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THE CONCEPT OF SYMBOL/SIGN IN THE WORKS  
OF S. T. COLERIDGE AND T. S. ELIOT

КОНЦЕПЦИЯ СИМВОЛА/ЗНАКА В ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ  
С. Т. КОЛРИДЖА И Т. С. ЭЛИОТА

This article presents a comparative analysis of the concept of symbol/sign in the works of S. T. Coleridge and T. S. Eliot. Coleridge's romantic concept of symbol was based on his theory of "organic unity", the principle desynonymization of such categories as allegory and symbol, fancy and imagination, understanding and reason. T. S. Eliot's symbol/sign has double or multiple meanings and is connected with his theory of the "objective correlative". As the poet of modernism, T. S. Eliot was influenced by S. T. Coleridge's works in a contradictory manner: his system of symbols/signs reflects the refusal from the romantic principle of lyrical passion and egotism and approves the idea of impersonalism and associative imagery, proposed by J. Keats.

*Key words: S. T. Coleridge; T. S. Eliot; Romanticism; Modernism; symbol; sign; allegory; fancy; imagination; "organic unity"; "objective correlative".*

В статье представлен сравнительный анализ концепции символа/знака в творчестве С. Т. Колриджа и Т. С. Элиота. Романтическая концепция символа у С. Т. Колриджа основывалась на теории «органического единства», принципе десинонимизации таких категорий, как аллегория и символ, фантазия и воображение, понимание и разум. У Т. С. Элиота символ/знак обладает двойным или даже множественными значениями и связан с теорией «объективного коррелята». Творчество С. Т. Колриджа оказало противоречивое влияние на Т. С. Элиота как на поэта-модерниста: его система символа/знака отражает отказ от романтического принципа лирической страсти и эгоизма и утверждает идею имперсонализма и ассоциативной образности, предложенных Дж. Китсом.

*Ключевые слова: С. Т. Колридж; Т. С. Элиот; романтизм; модернизм; символ; знак; аллегория; фантазия; воображение; «органическое единство»; «объективный коррелят».*

The poetry and literary criticism of S. T. Coleridge and T. S. Eliot – the most universal figures of English Romantic and Modernist poetry – are deeply connected with each other thanks to the synthesis of historical, poetical, and religious ideas, the reflected tragic turns of two fateful eras in the history of European and world civilization – after the French Revolution of 1789-92 and after World War I (1814-1818). Their poems – *The Rhymer of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) and *The Waste Land* (1822) – became the emblems of a tragic outlook and presented a new language of imagery, opened by both poets for their contemporaries, outlining future epochs in the history of English and world poetry. "It seeks not to reiterate the claim, already made elsewhere, that Eliot was

influenced by Coleridge as a poet, a critic, or even as a lecturer, but rather that, as his personal life threatened to overwhelm him, Eliot found the figure of Coleridge circa 1814-1816, strangely familiar” [1, p. 299].

Both poets emphasized the importance of symbol/sign, but their usage and frequency have common and different features, according to the poets’ aesthetic, philosophic and religious principles.

In “*The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*”, S. T. Coleridge created the system of symbols in the context of the outer and inner dramatic history of the hero’s soul, of Nature and God (“Mariner’s experience in prayer” [2, p. 110–111]). The old mariner has different prototypes (a Wandering Jew, a hero from *Arabian Nights Entertainments*), but he has become the symbol of overcoming a formal mechanical understanding of the Enlightenment era and embodies the rebirth of the creative organic imagination of Romanticism. He is also an “inner” prophetic wanderer-subject after his remorse and revelation in the scene of discovering water-snakes in the moonshine instead of acquiring the status of the “outer” object after the unmotivated killing of the innocent Albatross.

Coleridge explained the contradiction between the allegorical (mythological) working of consciousness and the symbolic (“esemplastic”) process of imagination. He turned a seemingly ordinary dream into a sacred real story about the road to self-salvation: an old sailor accidentally shoots an Albatross, which becomes the symbol of the omnipresent Christian soul during the voyage. It can be said that shooting the Albatross is a turning point in the whole poem: ‘*God save thee, ancient Mariner! / From the fiends, that plague thee thus! / Why look’st thou so?*’ – ‘*With my cross-bow / I shot the ALBATROSS*’ [3, p. 44]. As a spirit of Christ, Albatross represents a certain supernatural connection and internal communication between people, the Universe and the Creator. However, this kind of inner contemplation is not simply and straightforwardly expressed, but is presented through the use of fables by the poet.

