

❧ SYMBOLISM IN
MEDIEVAL THOUGHT
AND ITS CONSUMMATION
IN THE DIVINE COMEDY
BY HELEN FLANDERS DUNBAR

SUBMITTED APRIL, 1927, IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY,
IN THE FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



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PREFACE

THE hypothesis on which this thesis is founded is no more nor less than that Dante Alighieri was in full possession of his senses and of serious intent when, in words of supreme importance for the student of medieval thought, he defined the subject of his *Commedia*. Dante wrote: "Be it known that the sense of this work is not simple, but on the contrary it may be called polysemous, that is to say, of more senses than one; for it is one sense which we get through the letter, and another which we get through the thing the letter signifies: and the first is called literal but the second allegorical or mystic." It will be remembered that he proceeded then to analyze the allegorical meaning into its three senses, consistent with his earlier statement: "it should be known that writings may be taken and should be understood *chiefly in four senses*."

Students of medieval thought, like the rest of mankind, group themselves in hostile camps and appear impervious to the sense of Dickens' aphorism: "There is much to be said on both sides." Only too frequently, blind to the implications in that which they themselves term the literary masterpiece of the Middle Ages, scholars dispute, arguing with assurance over alternative theories. In Dante as he appears in the *Divina Commedia* has been recognized an epitome of all that is medieval, and factions among Dante critics represent adequately the schools of interpretation of medieval thought.

There are critics for whom the *Commedia* is an aesthetic and imaginative masterpiece, as such to be appreciated; the question of symbolic meanings is waived as of no abiding import: "Dante will live as a poet; why trouble about what he meant?" Greeted with disdain by opposing schools, these critics have for comfort Dante's own statement that for those little gifted with keenness of intellect or insight, there remains yet a good: appreciation of the sheer beauty of the poem; and should not this lead their opponents to regard them with charity?

Again, there are those to whom the poem is alluring as a revelation of the poet's private life. They delight to behold in it the artistic culmination of a romance, or a cleverly contrived weapon for the discomfiture of acquaintances and of those

whom Dante regarded as the cause of his personal misfortunes. Among them, the latest interest is study of the poem as revelation of a childhood neurosis. Certainly, it is with justice that they allege Dante's promise in the *Vita Nuova* to write of Beatrice "what hath never been written of any woman," and aver that judgments on individuals throughout the *Commedia* are not without their sting.

There is, on the other hand, a considerable school in whose opinion only littleness of mind could fail to perceive in the masterpiece of one of the world's greatest poets something more than the bereaved lover or the unhappy wanderer seeking compensation in dreams or satire. They see in the *Commedia* the work of a patriot and social reformer who, unable as administrator to realize his platform (revealed in the *Monarchia*), sought to present it in a poem of sufficient power to enlist the enthusiasm of princes. Their position is not difficult to defend, for of the very fabric of the *Commedia* are passages¹ of obvious political and social import.

Perhaps best known is the interpretation of the *Divina Commedia* as a prolonged tractate on ethics, in which Dante, like Bunyan's Christian, having become familiar with the wages of sin, proceeds to rid himself of the vices and acquire the virtues, that he may at last ascend to Paradise. Partisans of the ethical theory have such basis as Dante's statement of the poem's subject: "man,—as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of the freedom of his choice, he becomes liable to rewarding or punishing justice." Related is the contention that Dante's story is an evangelical thesis to demonstrate the humble position befitting the intellect in the presence of religious experience. Dante's confession of infidelity to Beatrice (who according to this theory is interpreted as Revelation or Faith, since she reflects divine truth) becomes then a confession of sinful preoccupation with philosophy.

Finally, the *Commedia* is regarded frequently as being solely of philosophical or mystical interest; and justification for this point of view is not far to seek. For completeness' sake, mention may be made of those for whom the poem is, like the Bible, a

1. For example, *Par.*, vi, 97-107 and *Par.*, xxx, 137-141.

source of mysterious prophecies. Even for their position support is granted in Dante's implicit comparison of his poem to Holy Scripture.

It is the very facility with which justification may be found for diverse interpretations of the *Commedia* that has been the occasion of so much annoyance among critics. One of them, for example, published a work entitled, "The Art of Misunderstanding Dante,"² wherein, having demolished to his satisfaction the political theory, he predicted with sarcasm that in the future would appear an interpretation of the poem as expressing the whole history of the Roman Empire. This critic then proceeded to give "the true interpretation" in terms of German pietism and romanticism.

