Proprieties and Vagaries

Hammond, Albert L

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Hammond, Albert L.
Proprieties and Vagaries: A Philosophical Thesis from Science, Horse Racing, Sexual Customs, Religion, and Politics.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68473

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2412296
Symbols*

The More Actual for the more real: if there is any rule for symbols this seems to be it—but roughly. So the familiar is used as symbol for the unfamiliar, the clearer for the more obscure, the small for the large, the more trivial for the important, the easier for the harder, "the less primitive component of experience for the more primitive" according to Whitehead.¹ All these comparatives figure, of course, as in the estimation of the user, at least of the originator; for symbolizing is deliberately or implicitly intentional. So the written shape or the uttered sound is symbol for the word, the word for what we want to say, the swastika for lightning and for Hitler, the fox for cunning, Griselda for patience, Dante's trip for the pathway of the soul, rosemary for remembrance.

¹ To the Johns Hopkins Tudor and Stuart Club, May 15, 1959. The introductory paragraphs have been revised. A part of the conclusion, because of time, was not read.

SYMBOLS

These represent many sorts, by no means all the sorts, of items which serve somehow as signs and to which the word “symbol” may be, but does not have to be, applied. “Symbol” might be used of some of the things meant by any of the following words: sign, mark, significative, note, word, character, token, indication, index, type, signal, ideogram, hieroglyph, representation, copy, icon, resemblance, recognizance, model, pictogram, pattern, image, instance, example, signe, emblem, colors, regalia, crest, favor, badge, totem, signature, ensign, sacrament, ensample, figure, trope, metaphor, simile, analogy, allegory, shadow, paradigm.

Three sorts of symbols seem chiefly to attract the assured or eulogistic word “symbol” in current fashion; at least these are chiefly the topic of this paper.

Say “symbol” to a mathematician or a logician, he thinks of the plus sign, the horseshoe, his variables, x, y, a, b, P, Q. These are made with express intention, are arbitrary in the sense that the iconic basis if any is forgotten or unimportant, and are stipulated—often need to be expressly stipulated not only for full formality but also for general understanding since the users of these symbols are well-known for their separatism (logicians fail to agree on a symbol for the negative although most of them agree negation is their least replaceable notion).

Say “symbol” to a literary man, he thinks of Rimbaud, Yeats, Wordsworth’s skylark and Keats’ urn, Faust and Mephistopheles, and of course, the white
whale. These symbols are made, discovered, contrived with more or less conscious intention or are allegedly so, are free in respect of their authors but not free in respect of their objects, where some iconic, analogic, allegoric, naturalness of connection is essential. The question of possible mistake in the critic’s allegation of the author’s intention is real here but hardly admissible with the preceding class of symbols.

Say “symbol” to a psychologist or sociologist, he thinks of Freud, dreams, an act of retirement as expressing “the” wish to return to the security of the womb, nature gods, “conspicuous waste,” and the gray flannel suit. These, too, have necessarily a sort of intentionality but typically one that is unconscious or forgotten. The flavor of allegation in the assertion of these symbols is stronger; the allegation seems almost incapable of testimonial confirmation and unneedful of it. We can ask a poet whether he meant to do so and so, and most of us would give some credence to his answer. Here we are rather in the position of the interpreter who is more interested in the poet than the poem. Milton, the interpreter may say, used that “fairest of her daughters, Eve,” as symbol of a proper woman’s unselfish devotion; that he did so was symbol of male incompleteness and Milton’s frustration with his first wife. Since these psychological-sociological-anthropological symbols are meant as after-the-event explanations and as revelatory, the assertor remains assertoric despite any conscious denial on the part of the supposed user of the symbol.
SYMBOLS

And, though this is unfair to psychology and sociology, when a propagandist picks up the technique, the assertion often seems the most confident when the assertor has the least sympathy or acquaintance with that which he is accounting for. Some of the world's most logical and cogent analyses (as in the *Malleus Maleficarum*) and some of the most ingenious and eloquent explanations have been of things that exist only in the beliefs of the analyst or the explainer.

