking these have their place, but they become dangerous when they are confused with images of Imagination, and then they are the stuff of which allegorical poems and obsessive fantasies are made. For they are utterly opposed to images of Imagination which take us flying just because they have the wings we lack. Blake insists that these two kinds of image ‘Ought to be Known as Two Distinct Things, & so call’d for the sake of Eternal Life.’⁴⁹ Of the true image he writes:

If the Spectator could enter into these Images of his imagination, approaching them on the fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought, if he...could make a Friend & Companion of one of these Images of wonder, which always entreats him to leave mortal things (as he must know), then would he arise from his Grave, then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy.⁵⁰

These are images with souls, but we have to make friends with them, and honour them. As with any *gnosis*, the living soul of another can only be called out by another living soul.

But how do we do this? We 'leave room' in the actual for the potential; we 'liberate' what is before us from too literal a perspective. This is Yeats, in an essay on the Symbolism of Painting:

If you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and their effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence; for we love nothing but the perfect, and our dreams make all things perfect that we may love them. ⁵¹

Paul Tillich writes of a mutual process of opening up in what Yeats would see as a conversation between two living souls:

Every symbol opens up a level of reality for which non-symbolic speaking is inadequate...But in order to do this, something else must be opened up - namely, levels of the soul, levels of our interior reality. And they must correspond to the levels in exterior reality which are opened up by a symbol...So every symbol is two-edged. It opens up reality and it opens up the soul. ⁵²

That is why every symbol is a unique event: it is the only possible expression of some invisible essence which could only encounter us the way it did because of the way we were. It involves liberation, love and transformation. The direction of symbolism is therefore quite different from that of allegory with which it is sometimes confused. It is as though symbols choose us, but we alone make allegories, searching for an image to represent some abstract idea - the sword of Justice, the sands of time - images of fancy. As Jung says: 'It is not Goethe who creates *Faust*, but *Faust* which creates Goethe. And what is *Faust*? Faust is essentially a symbol.'⁵³ A symbol involves our love, but an allegory only our mind. We do not have to relate totally to an allegory so it remains an idea, and the point could have been made another way. For allegory brings two worlds together but it does not marry them, and like, say, Mr. Facing-both-ways, it invites interpretation and sets us an example, so we make resolutions which we cannot keep because we have not been moved. We may be sorry for him, but we do not forgive him or ourselves; whereas symbolic art, Yeats tells us, is 'that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ.'⁵⁴

The meaning of a symbol can therefore never be fully grasped, for it is an experience whose moment has passed, and if we experience it again it has by then changed us and so changed

itself. But the search for one meaning which an idea can hold belongs, in any case, to the language of concepts, for in the language of symbolism there is not one meaning, or even meaning within meaning, but often meaning against meaning, whose reconciliation is the mystery we experience. Yet in the presence of a symbol, as of a person, we are not in need of any meaning in addition to their presence since, in the symbolic life, all existence is meaningful just because it is there. Lawrence says characteristically: ‘You can’t give a symbol a meaning any more than you can give a cat a meaning.’⁵⁵

This has implications for the way we approach our own and other people’s symbols in dreams or in ‘Active Imagination,’ for we cannot help wondering where we have been, and it is tempting to suppose that finding a meaning will restore the experience or in some way or save it from completely disappearing. But here again we can learn from the poets, for they can, in T.S. Eliot’s phrase, ‘dislocate language into meaning’ in order to make precise distinctions that the dualistic language of everyday tends to blur.⁵⁶ In *The Four Quartets* T.S. Eliot writes:

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only got the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it.⁵⁷

Poetry speaks through the rhythm and echo of its images of the place that is not known, ‘Not known, because not looked for’:

Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.⁵⁸

By the last two lines we are listening with incredible precision, but not to any one thing: we are just listening, perhaps for the first time. It has become a pure act of apprehension in which we are cleansed of expectation - virgin - and so can be reached.

Yet we do not need to stand dumbly before the figures of our Imagination. If we accept that the apprehension of a symbol is an imaginative act, we can try not to give it a meaning but to allow it to re-enter our consciousness on its own terms. Perhaps we can only begin to understand a symbolic experience by suffering its numinosity with awareness - bringing, as it were, double vision to double vision. But once we have abstracted a symbol from its context, this becomes impossible. If we take Blake's Tyger away from his poem - as, say, a symbol of the might of God, then we have turned him into allegory and lost the glowing of his eyes. And even if we do not make him a 'symbol' of something else, yet take him as the symbol of the poem, we can forget that the symbol here is not the Tyger, but:

Tyger, tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry...⁵⁹

Blake's symbolic tyger is Blake's poem, the poem that takes on a soul.

Perhaps we can sense this process at work in a poem by Rilke, called 'The Panther':

His sight from ever gazing through the bars
Has grown so blunt that it sees nothing more.
It seems to him that thousands of bars are
before him, and behind them nothing merely.

The easy motion of his supple stride,
which turns about the very smallest circle,
is like a dance of strength about a center
in which a mighty will stands stupefied.

Only sometimes when the pupil's film
soundlessly opens...then one image fills
and glides through the quiet tension of the limbs
into the heart and ceases and is still.⁶⁰

Is there not a point where we find the panther has appeared *imaginally* before us, and we are both seeing and feeling him together, not just seeing him and not just feeling him, but both at once? And are we not drawn into him by some magnetic attraction, of which Plato speaks,⁶¹ so that we become the panther - just as Fionn became Faery - and we experience a depth within ourselves where our 'mighty will stands stupefied,' so the image glides into our heart and ceases and is still?

As with a poem, so with a dream. For dreams are also art, the art of the soul as poems are, and since the line between dreaming and the full totality of waking consciousness is probably thinner than we know, it seems better to focus on the similarities rather than the differences between poems and dreams, and the process of understanding them. Perhaps, then, we can cultivate before our dreams and visions a poetic attitude of mind. We can attempt that 'willing suspension of disbelief for the moment,'⁶² which Coleridge advised, suspending our own extrinsic associations until the dream itself has called them in. If we rest in what Keats calls 'Negative Capability' - 'that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'⁶³ - then we can relive the process of the dream before we give it a name. It follows that the practice of amplification, when we explore other appearances of what might seem to be the same symbol, is a delicate matter, for it can be a violation of the integrity of this particular symbolic configuration. Of course symbols throb with the accumulated resonances of the past, and the life of our personal symbols grows each time they appear, but we have to meet this throbbing of history within the resonances of this particular dream or poem. For if we see images as living souls then they have an organic principle of growing as we do, so that each enactment gives rise to what follows it - 'Those images that yet / Fresh images beget' - Yeats says in his poem 'Byzantium.'⁶⁴ It is when we can discern the law of their begetting, the seed principle of feeling, that we may have a way in to the symbolic language of the Imagination, the language of the soul.

To end with Robert Bly's translation of Rilke's *Third Sonnet to Orpheus*:

A god can do it. But tell me, how can a man
follow his slender road through the strings?
A man is split. And where two roads intersect
inside us, no one has built the Singer's Temple.

Writing poetry, as we learn from you, is not desiring,
not wanting something that can ever be achieved.
To write poetry is to be alive. For a god that's easy.
When, however, are we really alive? And when does he

turn the earth and the stars so they face us?
Yes, you are young, and you love, and the voice
forces your mouth open - that is lovely, but learn
to forget that breaking into song. It goes again.

Real singing is a different movement of air.
Air moving around nothing. A breathing in a god. A wind. ⁶⁵

* * *

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