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Symbol and Intuition: Comparative Studies in Kantian and Romantic-Period Aesthetics.

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edited by Helmut Hühn and James Vigus

THIS VOLUME IS A WELCOME ADDITION to comparative studies in philosophy on theories of symbol and intuition, and it is fitting that the volume concludes with an afterward by Nicholas Halmi, author of *The Genealogy of Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), for the volume builds on Halmi's contention in his own work that the Romantic symbol is not a unified concept, but a multiplicity of conceptions within a shared philosophical context. As Helmut Hühn and James Vigus effectively argue in the Introduction, there is no single post-Kantian symbol, but a diversity of symbol-concepts reflecting a shared epistemological and metaphysical crisis. This is the crisis of modernity that confronts every scholar of the Romantic symbol — in its German, British, or American contexts — succinctly articulated by Hühn and Vigus as "a crisis in the model of reality," involving "the decentralization of the cognizing subject," and creating "a crisis of sign-systems and a loss of metaphysical wholeness" for the philosophies of language, cognition, and art (6–7). It is constructive and insightful to approach the diversity of Romantic conceptions of symbol and intuition — indeed of Romantic aesthetics generally — as various attempts to cope with this crisis. As Halmi correctly reminds us, this is valuable, not only in providing context for philosophical aesthetics, but even more so because of the development of modern critical theory from that context (191).

The volume begins with two instructive essays on Immanuel Kant's use of the symbol. The first, by Stephan Meier-Oeser, focuses on "Kant's Transformation of the Symbol-Concept," beginning with traditional ambiguities in the terms *symbol* and *intuition*. In the philosophical tradition that Kant inherited, symbol can mean a sign generally, or more specifically, either "the arbitrary linguistic sign" or "that special kind of natural sign… founded upon analogy" (21). For example, for Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, symbolic cognition is based on signs, and such mediated cognition is contrary to the immediate grasping of intuition. Christian Wolff and his school further restrict symbol to "thinking in words" (27), but Christian August Crusius and later Kant challenge this association of symbol with language and discursive thinking. While Kant denies intellectual intuition, he nevertheless recognizes symbol as a kind of intuitive and analogy-based cognition for when "the concept is one to which no sensible intuition can be adequate" (32). For Meier-Oeser, it is crucial to recognize that this "indirect mode of representation" is not a form of theoretical cognition: symbol is an *as if* mode of thinking that represents by analogy, via words and images, but is not a philosophical

foundation for apophatic theology or ontology (33–37).

The second essay is somewhat in tension with the first, for Jane Kneller argues that Kant's account of symbolic representation provides a positive solution for representing the "supersensible" that is based not on "mere formal analogy" but also has "ontological significance" for Kant's ethics and aesthetics (44). Meier-Oeser's essay is more consistent with the prevailing notion today of Kant's secular challenge to traditional metaphysics and theology, but Kneller's rejoinder is an important reminder that Kant's immediate reception was more varied and open to quite different interpretations. Thus, post-Kantians like F. W. J. Schelling and Samuel Taylor Coleridge could appropriate Kant's symbol for metaphysical purposes that seem unlikely to us today. For Kneller, Kant's aesthetic ideas, and his enigmatic section "On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality" in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), create potential (albeit undeveloped) space to expand cognition beyond the bounds of experience and "to imagine new intuitive content for otherwise unrecognizable concepts of reason" (51), and this is "not so utterly removed from the romantic identification of the sensible and supersensible" (57).

While the essays of Jutta Heinz and Helmut Hühn clarify the diversity of early Romantic symbol concepts, including their complex relation to allegory, I find them most helpful in drawing attention to the role (variously conceived) of interpretation and the perceiving subject in Karl Philipp Moritz, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich Schiller. Heinz begins with the seeming contradiction between Moritz's aesthetic theory of autonomous art and the self-proclaimed allegory of his novel *Andreas Hartknopf* (1786), and then persuasively argues that the novel engages multiple conventional systems of images and signs (e.g., Christianity, mysticism, and freemasonry) that are potentially both allegorical and symbolic, depending on how they are perceived and interpreted. This "multi-layered symbolism" (71) does not adhere to Schelling's stricter distinction between symbol and allegory but rather illustrates "fluid" boundaries consistent with Moritz's contention, in his theoretical work, that the symbolic depth of "realistische Mythologie" is "neither mere allegories nor mere history" (62, 74).