The world has had its fashions in the extent of its symbol-using and symbol-seeing and in what symbols it has used for what. He who thinks of the love of a child for his father and of the father for his child as a sign of God in the world thinks of God as more real than the actual psychology he finds. He who sees God as symbol for the child's later remembered love for his father, thinks psychological "drives" are more real and acceptable as ultimates than "God"—the intended meaning of the actual words he hears. We would learn about symbols and about history if we had a historical almanac to tell us how much symbolism each age went in for and what symbols it used and what it meant by them. We work without it.

I accept two basic sorts of real: things and their characters. Then there is artifice: what we do with these; for example, language. So there are signs: "natural" (although nothing is a sign except in the recognition of a mind), and "arbitrary," and the symbolizations of the art of living and of fine art, all of which are both
natural and made up. "Symbol" and "symbolic" have not always been the word: in Alexandria "allegorical" was fashionable and in the later Middle Ages "analogy." A wider and more recondite word might be safer than the present "symbol"—say "anagoge" and "anagogic"—with appeal to "man's glassy essence," Shakespeare, and C. S. Peirce. But since today's usages are here my target, today's word is better. Perhaps I can put a case using both: I willingly concede that man in his communicating is essentially, although only in part, anagogic; but I have protests, also partial, against today's devotion to the symbol.

Artists who contrive symbols and the critics of their arts will argue, praise, and object to the skill of the contrivances. Psychologists and sociologists and historians of ideas may praise or object to the adequacy or consequences of the asserted symbols. With these we are not concerned. External or philosophic objections may come from someone who thinks the contrivers or the descryers of symbols are too fond of the game. He may also think that because of this they are letting the symbol swallow what is symbolized, forgetting the normal assumption of the greater reality of the latter. Someone may object that from the viewpoint of certain objects they ought not to be treated symbolically or from the viewpoint of certain symbols that they ought not to be used as symbols or that certain asserted symbols are not symbols at all. Someone may object that the ontologic vector of the symbolization is misread or misdirected.
SYMBOLS

"He heweth him down cedars and taketh the cypress and the oak. . . .
"He burneth part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire.
"And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it and worshipeth it and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god. . . .
"And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge or understanding to say, I have burned part of it in the fire; yea also I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh and eaten it: and shall I make the residue an abomination? Shall I fall down before the stock of a tree?"

Hamlet: O, the recorder. Let me see.—To withdraw with you:—why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?
Guil: O, my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly.
Ham. I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?
Guil. My lord, I cannot.
Ham. I pray you.
Guil. Believe me, I cannot.
Ham. I do beseech you.
Guil. I know no touch of it, my lord.

Isaiah, 44:14-19.
PROPRIETIES AND VAGARIES

Ham. 'Tis as easy as lying. Govern these ventages with your finger and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most excellent music. Look you, these are the stops.

Guil. But these cannot I command to any utterance of harmony. I have not the skill.

Ham. Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.³

Oh who can hold a fire in his hand
By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?
Or clog the hungry edge of appetite
By bare imagination of a feast?
Or wallow naked in December snow
By thinking on fantastic summer heat?⁴

We are symbols and inhabit symbols.⁵

Let me put the chief point of my thesis, which is a complaint, at once and bluntly; asking you at the same

³ Hamlet, Act III, scene 2.
⁴ Richard II, Act I, scene 3.
⁵ Emerson, “Oversoul.”
time to believe that I shall add many qualifications and
distinctions and that I have more than I shall add. Much
symbolic interpretation makes me want to put Hamlet’s
indignation into the mouth of what is being symboli-
cally interpreted. “What an unworthy thing you would
make of me.” And this is the more so as what is inter-
preted is close to what Hamlet is or is thought of
as being, a real person, at least a real thing. I am a sub-
stantialist: I think the basic inventory of all that is would
be at least in part and in irreducible part in terms of
individual, existent, continuing and changing things like
you and me. Our existence and reality make us poor
symbols. Men and women of history become symbols
only as they lose their individuality. So, too, I think
it is with the gods, prophets, and persons of religious
knowledge or faith. Persons created by the artist to be
as if existent are, like us, poor symbols. But, as much
more than symbols, we and they have a right to some
of Hamlet’s protest (though most of us poor actuals
have de-realized ourselves more than Hamlet did)
against being turned to a lesser role we are not fitted for.

