

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

**The Art of Symbol-Making:
Literary Symbol
by William York Tindall**

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Philippine Studies vol. 5, no. 1 (1957): 106–109

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It was to be expected that these Discourses should be altogether in keeping with the religious spirit of his time and bear the marks of the ardent and simple piety that are so characteristic of the works of Kempis, and appeal directly to the affections.

In this work the venerable author, while interspersing with his thoughts and exhortations an abundance of appropriate texts of Scripture, is eloquent in his praise of the exalted dignity of God's Holy Mother, the surpassing holiness and virtues that adorn her blessed life, her joys and sorrows, and the high place that is hers in heaven as Queen of Angels and Saints, and extols the power of her intercession, as well as the maternal care and blessings that she so liberally bestows upon those of her clients who are tenderly devoted to herself and her Divine Son.

The prayers that are added will excite devotion, while the examples show how Our Blessed Lady rewards those that go to her with confidence.

A critical edition of the *Opera omnia* of Kempis was published by Herder in eight volumes at the beginning of the century. An English translation of the same was begun soon after in London published (I believe) by Kegan Paul. The present translation is therefore not the first to appear in English. It is perhaps a useful translation but, it must be said, not very distinguished.

HENRY A. COFFEY

THE ART OF SYMBOL-MAKING

THE LITERARY SYMBOL. By William York Tindall. New York. Columbia University Press. 1955. Pp. 278.

Philosophers of literature assure us that symbol-making is man's natural activity and condition. This interest in symbols, whether as a way of presenting reality or a way of apprehending it, is rooted deep in the human instinct. From the days of the mist-shrouded, charcoal-sketching cavemen to the era of our desolated artists who try in their tormented writings to give body to the horrors and agonies of our cultural wasteland, man has ever been

dissatisfied with the austere literal ways of expression. Literature and the arts are crowded with symbols of every kind, saying something by something else.

This fundamental habit of mind, though discernible in every age of man's artistic effort, rises at certain periods for reasons that can be historically reconstructed to a more conscious and deliberate attitude. The Age of Dante for example is often put forward as an age distinctly symbolical in practically all the phases of its cultural expression. Closer to our time, the symbolist movement beginning somewhere at the close of the last century carries on to our day, influencing profoundly and pervasively every level of our modern art. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that at no other time in literary history has the artist been more pre-occupied with symbol-making. Names like Melville, Baudelaire, Yeats, Joyce, Valery, Wallace Stevens, Faulkner, T. S. Eliot and a host of others immediately come to mind. The interest of these writers in symbols has produced in the reading public a corresponding awareness of the symbolic climate in literature. If for no other reason than this, Mr. Tindall's work *The Literary Symbol* is assured of a gratifying reception.

The author begins in Chapter One with an approach to a definition of literary symbol. Starting with the Webster's Dictionary definition and reviewing other contemporary attempts Mr. Tindall, after many "approaches and withdrawals," finally essays a working definition:

The literary symbol, an analogy for something unstated, consists of an articulation of verbal elements, that, going beyond reference and the limits of discourse, embodies and offers a complex of feeling and thought. (p. 12)

He goes on to explain: "Not necessarily image, this analogical embodiment may also be a rhythm, a juxtaposition, an action, a proposition, a structure, or a poem." In this definition, dangerously close to being a definition of literature in general, the word "embodies," according to the author, sufficiently specifies the literary symbol from anything else like it. One does not find it easy to quarrel with the author's position, enforced as it is by a keenly analytical discrimination of meanings between symbol and other literary devices akin to symbol, such as signs, emblems, allegory, metaphor, etc.

Chapter Two is a kind of peace offering to the disappointed reader who expected a survey rather than an inquiry into a limited literary period. This chapter, in effect a history of the symbol, traces the many stages of the analogical mode in literature from the allegorical in Dante and the Middle Ages through the "metaphysical" metaphor of Donne and the 17th Century and the metaphor-as-decoration of the mechanistic 18th Century to the emergence during the Romantic Movement of the symbol as we know it today. A large portion of this chapter describes the role played by the hermetic tradition (especially the idea of correspondences between the various hierarchies of the cosmos) in preserving the symbol as created constructs, through the hostile Age of Reason; how a revival of the hermetic point of view accompanied by a revival of the metaphysical metaphor resulted in a predilection among the symbolists for the private or semi-private aesthetic world.

The third chapter, "Supreme Fictions," contains a comprehensive account of the symbolist novel which, although one of the outstanding forms of our time, has received, according to Mr. Tindall, very scant attention. The author undertakes to supply this void in contemporary criticism. Devotees of the symbolist novel and neophytes alike will find his account thorough, enlightening, sympathetically accurate, full of sensitive intuitions. The author not only accounts for the rise of the poetic or symbolist novel during the last few decades but also discovers its character, describes its techniques, analyzes its typical images and typical modes of image-making, evaluates its most successful artists, and appraises the popularity it achieved in the literary field where it all but supplanted poetry from which it had learned its lessons. The symbolist novel at present, Mr. Tindall avers, suffers not from exhausted possibilities but from the inability of minor authors to create an adequate context for their borrowed symbols. This account of the symbolist novel, and the whole book for that matter, might conceivably have the effect of sending the reader back to his bookshelf to rediscover his symbolists or even tempt the timorous uninitiates to take the first step.

The last four chapters of the book investigate in greater detail what the third chapter broadly outlines. Each of the four chapters analyzes symbolic parts—image, action, structure, form—and illustrates them from the work of the most outstanding symbolists, both poets and novelists. Mr. Tindall's justification of

this piecemeal dissection is "displaying the text and calling those parts to notice that might be missed by a more casual approach." In undertaking these very thorough analyses, the author has also presented us with a highly-qualified critique of the most challenging poets and novelists of present-day literature, including two leading figures, Wallace Stevens and E. M. Forster, "whom criticism, in general, has failed to comprehend." The last chapter of all is especially noteworthy for the discussion of form, an elusive and slippery concept which not infrequently escapes the competence of less capable critics. A sense of richness, breadth and profundity pervades these last four sections of the book, containing as they do very thorough explorations done with vital perceptiveness and critical depth.

The Literary Symbol should prove of great value to lovers of significant literature, to professors of College English, and to careful and interested students of the literary arts. The work abounds everywhere with rewarding determinations of literary concepts, the result no doubt of the author's antecedent attempts to clarify the ideas to himself. The book makes moderately difficult reading, the matter, not the language, causing the difficulty. The reviewer confesses to any number of backtracking and rereading to catch the full import of a sentence, a definition, an interpretation, an illustration, etc., and this in spite of the fact that the criticism is rarely, if ever, saddled with the eccentricities of too personal and too technical a terminology.

Never factious or dogmatic, the tone of the book is charmingly tentative yet confidently assured. One of Mr. Tindall's occupations, that of Professor of Contemporary Texts at Columbia University, should commend this full account of the author's aesthetic even to the most discriminating and exacting reader. Let the reader but refuse to be infuriated by an occasional pun, or "smart" utterance, or language in a lighter vein—inconsequential specks in a basically sound and competent work—and he can promise himself in the pages of *The Literary Symbol* an informative excursion into the mysterious and elaborate architecture of the symbolist world.

ANTONIO T. LEETAI