After describing the mythological experience of the old sailor in his voyage, Coleridge emphasizes the symbolic scene of the Mariner’s outlook transformation thanks to the awakening of Imagination and opening the Beauty of Nature in moonbeams. Therefore, allegory (myth) is the major form of representing the outer world and external objects without any organic connection between the literal and ideal meanings of the object. For example, the figures of Death and Life-in-Death are allegorical, as the speculative abstract essence is connected with the visual images of fearful women arbitrarily. But such images as the Sun, the Moon, the rain, the wind, the sea and ice are symbolic, because there is organic unity between their literal and ideal meanings, and the manifestation of their meaning is dynamic, coming from the context (for example, *Sun – bloody Sun, Moon – Moonshine*). Thanks to the revelation and transformation into the “inner” subject, the Ancient Mariner begins to see, hear and feel the sacral meaning of Nature as the Whole – the creation of God (Moonshine as the light of Truth, rain as the energy of revelation).

In “*Christabel*”, the angelic and ideal heroine meets a mysterious woman in the woods late at night when she is praying and asks blessings for her distant lover. The compassionate Christabel brings Geraldine home. The snake-like woman creates tension between Christabel and her father, and triggers a series of contradictions in an attempt to transform her hostess’ personality. At the end of this poem, there is a concluding statement: *Perhaps ’tis pretty to force together / Thoughts so all unlike each other / To mutter and mock a broken charm / To dally with wrong that does no harm / Perhaps ’tis tender too and pretty / At each wild word to feel within / A sweet recoil of love and pity / And what, if in a world of sin / (O sorrow and shame should this be true!) / Such giddiness of heart and brain / Comes seldom save from rage and pain / So talks as it’s most used to do* [3, p. 94]. Coleridge uses the form of allegory to explain this unseen psychological drama of the uncontrolled power of unconscious anxiety, materialized by Geraldine. It is symbolized by Christabel’s dream about a green snake coiled round a white dove. But dreams are stimulated by one’s own imagination attempting to gain insight into the nature of the human soul. There are two conclusions in this poem that lacks resolution in its plot. Later Coleridge explained this impossibility of creating the poem’s ending by the contradiction between the demonic essence of the imagery and the atmosphere of day’s light, by incompatibility of the truth and lies (“Table Talk”).

This difference (allegory – symbol) is more obvious in *Kubla Khan*. The poet reached the capital of the Yuan Dynasty through a brief dream vision. In his dream, the poet did his best to describe the splendor of the capital and the strange beauty of the palace: *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree / Where Alph, the sacred river, ran / Through caverns measureless to man / Down to a sunless sea / So twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round / And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills / Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree / And here were forests ancient as the hills / Enfolding sunny spots of greenery* [3, p. 155]. The poet achieved such an effect thanks to the magnificent (“*esemplastic*”) power of Imagination, with the help of which he transformed all these scenes from the mythological story into the symbols of recreation, the ideal essence of the palace – Beauty, Truth, divine creation – through Time and Space. Kubla Khan saw the image of the Palace in his dream, and the Poet, some ages afterwards, saw this image in his vision. So, the ideal essence of Beauty and Truth is eternal and can be discovered under the surface of reality thanks to Imagination as the creative aspect of the lyrical passion of the poet in a dream, and only partly in reality. It can be said that symbol, as an important tool used by S. T. Coleridge differs fundamentally from allegory (myth) in the same way as an organic living image may differ from a mechanistic “*dead trope*”. His philosophic idea of symbol was developed later in different modifications. Modernist poets replaced the lyrical passion as the way of lyrical experience by the method of “*objective correlative*” (Eliot), and as a result, symbol became more rational and closer to sign [4].