Those of you who are explicitly or implicitly by
present fashion on the symbolist side, and therefore sus-
picious of my antisymbolist beginning (and I imagine
most of you are), and also those of you who are ac-
customed to keeping your logical suspicions attentive
through at least the first two or three pages of such a
paper as this (and all of you are here)—will already
have noted several challenges you might make to my
use of the text from Hamlet. Here you should say: “I don’t see that Hamlet is objecting to being used as a symbol. What are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern making him a symbol of?” And you will be right but not sufficiently so.

I could escape by saying that all I need of Hamlet’s speech is that, just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are assuming to pluck out the heart of Hamlet’s mystery by finding out why he is putting an antic disposition on, so the critic who uses Hamlet merely as a “symbol” of intellectualized indecision, or of noncommitment or of the death-wish-where-the-sexual-drive-is-aristocratically-inhibited is assuming to pluck out that mystery. And other symbolic uses go further and may do worse except that there is a measure of caution and of truth in the very multiplicity of interpretations. But I am not content simply to let it go at that.

There is a sense in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are making a symbol of Hamlet—they are forgetting his substantiality and putting him into that other great field of being sometimes called abstractions, of characteristics or possible characteristics of substantial persons or things. Or, perhaps, they are putting him in that intermediate and secondary field of signs, symbols, and surrogates for the real; both of which fields share the difference from substantial things in that they can be seen through and cannot be “made an unworthy thing” by being pried into and understood. (There is some paradox here, for in the older usage the symbol
SYMBOLS

is supposed to be the more concrete stand-in for the more abstract. Well, in the older usage the symbol was ordinarily in what I have called the derived field and stood for something in the abstract field: the figure of the cross is the symbol of Christianity, the picture of the lion the symbol of courage; or, perhaps, something in the field of artifice is the symbol—though here the word was apt to be "emblem"—of something in the substantial field, as the figure of a lion may be the mark of an actual king of England, say Richard I. To this I shall return.) At any rate the abstract and the artifice invite theoretical knowledge—may defy it but invite it. The substantial, the person, properly invites love or battle, not explication. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are making Hamlet an object of study and using him as a counter in their game of preferment with the new king.

This ignoring of substantiability in favor of prying I take to be one of the vices of our age. It has wider bases and ramifications than my topic but let us note the fashionableness of our psychological curiosity. The anatomist, the physiologist, the pathologist, the medical doctor are among our greatest benefactors and they have their platform of safety in the attention to the body with its objective parts; but even they become, of necessity but at some peril, psychosomatists and confessors. The personal psychologist, psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, too, we must have—but where is there safety from intrusion and falsification? And sometimes they do play
upon us—sometimes unfret us. And when the doctor passes from the observable parts of the body to the un-observable “parts” of the self, mind, soul (the “personality” it is now, I believe), a whole new pertinence if not necessity of a new set of symbols comes in. What are will, intellect, instinct, id, superego but devices to stand more or less truthfully for doings of the real person, the substance?

Now, of course, Hamlet is not literally substantial. That there may have been a historic Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, in Elsinore is something else again. And it is commonplace that he is more real than most people in that he is more interesting, greater. But he is, as I have said, “taken as being” real, and by this I mean not only that Shakespeare intended to write of him so that the reader would think he was writing as he would write about a real person, but also that Shakespeare himself dealt with him in great part as though he were real. He clearly learned more about this “creation” of his after his first reading of the story, on to his play as represented in the First Quarto, and so to the Folio. Did he decide to put in extra touches in a consciously contrived construct, for dramatic or poetic or even psychological reasons? I don’t doubt that he did, but he did more than this. I think that fundamental to such touches was the fact that Shakespeare thought and felt about Hamlet and learned about him as about a real man. He learned about him, that is, not by study or analysis or prying but by living with him; so that at once much
SYMBOLS

became clearer and the mystery became richer and deeper because its "heart" was left in place.