No Dante critic need feel himself without justification; but for the confusion of all stand Dante's words: "of more senses than one." According to the explanation of its author, the *Commedia* is polysemous, to be interpreted *at one and the same time on different levels so closely interrelated that each is corrected by the other and that all are blended into an harmonious whole*. Such interpretation demands two things: the admission (on the basis of equal truth in their respective levels) of many meanings in addition to and necessary for the correction of that which happens to be the reader's special interest; and the rejection of certain meanings as ruled out by the harmony of the whole. For example, had the meaning of polyseme been appreciated by the school of criticism here termed evangelical, the implication would never have been possible that Dante, having left Reason (Virgil) behind, was in Paradise a sort of Orlando Furioso. Disregard of Dante's words and inevitably resultant misconceptions have gained a prevalence to be checked only as it becomes the custom among critics to study Dante with reference to his *milieu* no less enthusiastically than with reference to their own.

To make matters worse, however, the medieval *milieu* itself has been considered from the retrospective of modern advance, rather than from the perspective of the great intellectual development of which it was the culmination. In consequence

2. In Karl Witte, *Essays on Dante*.

there is readily at hand no basis from which the Dante student may proceed to the more refined aspects of his task and a clearing of the ground is demanded. With this in mind the present work as first conceived was arranged in two parts: the first having reference to the function of symbolism in medieval thinking, necessary background for an understanding of Dante; the second being a consideration (from an approach given justification in the general study) of the *Divina Commedia* as illustration and consummation of medieval theory. With the working out of the problem other arrangement seemed expedient. As the book now appears: Chapters I, III Part I, IV Part I, V Part I, and VI constitute a study in broad outlines of medieval symbolism as a whole, origins and philosophy, methods, molding of the learned tradition, and relation to the activities of the people; Chapters II, III Part II, IV Part II, V Part II, and VII constitute an application of the principles of medieval symbolic usage to the specific problem of Dante interpretation. The possibility is thus left open for anyone who prefers a different arrangement to accomplish it for himself or to omit entirely the sections of more specialized reference to Dante. A similar procedure with regard to the sections dealing with medieval theory for obvious reasons is not recommended to the Dante student.

It need scarcely be stated that complete treatment of symbolism in medieval thought, and complete solution of the problem of the *Divina Commedia*, are equally beyond the scope of this work. On the other hand the purpose is not, on the ground of some accepted theory, to analyze one more minor problem. It is rather to present, not a thorough and detailed interpretation of the *Commedia*, yet a basis for it, a pattern into which detailed studies may be fitted. Many of the interpretations here suggested will require monographs in their support, some of which it is the hope at a later date to supply. It should be understood clearly that such interpretations are presented far from dogmatically, even where limited space has rendered impracticable full recognition of the controversies involved. The present work must stand or fall on the harmony of the whole, not on any one detail of interpretation.

If it be conceded that in the letter to Can Grande and in the related passages in the *Convivio* Dante probably meant what he

said, and that³ the polyseme is not only consistent with Dante's nature and traditional heritage and with the period in which he lived, but also crucial in the whole of medieval thought; then the purpose of this study will have been achieved. On such a basis it is possible to synthesize meanings already found in the *Commedia* and to suggest at least in outline that which would be involved in a complete solution. The fuller comprehension alike of Dante and of the Middle Ages can be attained only as critics cease to insist that the true solution must be a question of "either—or," and to ignore both the possibility, and Dante's assertion, of "both—and."

Elucidated by an understanding of the polysemous nature of the *Commedia*, Dante's poetry may become again, as Shelley found it, "the bridge thrown over the stream of time which unites the modern and the ancient world." The restoration of this bridge is almost a *sine qua non* if modern thought is to become truly conversant with its great ancestry in the Middle Ages.

The author wishes to express indebtedness to Dr. Irwin Edman for encouragement in the study of Plotinian philosophy; to Dr. F. J. Foakes-Jackson for direction in reading on church history and practice; to Mr. Dino Bigongiari for *explications de textes* of the *Divina Commedia*; to Dr. Lynn Thorndike for guidance in the history of thought in the Middle Ages; to Dr. William W. Rockwell for bibliographical suggestions; to Canon Winfred Douglas for a critical reading of the entire manuscript; to Miss Mary A. Ewer for assistance in the preparation of the manuscript for the press; and to Mr. William Henry McCarthy, Jr., for a checking of bibliographical details. A special debt of gratitude is owed to Prof. Jefferson B. Fletcher, whose insight into the symbolism of the *Divina Commedia* first turned the author's studies in medieval symbolism into the particular channel of Dante criticism.

