The Semiotic Perspectives of the Symbol

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“The symbol – the thing itself, not the word – is the object of this book.” This is how Todorov begins his work *Theories of the Symbol*. The topic, far from being obvious, makes it probable right at the beginning that this theoretical book about the symbol does not represent any of the conceptualist theories. *Theories of the Symbol* is a great work, still important 32 years after it was first published in 1977 despite the fact it has become arguable on several points. Its basic methodology is that it does not aim to provide a unified definition of the symbol; its subject is the symbolic phenomena in a wider sense, “the symbolic” [“symbolique”] which had been defined and examined in various ways throughout the ages. In other words, for Todorov, defining the subject of the theory (or theories) depends on the historical research, while the various interpretations of the symbol are interrelated with the worldviews determined by history.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the word symbol is one of the most interesting and complicated semantic delicacies. It is a concept with a long history, thus it is connected to various meanings and interpretations. The word symbol is used as a logical, epistemological, mathematical, religious and psychological term, and also appears in the field of semiotics and linguistics. Todorov expresses in the book’s introduction that within this wide and colourful tradition he confines his research to the theory of verbal symbols, and he laconically notes that his approach is *semiotic*. As research in the most different fields of culture deals with semiotics as well, we can claim that most disciplines can be subsumed under it. For this reason, from the theories of the variously definable symbol (theories appearing in the plural in the title), Todorov has chosen in each time period the field of culture he considered the most important from the point of view of his subject. Hence, his book of the symbol may also be read as “a few chapters in the history of Western semiotics” (10).³

One of the few theses of this work elaborately presenting a diversified tradition is as follows:

Reflection on the sign has been undertaken in a number of disciplines that are distinct and even widely separated from one another, such as philosophy of
language, logic, linguistics, semantics, hermeneutics, rhetoric, aesthetics, and poetics. The separation of these disciplines and their terminological inconsistencies have led us to ignore the unity of a tradition that is among the richest in Western history. (10)

In other words, Todorov aims to reveal the unity of the problematic points behind the different theoretical traditions and terminologies of the symbol. By emphasising the continuity of the tradition, he tries to reconstruct a history from the thoughts of two thousand years, a “history-fiction” [“histoire-fiction”], as he says. What is this fiction about?

To answer this question, we have to return to the methodological framework hardly discussed by the author and the terminological questions arising from the framework. The approach called semiotic, in effect, outlines a clearer direction of the analyses, as Todorov defines the nature of the symbol and the order and theories of the symbolic phenomena in the context of differentiating the symbol from the sign. Todorov, a prominent representative of French semiotics, highlights the symbolic nature of the sign as well the semiotic nature of the symbol, while in fact presenting the main paradigms of the binary relationship of these two concepts. The fact that he defines the symbol, a concept of varying meaning and changing value, in the historical horizon of distinguishing between sign and symbol at the same time means that the symbol obtains a deeper sense from something invariable. Todorov incidentally notes at the beginning of his work that the symbol is based on indirect meaning, and he maintains that indirect meaning is the most characteristic feature of certain uses of language (for example, literature). Furthermore, as the invariable mentioned above is the implicit condition of the arbitrary sign, the two distinct but not at all independent orders of the sign are presented on this semiotic basis through the relation between direct and indirect, proper (literal) and transposed, motivated and unmotivated etc. representation, but not in dialectic opposites. The book thus attempts to systematically present from Aristotle to Jakobson the history of theories focussing on the connection between symbol and sign. As it seems, according to the basic hypothesis of the conception creating the “history-fiction” of the symbol, the semiotic tradition involving conflicting theories presents the concepts of sign and symbol (if not synonyms of each other) in a changing subordinate-superordinate relationship. This in fact means that most of European culture can be described by the history of the symbol, by its changing interpretations and by the narrative of its appreciation and depreciation (as well).

It is enough to scan the Table of Contents of *Theories of the Symbol* to find “telling signs” of a definite historical conception formed by the significant stages of the history of the symbol. The subchapters also show a completely even structure, divided into two symmetrical parts: the chapters titled *The Birth of Western Semiotics* and *The Romantic Crisis* discuss the periods mentioned in the titles. This periodization is in parallel with the theoretical argumentation forming the backbone of the book. In other words, the structure of the book reflects the opposition between the “classical” and “romantic” interpretations of sign and symbol, and with regards to the interpretation of the concept builds around the radical change taken place at the end of the XVIIIth and the beginning of the XIXth century. (According to the author, the contemporary use of the word symbol is determined by presuppositions originating in the early Romantic period, thus his ambitious undertaking in fact also shows the formation of the concept of symbol gone through different variants of meaning.) In what follows, we attempt to outline the scopes
of meaning attached to and emerging from the word symbol through discussing the historical stages of the Todorovian theory (or theories) of the symbol.