This seems to me a very realistic view and I would distribute it to almost all the great characters of literature. But it does not seem "realistic" in the technical sense of literary schools if I understand that usage. The "realist" restricts himself to observable facts or materialistically acceptable simple motives and puts everything of this sort—especially everything unpleasant—in. Imagine—or rather let us not imagine—Hamlet as written by this sort of a realist. On the other hand the symbolist (in a narrow but not the French sense) might have his own moral, or his own metaphysical or psychological or even political lesson he wants to impress, or a set of emotions and impressions he wants to suggest. He adds to the framework of Hamlet whatever will and only what will serve as analogy or metaphor for that further vision. The actual Hamlet quite breaks through either formula.

I know, however, that there are those here who have much more familiarity and more competence than I have in literary history and in the interpretation of literary imagination and methods. And this part of my doctrine, while an ingredient and perhaps helpful to my other conclusions, may not be logically essential to them.

All that I have said of those conclusions so far may perhaps be summarized as: No chronicle of a real person, or history, or poem or novel or tale or play which
makes up a character to be taken as a real person should use that person or those persons simply to symbolize some ulterior interest of the author or the reader, whatever that interest may be. And it seems a sort of corollary of this that, although the "omniscient author" may be tolerated as knowing all that happens to his character, he is not easily to be tolerated as knowing all there is about any person, even the simplest, even his own creation—first because there is no way to know all there is of what is actually there and second because some of what he must presume to know is not there to be known anyway.

I hurry to get in two of my qualifying acknowledgments: that there are many other symbolic modes, and that even here I am not presuming to prohibit. Some of the other symbolic modes I shall consider. I am sure some of you have been saying to yourselves, "Even if Hamlet is not a symbol, Hamlet himself seems to use the recorder as one." The matter of prohibition has two aspects. I have built my case in part on my substantialist metaphysics—the primary reality of the individual thing, not of its stuffs or elements or equations or drives. This metaphysics is so far from being standard in my own craft guild of philosophers—I think it pretty normally is standard outside—that it is not fashionable, although it is becoming more so again. But I certainly cannot impose a conclusion resting on a premise others do not accept. Indeed, here it may be a direct begging of the question since I suppose one basic
SYMBOLS

difference between my feeling and that of the anagogic opposition is in my substantialist wish to hang on to as much as may be of literal fact. On the other hand my argument even as built here is not just on that basis and, even so far as it is, it is, as is every argument, built on one's own major premises and is properly presented if honestly presented as such—for the concurrence of those who also accept those majors, for the hoped-for concurrence in both premises and conclusion of those who have not taken any position as to the majors, and even for the hoped-for concurrence in the conclusion of those who deny the majors since true conclusions are often derived from false premises.

And indeed I can argue in the opposite direction, from the unsatisfactoriness of this mode of symbolizing to the metaphysical priority of the thing.

Still and nevertheless, although I argue for one style as better and against another as partly mistaken and inverted (like a fourth figure syllogism when a first figure is available) I would not prohibit the worse. I have no prerogative of prohibition, and I am a patron of variety who thinks that sometimes a better and a worse are better than two betters of the same sort, and anyway, even if I thought the symbolism in question is worse than I do think it, I should not wish to prohibit it. I think, let us say, the taste for the tyranny of the telephone is worse, but I would not prohibit the telephone—I have friends who scarcely survive the day without that busy way of wasting time. And the world seems full
of people and indubitably intelligent and learned ones who would find little interest in the one-legged captain and his white whale except as symbols of pride's war against evil or something, and I should not want to take that from them or to take from Melville his fame at this late date. I should note there may be differences in using the man, the men, the whale, the ship, the voyage, or incidental devices as symbol.