In the works of Eliot, one of the most important literary masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century confronting many shortcomings of modern society, the expression of signs underwent important changes. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the world and society appear like a desert, arid space without people, lifeless, and spiritually barren. To express this concept, the poet “shouted” his emotions through *The Waste Land*. At the beginning of the poem we read: *April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain / Winter kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers* [5, p. 51]. In the eyes of ordinary people, April is a season when business is brisk and everything is ready to grow and flourish. This is the beginning of spring and the beginning of beauty, but in the eyes of the poet, it is a desolate month – the cold, uncomfortable and cruel season. A commonly perceived positive image is endowed with the opposite meaning. Here, April is ascribed with a unique symbolic quality. In the following description, the word *corpse* also triggers different effects: *There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: ‘Stetson! / You who were with me in the ships at Mylae! / That corpse you planted last year in your garden / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year / Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?’* [Ibid, p. 53]. In Eliot’s works, through our in-depth interpretation and thinking, we find that the use of signs is usually symbolic and very rich in meaning. The corpse itself is a static and ominous image, but the poet gives it a dynamic and vital sense, which symbolizes the re-establishment of a new vigorous life based on the broken, confused, and destroyed foundations of modern society. The world gives people a kind of inner encouragement and confidence, and the poet writes a narrative about the grave at the end: *In this decayed hole among the mountains / In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing / Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel / There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home* [Ibid, p. 66]. Images of death and outdated graves are also thought-provoking here. In our eyes, it is usually related to the existence of death, sadness and fear. In the poet’s view, he has provided this single image with multiple levels of meaning, even contradictory symbolic meanings, which are unified through the theory of the “objective correlative”. They exist harmoniously within the same image, causing a strong inner shock and then leading to self-reflection. The meaning of death in the tomb was changed by vitality and singing. On the contrary, it shows the hope of re-establishing a new order and a new world on the graves. A completely gloomy image is instantly transformed into an image full of hope. A specific use of this sign creates poetic charm. In Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, water is a common image, but it has multiple meanings. At the beginning of the poem, *I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god – sullen, untamed and intractable* [6], water is endowed with three meanings according to religious philosophy. First, water itself is an important condition for life. Without water, people cannot survive without God’s salvation. Second, the flow of water is just

like the passage of time; the poet tells us to unify God's time in our own existence to obtain eternity. Third, water can wash away the dirt from the surface of the entire world, which means God's salvation, the entire salvation of the world, thereby renewing it with the power of religion. Therefore, the image of water is given three meanings by the poet at the same time: it symbolizes the self-renewal of life, the eternity of time, the salvation and the hope of the world. When the images of external things are endowed with emotions and philosophies, they acquire the meaning of their own. The same is true for the sign of fire: *Water and fire succeed / The town, the pasture and the weed / Water and fire deride / The sacrifice that we denied / Water and fire shall rot / The marred foundations we forgot / Of sanctuary and choir* [6]. Fire is also given a special meaning: first, in the process of human evolution, the appearance of fire promotes human development, symbolizing the fact that fire is a unique gift of God, which exists in the past, present and future; secondly, fire represents destruction like the fire in Hell, it can block the relationship between man and God; finally, fire is also a symbol of light and warmth, which means that mankind can find light and redemption, and not be in darkness. The poet hides his own religious thoughts behind concrete objects, and presenting and expanding the meaning of images, he manages to create their new and fresh perception. The image of fire here means light, heat, destruction and growth at the same time. Therefore, imagery with multiple meanings has become the best way for poets to express their inner world, and symbolism has become an important means to express the world of existence artistically [7, p. 36].

Through specific research and analysis of the texts by S. T. Coleridge and T. S. Eliot, it can be seen that before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, allegories (myths) and symbols (metaphors) were regarded as synonymous. However, thanks to Coleridge's works, the differentiation between allegory and symbol led to their more profound understanding and poetic use. Coleridge emphasized that an abstract idea is united with the image's outer form mechanically, without the organic unity of the external shape and inner essence. While allegory is the product of Understanding (mechanical action of the creator), symbol is the result of "esemplastic" power of Imagination.

In the process of using symbols/signs, Eliot emphasized the integration of symbol, language signs, external experience, and ideas into a unified and harmonious whole. Through the technique of symbol (metaphor), he projected his own thoughts and experiences onto the exterior world. The process of dissolution and reconstruction of the image is closely connected with Eliot's theory of the "objective correlative" and de-personalization. Coleridge's symbols/allegories (myths) and Eliot's symbols/signs (metaphors) are ways of image self-realization, which reflects their individual life experience, religious and philosophic views. In the compassion of the world, they are united in the process of creating symbolic images in their essences and functions.

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