7 Even in the Antiquity many disciplines dealt with the birth, forming and interpretation of the symbol, which even then had a complex history. For this reason, Todorov discusses the symbol within the history – birth and development – of semiotics. The aim of considering the first definitions of the sign is certainly to make it clear that the symbol has been defined in relation to the arbitrary concept of sign since the Antiquity. The history of the symbol thus begins with the philosophic debate on the nature of linguistic signs (physiel – nomo) mainly known from Plato’s Cratylus. This debate immediately makes clear the two main arguments along which the nature of language (and figurative language) has been discussed from the ancient times until now. It was a decisive step for the European linguistic thinking that in this debate Aristotle argued for the nomos principle. As he considered conventionality a feature of the sign and such a sign a constituent of language, the Greek philosopher may well be regarded as the founder of the Western tradition that interprets language in a semiotic framework: the famous definition of On Interpretation formulating the conventionality thesis points out that a similar relation exists not between the sign and the object, but between the image and the object.

8 In spite of all this, in Todorov’s work the real founder of semiotics, the first thinker developing a complex typology of the sign is Saint Augustine – although the discussion of his theory does not satisfy the reader, especially if we think of his eminent role in Todorov’s book. The detailed account of Augustine mentions that the Church Father replaces the Aristotelian distinction of symbol and sign with given sign and natural sign mostly because of his practice of exegesis. However, the book does not reflect on the significant characteristic of the Augustinian semiotics, namely that it expands the conventionality theory to every possible sign, also including supposedly natural signs and signs formed by imitation. It is obvious that within the typology of signs described in De Doctrina Christiana, the distinction of signs according the nature of symbolic relation, that is, the dichotomy of proper and transposed signs, is much more important for Todorov’s point. As Todorov claims, “[i]n modern terminology, signs (in the restricted sense) are opposed to symbols as the proper is opposed to the transposed, or, better yet, as the direct is to the indirect” (57). A vital consequence of the fact that Saint Augustine applied the ancient thinkers’ distinction of proper and transposed meaning to signs is that the two main types of representation, “signification” and “symbolization” in Todorov’s terminology, have become distinguishable from one another. Presenting the Augustinian semiotic theory as the first systematic reflection on the symbol, however, tells very little of its contemporary interpretation if we do not consider the conventionality mentioned above in depth. As far as we are concerned, for the sake of the historical analysis it would have been advisable to reflect more explicitly on the oscillations between the different uses of symbol in the antique language.

9 The fact that this concept (in the same way as tropes and figures), in absence of any distinction, signifies the figurative level of meaning which differs from the literal one shows that, on the one hand, we cannot actually think of the symbol in the modern sense in this period. On the other hand, it becomes clear that the boundaries between the categories of symbol, allegory, metaphor, simile etc. have always been unstable since Antiquity. Considering the fact that until the Romantic period the symbol was only connected with transposed meaning, it would have been reasonable to discuss those
elements in Saint Augustine's conventionalist semiotic theory that contributed to the development of medieval symbolism, and also to present Augustine's views in connection with the symbol (and even allegoresis) in a narrower and more traditional sense that later fundamentally influenced theology and hermeneutics. Highlighting the importance of the argument above, we can only briefly note that the basis of medieval pansemiotism was Augustine's understanding of the sign developed by use and not by nature (the function of objects as signs); medieval semiotics, however, established a symbolism which, contrary to the Augustinian theory, was based on a variant of the physis principle, and viewed the world as an endless network of symbolic references.