We use the nearer, more familiar, more concrete, more easily handled, more available to symbolize the further away, less familiar, more abstract, more difficult and problematic; also we use the less real, less important, less threatening or promising, less enduring to symbolize the more real and important. These two motives are part of the reason that two ages, peoples, circles, persons can sometimes take the same pairs in opposite directions, and indeed that the same age or person can go both ways.

We talk of nature gods, we read Cassirer and say that for their devotees these gods were symbols of natural processes: the Hopi rain god (was there one?) was a symbol of rain. I suppose for the anthropologist or present semanticist rain and the social need for rain are obviously real and the god obviously unreal. But I suspect that for the Hopi—though I have never talked with or even seen a Hopi—it would be nearer the truth to say rain was seen or is seen maybe as a manifestation, sign, if you please symbol, of the rain god. And common sense would say the notion of explanation and of pro-
SYMBOLS

duction and of getting something produced—and quite literally—is also there.

When we see the trash can turned over and say, “That dog has been here,” we don’t use the dog as a symbol of the trash can’s overthrow or of trash-can-overnowness universalized. And if we say, “Take it to City Hall” we don’t mean that City Hall is a symbol of interposition, retribution, or rescue. I think Cassirer and Mrs. Langer are quite right that there surely is much more than utilitarian consideration in early or any religious doctrine and practice. There is ritual for its own sake and there is satisfaction of curiosity, which go on into worship and science. But when explanation, the satisfaction of curiosity, shifted with Thales and the Milesian Greeks, it shifted, without knowing it, in the direction of symbolic statement, not away from it, it gave up, and not only gave up but renounced, the ideal of literalness; but poetry and religion, together with common sense, did not give it up. In so far as they do they become, or are in danger of becoming, science. There is a great glory of science and hereby we increase that glory. But there is one glory of the moon and another glory of the sun; and when everything becomes science and symbolic the glory of realistic vision has departed. One doctrine might properly welcome this, I think, and only one: the thorough mystic who thinks science and history and poetry and religion and all discourse are symbolic but that beyond all these is the unspeakable vision which alone gives reality. I assent to
the mystic claim of vision but not to his claim of truth, still less to his claim of a monopoly of truth or of the vision of the real.

Now among the purposes of symbolizing in literature even among writers the least prone to liken themselves to scientists is the pedagogic, the argumentative one of proving some point in the symbolized doctrine, of assuring its acceptance by the persuasiveness of the symbol. The symbol here, to be sure, does not explain as the scientific theory with its symbols explains the symbolized fact or as the scientific model explains the theory—rather the literary symbol explains to the learner (reader or writer himself) how the explanation explains, how the theory is to be understood and so wins its acceptance by the clarification the symbolic story lends. (According to Francis Bacon there is also the motive of concealment.) According to Whitehead, for the poet the actual scene is the symbol and stands for and suggests the words, which for the poet are the “meaning” of the scene. This is accurate on Whitehead’s definition and theory but they are concerned with a very bare and basic level of symbolic activity. In those symbolisms we are apt to think of in literature the poet presumably in some degree has the “meaning” and the reader in mind and picks out or creates the symbol, the symbolic object or tale, so as to convey, enforce, evidence the meaning to the reader.

This interferes with the fundamental rule of for-its-own-sake for one who accepts it. It also raises the ques-
SYMBOLS

tion: why, if the author wants to convey a meaning, doesn’t he do so directly, and why if the reader wants to learn meaning—say ethics—doesn’t he do so directly? Some, of course, both authors and readers, do; but many do not and are frankly or implicitly impatient or contemptuous of straight theory while avid of the same subject matter delivered in the artistical and symbolic. This situation partly accounts for the wariness of theorists like me who do like to take our theory straight; a preference spiced for the professional with a degree of envy that so many who are amused or bored by the idea of studying the *Nichomachean Ethics* or the third book of Hume’s *Treatise* will study and discourse long on moral philosophy as taught by Faust or the white whale.