H. F. D.

New York City
April, 1927

3. Whether or not the authenticity of Epistle X be disputed, as it was a number of years ago. The letter now is generally accepted as genuine. The subject is fully treated by Dr. Moore in his *Studies in Dante. Third series*, pp. 284-374.

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SYMBOLISM IN MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

CHAPTER I. SCHEMA

Symbolism as a medium of expression. Symbol defined. Philosophy of symbolism. Philosophic basis of medieval symbolic usage. Method of medieval symbolic usage. Medieval search for knowledge. Summary.

CHAPTER I. SYMBOLISM AS A MEDIUM OF EXPRESSION: ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

Nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna,
che si dilata ed ingrada e redole
odor di lode al sol che sempre verna,
qual è colui che tace e dicer vole,
mi trasse Beatrice, e disse: "Mira
quanto è 'l convento de le bianche
stole!"

Within the yellow of the eternal rose,
which doth expand, rank upon rank,
and reeketh perfume of praise unto the
Sun that maketh Spring for ever, me—
as who doth hold his peace yet fain
would speak—Beatrice drew, and said:
"Behold how great the white-robed
concourse!"

I. PROEM

THE vision that sees in a yellow rose the solution of the drama of life and death is not native to this generation. Modern culture, formed in the rise of the scientific method, and freed from cobwebs of fantasy, finds itself in a position to smile at the *naïveté* that sees in a flower at once an expression of philosophic truth, the goal of a career, and the fulfilment of social and political theory. Dante's Celestial Rose is readily banished to the realm of poetic conceit or buried among the ashes of time-worn symbolisms, while contemporary thought puzzles genially over an almost obsolete tradition: seeking in its fossils disclosures of phenomena of mind, and ignoring their living rôle organic in the enigma of genius.

No longer, as in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is a rose a natural and appropriate expression of the deepest that is known. Once a luminous eternity unfolding without pause its myriad petals, each the throne of a radiance-vestured soul, it offered up perpetually as perfume the incense of creation's praise. As it mirrored, like the crystal sea, the Threefold Glory in whose radiance it was bathed, over it angelic multitudes, glowing and shadowless, like bees ascended and descended bearing blessings from the Sun. In this Celestial Rose has been discerned a statement of truth far more accurate than any possible to the unaided power of science, although demanding foundation in the most rigorous discipline of the intellect.¹

It is of the nature of today to exile such use of symbol to the realm of poetry, where it may be harmless, charming, even em-

1. Cf. the closeness of Dante's scientific reasoning, for example in *Convivio*, 3, 5, and also of the reasoning in the *Monarchia*, where are analyzed those theories for which he gives consummate expression in the Rose.

blematically suggestive of a Paradise itself long since relegated to the same region. Dante was a poet, but he was likewise a statesman and a student of the sciences; he lived in an age in which specialization was not yet supreme as the means of penetrating into the mystery of the universe. For him, symbolism constituted not only the natural, but the most adequate expression. Today even poets are puzzled by the intricacy of Dante's imagery, and scientists fail to recognize in him a kindred spirit. Historians, although unable to ignore his thought, prefer the more direct and lucid expression current in the literature of the League of Nations, while lovers of utopias are more drawn to the delicate conceits of the Houyhnhnms than to the pageant of the *Paradiso*. The *Divina Commedia*, although an inspiration in the Renaissance and from time to time of men of genius who have "trusted their light bark to the waves in Dante's wake," is so little understood that it has become the seldom-disputed prey of scholars delighting in the obscure.

The modern reader of medieval philosophy, lore of the medieval church, early fable and allegory, Grail legends, courtly love, mysticism, alchemy, astrology, wonders at the puerile and contradictory extravagance of the Middle Ages. Now and then he looks askance at the masterpiece of genius, which in some way grew out of that perplexing period. Perhaps allured by the suggestion that in the *Commedia* of Dante Alighieri may be locked the solution of many puzzles, and half suspecting from the baffling ubiquity of symbolism in medieval thought and expression that in it may lie the key, he may be challenged to the quest for the lost secret of its use.