Antique and classical rhetoric called the types of symbolic expressions which are based on linguistics signs and from which linguistic signs are constructed tropes, but did not deal with the symbol, which, as they claimed, does not refer to a linguistic entity and only secondarily uses linguistic signs. Nevertheless, Todorov relevantly discusses the history of rhetoric. The rhetorical tradition that not only has a prominent place in the tradition of linguistic thinking, but has also initiated the analysis of figurative language, preserved the dichotomy of proper and transposed meaning based on the distinction between natural and figurative language. As it is known, after the dissolution of the institutions of the republic, the discipline of rhetoric was gradually confined to the examination of elocution, the eloquence of speech, and to the theory of style of discourse. According to the chronology of the book, in its second great phase lasting approximately from Cicero until the 1830s, the scope of rhetoric narrowed further, and was almost completely restricted to linguistic expression and the theory of figures. Rhetoric – after Quintilian – interpreted the theory of tropes and figures for centuries as “divergence” (écart) from the natural, ordinary and everyday use of language. Both the Classicist tropological theories of rhetoric represented by Du Marsais and Fontanier, both the New Rhetoric reborn in French speaking countries in the 1960s dealing primarily with the language of art (which Todorov, rather peculiarly, does not discuss), focussed on the theory of metasememe dealing with the transmission of meaning.

We can see that the oppositions of proper and transposed, proper and figurative, natural and figurative (figuré) language are relevant with regards to the “theories of symbol” so far described, since the difference between figure (including the trope, the linguistic image) and non-figure may correlate to the difference between sign and symbol. On the other hand, the invariably oppositional structure dominant in the long history of rhetoric raises the question whether the linguistic image (the symbol in our case) may be regarded as an “unnatural” linguistic phenomenon or a form of expression most suitable for human language. As our main focus is the symbol, the rhetorical category of “divergence” should be highlighted. The concept of divergence also comes to the forefront if we reflect on the romantic theories of the symbol emerging after the “death” of rhetoric in the XIXth century, or on the literary theories connected to the “rebirth” of rhetoric. Rhetoric (and its normative approach to language) was subordinated to social, political and religious interests and played a secondary role from the turn of the XVIIIth century. In the meantime, parallel to the emancipation of art, a completely different idea emerged, the idea that the original character of language is manifested in poetry, and that figures of speech are the oldest and most natural part of language.

“A figure is a gap in relation to usage, but a gap that is nevertheless part of usage: that is the paradox of rhetoric” – Genette thus points to the uncertainty in the rhetorical concept of “gap” or “divergence”, the reason of which is that divergence is defined in
relation to a norm which itself is (re)constructed on the basis of divergence. It is curious
that while Todorov – in his detailed historical account of rhetoric – explains the notion
of divergence from the norm with the slow decline of rhetoric lasting from the time of
Quintilian to Fontanier, he does not comment on the negative value judgment of this
concept. Todorov only says that the reason of the decline was the change in rhetorical
function: speech presented for the sake of persuasion was now presented for the sake of
aesthetics (while, in effect, rhetoric suffered a loss of social prestige). Nevertheless,
Todorov takes a clear position in his other works, and, similarly to other representatives
of New Rhetoric, aims to describe the divergence concept more precisely by defining the
basis of correlation between norm and divergence. Taking the argumentation of Du
Marsais and Fontanier as a starting point, he elaborates the characteristics of the
dichotomy of natural and figurative language in his writing *Tropes and Figures*, which was
published as an Appendix to his book *Littérature et signification* (1967). Furthermore, he
asserts in an article (Les poètes et le bon usage) published in 1965: “Poetic language is not
only foreign to good usage, it is its antithesis: Its essence consists in a violation of the
norms of language.”

We are not far from the truth if we claim that the differentiation between tropes and
figures and the normal use of language (present since the earliest phase of the rhetorical
tradition) is “reborn” in Todorov’s work – based in fact on New Rhetoric – as it defines
the symbol as opposed to the sign (or the proper, direct meaning as opposed to the
transposed, indirect). The fact that Todorov (implicitly) accepts in his work the
“divergence/deviation principle” of (New) Rhetoric might be the reason why the book,
which otherwise aims to provide a detailed historical outline, does not mention Friedrich
Nietzsche, a significant thinker even of our topic, who, as is known, questioned the
difference between the tropic and non-tropic registers of language in his philosophy, and
was the first to attempt to lay down the rhetoric basis of language, rather isolated.