And yet these same resentful professionals will appeal—some of them—to the same ensamples and not just as ensamples. I have often said, in courses in ethics when the question comes up as to where the philosopher can get his ethical facts and principles, that there are at least three needful sources: a) one’s direct perceptions of value in concrete particular cases and in such cases abstracted and formalized, b) by deduction from metaphysical, logical, and religious premises or systematizations, c) from the perceptions and decisions and situations of the past as selected and focused in myth, poem, play, and novel. If one says these principles can be got from the *Nichomachean Ethics* and the *Treatise* and the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of*
PROPRIETIES AND VAGARIES

Morals, I answer: To be sure, but only in so far as Aristotle and Hume and Kant got them from some such sources. What they add preciously to the same perception the poet may have is the recognition and elaboration of the philosopher.

The solution, so far as one is needed here, seems fairly simple. It is not the case that the original creation came to the artist as revelation, or by subconscious imagination or prediscursive insight, the artist having no doctrine or idea or access to idea or doctrine for which his plastic or analogical imagination should seek out a symbol. Nor is it probably the case that the author of the good symbolic work of art has his abstract meaning and his reader firmly in mind and then picks out his symbolic vehicle. This is done, of course, and usually the result is less than excellent. If the meaning is sufficiently simple even if not universally accepted or generally practiced, it can be the pre-existent and overarching meaning while the story proceeds, if the author is of the proper meditative cast with a still-dominant concrete imagination. I should put The Scarlet Letter here. A thesis which we all know (the virtue of openness and the peril of hiddenness), which is doctrinally obvious and almost unavoidable, and yet which we flout and often disbelieve in our real belief as well as in our action, is manifested and enforced by a tale at once simple and subtle and powerful in its own right and in its telling. But I think not many have succeeded where Hawthorne did; and did Hawthorne always? And I have the right
SYMBOLES

to add that I do not consider the fable of *The Scarlet Letter* even undebatably symbolic or allegorical; it is rather a literal instance. Hester Prynne is very real and neither she nor Arthur Dimmesdale is symbolic though each may be called a type of moral fate; the letter A that Hester wears is a symbol.

More usually—or is it more rarely because only then it is at its best—the artist creates a character and a story and learns something of the "meaning" as he goes along, as I have said I think Hamlet grew in the creation. And what is Hamlet? I have heard so many interpretations most of them "wrong only in that they cannot help thinking themselves right." I would give an interpretation which would validate many, not all, of the others and some of those still to come. Shakespeare took the story of the Prince of Denmark and the ghost and, as he created that most real person and his fellows, the genius—not only dramatic genius—of Shakespeare constantly learned and followed and made more of the problems and solutions Hamlet makes. I think the play is the story of a powerful mind of considerable learning and great rhetoric, who is in a tough spot, and whose rhetoric plausibly presents the proper action according to the proprieties of Elizabethan England, of Aristotle (from whom he virtually quotes), of chivalry, even of Europeanized Christianity; but whose acumen, feeling, wit, and wisdom are always too wise to be really led by his rhetoric. The commentators assume he ought to have swept to his revenge, and then argue ingeniously as to
what prevented him. I am not sure Shakespeare thought so and I am sure Hamlet, although his rhetoric sometimes assures him of it, never found his mind or his will or his soul clearly assenting. He had a commission without commitment, not because he lacked the power of commitment but because he was too smart and too wise not to suspect the goodness of the commission.

A symbol, it seems, cannot be only a symbol. It is not merely that there must be something for it as a sign to signify, it must have some sort of being in its own right before being used as symbol. But there is a difference in the sort of prior reality. “Being in its own right” may point to a full natural existence (as the recorders were there and playable before Hamlet used them as symbol of his voice and mystery and as Napoleon was a living man before he was ever used as a symbol of glory), or a logical being (as the triangle taken as symbol of unadjusted love and the ratio of the diameter to the circumference of a circle taken as the irrational rule of the world. “Being in its own right,” however, may point to a mere “token” existence, made up simply to serve as symbol. Such are the symbols of the alphabet, of any algebra or calculus (as a little drawn triangle is the symbol for the triangle, pi is the symbol for the ratio of the diameter to the circumference of the circle, \( = \) means “equal to”). That is, what is used as a symbol may have been made for that purpose, or not.