Hühn first alerts us to two often unrecognized features in Goethe's early articulation of symbol in his 1797 letter to Schiller: the examples given are genuinely historical experiences and not limited to pure nature (91); and a particular symbol relates metonymically to other particular symbols and from this multiplicity a thinking subject can indirectly perceive a limited universal, but this is markedly different from the more synecdochical structure of Schelling's symbol in his 1802–03 lectures on *The Philosophy of Art* (87). The more fundamental question is confronted by Schiller in his critical response to Goethe: does the meaning of symbol come from the object itself or from the perceiving subject? Schiller insists that symbol depends entirely on the interpretive imagination of the poetic subject, but then there is the potential danger (as Hühn recognizes) that any object can become symbolic. Goethe's position is more subtle than Schiller's critique suggests: symbol's meaning is a

cooperation of object and subject, such that the object can be variously perceived or interpreted. Here Goethe's theory of symbol draws from his earlier theory of morphology, and with both, Goethe articulates a "skeptical realism," such that "the cognition of reality [is] an interminable process" (91, 93).

This leads to what I find to be one of the most constructive issues that emerges in this volume: the question of the symbol's relation to theology. Jan Urbich insists in an essay on "Friedrich Schlegel's Symbol-Concept" that Schlegel "raises an objection against the abstract theological mode of symbol that has been claimed as a general pattern for the so-called *Goethezeit*" (103), specifically citing Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (J.C.B. Mohr: Tübingen, 1960). Urbich here identifies theological symbol with the identity philosophy of Schelling and with the identity of being and meaning in the symbol-conceptions of Moritz and Goethe. (The essays of Heinz and Hühn problematize this reading of Mortiz and Goethe's symbols as identity.) Urbich contrasts this with Schlegel's symbol, which retains "the temporality of an infinite aesthetic dynamics" (97) — or an "open dialectic of absence and fulfillment," resulting in ongoing interpretive and aesthetic striving (99) — such that the symbol/allegory distinction is not central for Schlegel.

While this is a helpful corrective of the dominant reception of the Romantic symbol/allegory distinction — a criticism well articulated by Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man (both cited in the volume's bibliography) — it does not negate the significance of the symbol-concept for theology. If anything, re-establishing symbol's conceptual connection to the temporal and interpretive dynamics of allegory opens up new constructive possibilities for the symbol-concept and modern theology. Already, we see movement in that direction in Cecilia Muratori's essay on G. W. F. Hegel's distinction between *mystical* and *symbolical*. While the two terms are clearly distinct in the later Hegel, there is more convergence in the earlier text *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate* (1799), where they both depend on a similar dynamics of presence and absence, "a movement of disappearing and reappearing" (111), creating a gap between form and content that points towards "something more" that always remains somewhat hidden (114).

The theological potential for symbol is also evident in Jeffrey Einboden's essay on "Emerson's Exegesis: Transcending Symbols." On the one hand, Ralph Waldo Emerson critiques the static and culturally-situated nature of traditional religious symbols in his 1832 valedictory sermon at Boston's Second Church. Here, Emerson calls the audience to transcend the constraints of inherited cultural symbols. On the other hand, Emerson's later turn to natural studies finds the true symbol in physical nature, and he specifically invokes Christian thought (including Coleridge's theological use of symbol in his 1825 *Aids to Reflection*) to explicate nature as symbol (165). However, and this is important, nature's symbol evades definition and interpretive closure, whereas (for Emerson) there is always the danger that religious symbol will become static and restrict "interpretive liberty" (168). This is a concern that Coleridge

shares and that informs his theologically motivated distinction between symbol and allegory in his lay sermon *The Statesman's Manual* (1816).

While it is impossible to engage all of the essays in this volume in a single review, they are all instructive in developing that wider context for Romantic symbol and reclaiming the diversity of Kantian and Romantic conceptions of symbol and intuition. My own reading has gravitated to questions regarding the symbol's connection to allegory, hermeneutics, and theology, and on these issues, the volume's contributions are welcome and thought-provoking. It is crucial to continue to resist easy dismissals of symbol as naively theological or to assume that a more temporal and dynamic notion of symbol (one that resists interpretive closure) somehow negates its theological potential. Perhaps the more challenging question is how that more dynamic understanding of symbol relates to the immediate beholding of intuition. Here, I think someone like Coleridge is trying both to retain Schelling's intellectual intuition, while also challenging (even as he appropriates) his identity philosophy, and this is where Gadamer's univocal articulation of the Romantic symbol in *Truth and Method* is especially problematic. Thanks to the work of Nicholas Halmi, and now the contributions in this volume, we are beginning to appreciate again the diversity of Romantic symbol-concepts and thus also to discover new constructive possibilities for symbol for philosophy, critical theory, and theology.