After the “death” of rhetoric, different conceptions of art emerged in the Enlightenment.
These conceptions form a transition from Classicism to Romanticism and provide variants
of the mimesis principle – from Diderot through Dubos to Lessing. As a consequence of
the dissolution of the absolutely hierarchical society and the emergence of civil societies
and democracies in the XIXth century, the great romantic paradigm of literary and
aesthetic history evolved as an opposition to the mimesis conceptions. This romantic
paradigm – in essence an antimimetic movement – considers the depiction of reality
viewed as a norm of art a submission to the everyday, to the vulgar, and rejects it.
“Without exaggeration, we could say that if we had to condense the romantic aesthetic
into a single word, it would certainly be the word symbol [...]. The entire Romantic
aesthetic would then be, in the last analysis, a semiotic theory.” (198-199), writes
Todorov, and from his chosen semiotic perspective, connects the birth of the modern
aesthetic paradigm emerging as a dialogue between theories based on and opposing each
other to the development of the conceptions of the symbol – which took place between
1797 and 1827 in the period of German Romanticism. Todorov, therefore, regards
Romanticism as a unified and comprehensive movement of European culture, the main
streams of which created concordant theories, philosophies, styles and interrelated
conceptual networks. As Todorov believes that the whole period can be described by the
theoretical developments forming the modern meaning of symbol, he does not express
any doubt regarding the definition of the romantic period. He disregards both the
common views doubting the grounds for the notion of Romanticism, both the arguments
brought up against the unity of German romanticism. Todorov’s book constructs the collective concept of Romanticism as opposed to Classicism. In particular, taking the already developed opposition of classicist and romantic as a basis it reconstructs as a response to the imitation principle of French classicism the process by which the symbol has become a central aesthetic category – the opposition already present in the self-evolution of these contemporary movements (Schlegel brothers).

Romanticism, defending the autonomy of art, naturally transformed the language of works of art. On the one hand the Romantics view poetic language as an inherent feature of language, as opposed to the rhetorical paradigm which defines it as a divergence. On the other hand, Romanticism, unlike the aesthetic thinking of the Enlightenment, does not regard poetic language as mimetic since it expresses the unity of language and reality, in Todorov’s terms, Romantics see language as intransitive. In this respect, the Romantic view of art and the intransitivity of language constitute the two complementary parts of the symbolon. Obviously, Todorov does not merely reiterate the numerous and popular definitions of Romanticism which trace back the poetic expression to the abolition of polarities (the poet’s state of mind and the external world, art and nature, language and reality, conscious and subconscious), as his pursuit of synthesis belongs essentially to the theoretical linguistic framework of the symbol.

The historical theory of the symbol adopted by Todorov noticeably views the new era almost exclusively from the perspective of how new and old language concepts epitomize in his central category, the symbol. Todorov derives his analyses from the idea that the artists and philosophers of the era are regarded as theoreticians of the symbolic form, even though they did not deal directly with the symbol, but with an ideal representation that enables linguistic creativity – refuting mimetic art and its view of language. Moritz’s and Schlegel’s thoughts on artistic philosophy, Humboldt’s view of language as activity and the magic idealism of Novalis are all integral parts of the theoretical framework concerning the symbol as the epitome of the entire poetic language.

Although the Romantic language concepts question the image of language constructed around “divergence” the theories of the symbol are also based on a dichotomy, in other words, on the opposition of symbol and allegory, which evolved gradually in the first decades of the XIXth century. *Theories of the Symbol* adequately calls attention to the fact that the great theoreticians of the era (Kant, Goethe, Schelling, Schiller, Creuzer, Solger), who are the first to put the symbol into the centre of their reasoning, created diverse concepts, but the common traits of their definitions constitute the core of the popular definition(s) of the symbol of our times.

“The allegoric differs from the symbolic in the sense that representation is indirect in the latter and direct in the former case.” – states Goethe in his essay *On the Objects of the Plastic Arts* (1797). According to the definitions in his other works, the greatest value of the symbol lies in the indefinability and immense depth of signification. In Goethe’s view, symbols are the means of artistic expression, and they are in stark contrast to the allegory meaning a clear and precise representation which cannot be regarded as artistic. On the one hand, allegory is a means of direct signification, it has an object, so the relation between the signifier and the signified is unambiguous for the receiver; they, so to say, pervade each other. On the other hand, signification through symbols is indirect; it has no object, and the signifier maintains its own value, but at the same time it also carries the meaning in a synthetic manner. As a result, only the symbol can be motivated and natural (as the two elements are in a justified and intimate relation); the allegory is
arbitrary and conventional (the relation of the two elements is extraneous), so its interpretation requires knowledge. The creation and interpretation of the symbol is intuitive, while allegories can only be interpreted by rational thinking, in other words, with the help of the ratio. Todorov assumes that the core of Goethe’s discussion on unique, outstanding and general concepts (according to which the symbol looks for the general through the particular, and the allegory pursuits the unique through the general) is the idea that symbol is a type representing a general law as such; – since the difference between reality and its representation is not a question of existence but of coverage – the symbol creates the aesthetic quality of participation in contrast to the classicist doctrine by establishing an intransitive representation that abolishes the dichotomy between the poetic mind and the outside world.