But the division may mislead us and the left-out third may be the most important for our present consideration. In art, notably in literature, everything is “made up,” and
then possibly used as symbol. The question is: How far was it made up in order to be used as symbol? How far was it made up to be as though having a being in its own right before any use, symbolic or otherwise? How far was it made up to serve a use—entertainment, literal instruction, edification—different from and maybe prior to the symbolic use if any? How far was it made up with a complex of motives? I believe it is the second rubric gives us the best art—and probably the best symbols.

And surely if we are to learn—as I have said I as a student of ethics want to learn—from a created story and character, we can do so, in the way I mean, only if the author’s insight into reality enables him to create a story more real or more understandable than mixed-up actuality. If his story is made up by him only to symbolize a theory he already had, I shall do better, and should prefer, to get the theory from him straight—or I think I will go to Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer. It is as though the physicist or the biologist appeals to evidence constituted by a story he tells and from which his own hypothesis must be extricated. This is not altogether bad, by any means; the scientist does this, in part, and so does the philosopher, to explicate and test the plausibility of his theory. But factual evidence must come from the independent outside. It is this, we know, that caused the emphasis in scientific method on the devising of experiments for future doing. The antecedent reality of the writer’s story is the correlate of the futurity of the scientist’s experiment.

All communication—at least all normal communica-
PROPRIETIES AND VAGARIES

tion—makes use of some vehicle, usually language either as verbal or symbolic in the narrower sense and all this is symbolic in some sense of being "semiotic." The "tokens"—written shapes or audible sounds—may be said to be signs for the words and the words for their meanings. (E.g. the two words "let" have the same tokens but stand for two meanings.) What meaning is is itself a desperate controversy, but one we can shun. We merely note that what is meant by the words may be a symbol for something beyond itself; and these are most of the symbols of art, religion, psychology. We also note that while we call the vehicles of ordinary language words and add that they are symbols of a sort, stipulated signs; the vehicles or some of the vehicles of logic and mathematics we firsthand call symbols.

That these mathematical signs are purer symbols, and yet from the literary view weaker symbols, is, I suppose, shown by the fact that, although they can like tokens be translated into words, they do not have to be, and still more by the fact that what they stand for is less "realistic" or substantial or experienceable. If we ask what are the objects meant by the ordinarily mathematical statements of modern science, we have a different set of questions in train than if we ask this of ordinary discourse or literature or religion. (Music, of course, as communication brings new puzzles.) When Hamlet calls for the recorder we know the musical instrument the word means and think of it as an actual part of our familiar world even if it is then at once used as a symbol.
SYMBOLS

for something further Hamlet or Shakespeare means. And this something further is not back to words again but something thought of in human, dramatic terms even though it may be, and in artistic and religious uses usually is, less concrete and familiar, cloudier and larger, more laden with metaphysical pathos, than the symbol-thing, the recorder, we started with (otherwise why run to symbolism?). Shelley’s “dome of many-colored glass staining the white radiance” puts before the mind a thing and a set of qualities, must do so to be the definiens part of a simile. And the definiendum is “life”; as that of the recorder is a slight but still, to Guildenstern, an opaque “mystery.” But with \( f = ma \), a central statement of physics, what is the object or objects meant by it or by its terms?

It used to be supposed that we can expand the “variable” symbols, here just initials, and say “Force is equal to mass times acceleration”; and that force, mass, and acceleration, like the recorder and the dome and its colors, are known to us in ordinary experience, and that the two constants, “equal to” and “times” are known by Platonic or Cartesian reason or Lockean intuition. Well, I still think there is something in this old and naive supposition, but not many others do and even that would not really get us out. A modern physicist or logician will say \( f, m, a, =, \) and the adjunction of two variables are to be taken as parts of a well-worked-out formal system. If we want to say this statement, or any like it, is true, we must set up operational definitions of \( f, m, a, \) and then
measure actuals. Our measuring is sometimes charged with internal and external relativities, our fundamental definitions are sometimes charged with being circular. Engineering or any "prediction" about things of the world requires the setting of "boundary" or "state" conditions and prior positions and velocities.