Should he aspire to penetrate the jungle of adversities on a quest for an understanding of medieval symbolism, he may well undertake, like the hero of myth and faery, several preliminary exploits as it were for the achievement of magic cap, mirror, steed, and sword, against the perils which are to throng the path. He should be prepared with a definition of symbol, and he should know something of its philosophy and ultimate origin. Not only this but there must be added a survey of the philosophic bases of medieval symbolic usage itself, and the method by which medieval thought in its quest for knowledge

wrought of the materials of symbolism a means of penetration into the mysteries of the universe. To win this equipment will be the task of the introductory chapter, after which the quest may well commence with a rough map (Chap. II) of the ground which it would seem that Dante intended his scripture to cover, in which may be observed, as in a microcosm, the Middle Ages itself. Next, endeavor must be made to isolate and analyze (Chaps. III to V), in the light of Dante's traditional heritage and of the thought of his time, the more important aspects of the multiplex symbolism of the *Divina Commedia*, thus to test the validity of that which has been postulated. Confirmation may then be sought (Chap. VI) in a glimpse of the varied activity of the thirteenth century, which at the same time should have been illumined by the preceding study. It will remain to ponder on the meaning of that which has been achieved.

II. SYMBOL DEFINED

"Qu'est-ce-que le symbolisme? On frisson à la pensée qu'il faudra répondre à cette question-là!" Beaunier.

THE student of symbolism nowadays follows a Siren's song; his peace of mind is the inevitable sacrifice. Let him consider well before he attempt to communicate his ideas, especially if he has ventured beyond two or three well-defined phases of his subject. If his interest be in the mathematical system, he will attain to the understanding of a restricted audience. If it be in the static arts, to the sympathy of colleagues will be added from those to whom symbolism suggests "apples and pomegranates in the hands of medieval Madonnas" such understanding as may be gleaned from *Baedekers* and glossaries. The psychologist or interpreter of dream symbols, to some degree supposedly beneath the banner of Freud, will be surrounded by the fascinated—admirers and calumniators alike. With these types of symbolist our generation is at ease; it has labeled them and their terminology has penetrated its vocabulary. Not so, however, with the symbolist who sees in his theme a fundamental impulse, essential alike in human thought and expression. Even among those of kindred interests such an alien must "run the gauntlet" in the ordeal of definition of terms.

To say that in the field of language the word "symbol" has been used loosely is an euphemism. There are books professing to deal with the subject, the authors of which seem cheerfully oblivious of the fact that definition is a useful convention. An indication of the inadequacy of current exposition of symbolism is the frequency of such questions as: How does symbol "differ from" allegory, analogy, emblem, sacrament, parable, metaphor, and the like?

Fundamentally, as far as there is any agreement among men, it is agreed that a symbol is an expression of meaningful experience. The basis in association (of course between some combination of ideas, emotions, and sensations) is indicated in the root of the word itself.² As to association, there is unwonted accord among philologists and philosophers, psychologists and psychiatrists, that essentially it is of two types. Following the ancient classification of knowledge, association has been defined as mediate and immediate³ or more recently as extrinsic (association through contiguity) and intrinsic (association through resemblance).⁴ Two types of symbol are thus defined, which for present purposes will be noted as the extrinsic or arbitrary-association and the intrinsic or descriptive.⁵

With these two groups of symbols⁶ readily classified and explained as dependent on simple psychological laws of association, it is customary to assume the subject to have been covered. There remains to be defined, however, a group of symbols which depend on a synthetic process for which as yet psychology has no adequate description, as for the validity of its analogies philoso-

2. Symbol, from *σύμβολον-συμβαλλειν*, to put together (*σύν* + *βαλλειν*, to throw). For the range of variation in use of the term symbol, reference should be made to Appendix I, ii, footnotes. Consideration of the problem, in relation to the divergent statements and ideas there exemplified, has suggested the possibility and expediency of dealing with symbol under a threefold classification.

3. Among others, by Wundt, Kraepelin, and Aschaffenburg. (Cf. Leonardo Bianchi, *The Mechanism of the Brain*, p. 220.)

4. Wundt's terminology. With this classification, however, the world was already familiar as a result of the learning of Teufelsdröckh—see Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, Bk. III, chap. 3 (Everyman ed., pp. 167-169). Compare also C. G. Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, p. 105.

5. For full differentiation of the two types of symbol, cf. Appendix I, ii.

6. Cf. Appendix I, ii, for a more detailed discussion of arbitrary-association and of descriptive symbols.