All this is thorny and I make no pretense of elucidation. We merely note again the unique achievement of physical science while also noting that what is meant by the symbolic statements of developed science is variously interpreted or shrugged off. And my momentary point is that there is at least a real sense in which it is science (the most developed science as proof) and not poetry or religion, which can claim to be or must confess to being symbolic.

Bishop Berkeley already pointed to the questionable-ness of such words as "force" and "faith" and at first wanted a symbolic reference to actual sense "ideas," later sought a symbolic reference to purpose and use. Some nineteenth and then some twentieth-century physicists discovered parts of what Berkeley taught; and Jeans and Eddington, Einstein somewhat differently, suggest that the constructions of science "are true of" but not representative of "sense data" in their appearances and orders. Others would retain some realism of a "model" and think of a world of four-dimensional, multi-geometrical space-time, subatomic particles, "waves," or fields of force.

In the phenomenalistic reduction, our familiarly lived-
with things have no real role; and in the model reduction, our familiarly observed and enjoyed qualities have no real role. Indeed, as the things in the model world have become such things as not even our dreams are made of—very unthingy things—so the perceptual world to which the phenomenalist says science must conform has become a pallid one of pointer readings and relations—very unqualitative qualities.

Perhaps we may simplify toward some comparison and conclusion. Science as well as common sense, literature, religion, uses some sort of sign tokens. The nonformalized language of common sense, literature, religion uses tokens which are at once taken as words, words that are grammatical constants, like “and,” “is,” “if,” or substantive constants, “Napoleon Bonaparte,” or substantive or adjectival variables, which in words are almost always limited in their scope, like the common noun, “recorder.” These last may then be individualized: “the recorder,” says Hamlet, “this pipe,” holding it in his hand. This it is, this pipe, which now is used by Hamlet, as reported by Shakespeare, for a literary symbol to bring to the minds of those who heed some further “meaning.” Some of the partial variables have references more like those of science. “’Tis as easy as lying,” Hamlet says. And it may be commented that such a non-thing as lying is seldom used as a literary symbol; although of course, there may be a story about lying which serves as an ensample or allegory and so in our present usage is a symbol.

The tokens of scientific statements, we have said, can
be translated into words but need not be. At any rate they stand for constants and variables, as do those of ordinary language, but with differences. There seem to be very few substantive constants; perhaps time-space, centimeter, gram, second; and these seem queerly insubstantial. For engineering the variables can be applied and so in a sense may be said to be individuated; but there is more than a touch of illusion in this, for the concrete actual thing never appears in the scientific statement as such even when applied to an actual situation. The proper name is extrascientific; the common noun disappears early; then the adjective. It seems that as science develops, the entities that are the values of its variables, the remnants of its substantives, are more and more purely of the sort that Berkeley, at first to his distress, noted as having no idea, no thing, no ostensive definition. Not only the marks on the page, but also that for which the marks stand primarily and secondarily are symbols. The concrete, actual, existential, substantial, moving and changing and enduring stage, the intermediate and central stage of ordinary discourse which is presenting a symbol simply is not. It might be hazarded that science is as a whole a symbol for use or for the understanding of the actual; but we do not need to do so.

It is thus science that is essentially symbolic. And thus it seems to me odd that literary and religious men, some of them, should say, sometimes a bit wistfully, that science has taken over literal truth and they perforce must play up symbols. Let them rejoice that art and religion
SYMBOLS

with common sense are left the possessors and guardians of literal truth. I like to believe some literal truth can be kept in science—but it is the least "scientific" part. And I willingly concede there is much symbolism in religion, more in art; but it is "adscititious and ancillary," a tool in their endeavor to win and communicate insight. When I read about the River Wye I think it is the River Wye, although I may well think of my own "wanderer through the woods." When I pray to God I pray to God, not to a father image. Better than that would be the stock of a tree that Isaiah talks of, which is at least a thing.