If we return to the roots of the main theorems which inspire and contradict each other at the same time, it becomes clear that the difference between symbol and allegory can be reduced to the dichotomies of direct and indirect, arbitrary and motivated representation, which is described by Todorov as the dichotomy of symbolic and semiotic functions in terms of the transitive-intransitive opposition. As we remember, the preface to the book has already stated an important presumption: throughout its history, the symbol has most frequently been defined in opposition to the sign, so the train of thoughts becomes clear at this point arguing that the dichotomies of allegory and symbol, in parallel to transitive versus intransitive, determine the binary status of sign and symbol. According to the argumentation of Theories of the Symbol, the “Romantic crisis”, or the paradigm shift in aesthetics and language, merely reverses the semiotic hierarchy of the tradition of sign theory as the sign becomes subordinate to the symbol.

This is worth attention because the hierarchy of sign and symbol affecting authenticity leads to the complex and multifaceted problem of referential signification. What does the central category of Theories of the Symbol, intransitivity, mean exactly? The chapter of “Intransitivity” in Novalis’s Monologue describes most adequately the particulars of intransitive signification. According to Novalis, the arbitrary nature of poetry and its continuous self-reference derives from the fact that link between language and its object is not compulsory: “The particular quality of language, the fact that it is concerned only with itself, is known to no-one. Language is such a marvellous and fruitful secret – because when someone speaks merely for the sake of speaking, he utters the most splendid, most original truths.” In essence this “expression for the sake of expression” in Todorov’s framework – as a self-reflexivity that is deprived of reference to the external world (the mimetic or referential functions) – is epitomized as an intransitivity which represents the convergence of linguistic (intralinguistic) and non-linguistic reality.

As several problems concerning the symbol are concentrated in the concept of the sign, as stated by this book as well, reading the preface, one might have anticipated that the symbol may be analysed in the framework of a more exact semiotic theory. However, this is possible only to a certain extent. It may not be an exaggeration to state that Todorov fails to give a subtle and thorough analysis of the symbol expressing a transcendental-organic perspective, though he examines his central category along the lines of semiotic methodology, providing a detailed examination and frequently reiterating the keyword of intransitive signification. We may expect greater attention to the fundamental issues of symbolic structures from a theoretical work which adopts a semiotic perspective and regards language as a set of arbitrary and binary signs (the first chapter entitled “The
Birth of Western Semiotics” discusses the evolution and presumptions of this perspective).

Obviously the binary and oppositional semiotic structures of the sign differ from the symbolic linguistic model which presumes the inseparability of sign and meaning, as well as the relation and interaction of form and meaning; however, the semiotic grounds of this difference (which Todorov mostly describes from the perspective of intransitive and motivated signification) are only vaguely illuminated by comments that express opinion on the Romantic theoreticians of the symbol and that scarcely go beyond general assumptions, such as this one: “The symbol is, the allegory signifies; the first fuses signifier and signified, the second separates them.” (214) It is obvious that the arbitrary structure of the sign is a basic principle in pure semiology, while the referential and transitive signification of language is a necessary function. Consequently, the symbol as the coincidence of the signifier and the signified, of the mind and the language, and of the mind and the external world remains questionable from the semiotic perspective which was adopted through Saussure’s works in European theory. Probably that is the reason why Theories of the Symbol does not put Saussure among the “modern theoreticians” of the symbol. Although Saussure did not consider symbols to be entirely arbitrary signs (!), there is “no place for symbols” (268) in his semiological language theory, which maintains that the ideal representation uses unmotivated signs exclusively. Concerning the semiotic standpoint of Todorov's book, it is crucial to underline that on the one hand, the author endorses the idea (through a somewhat paradox argumentation) of a closed structure made up of the relations of signs that exclude any possibility of reference external to language; yet, he fails to take into account an important issue: if the link between signifier and signified (as criticised in Saussure’s works) was fundamentally natural, they would not depend on the other co-existing parts of the linguistic system. Consequently, the existence of the signifier is rooted in mere reference and differentiality as opposed to the impenetrability and intransitivity of the Goethean symbol. As a miscellaneous criticism on Saussurian semiotics, Todorov regrets to conclude that the assumption of this linguistic structure stating that “Saussure’s “sign” is what [...] Goethe called allegory” (268) influenced the semiological direction of theories of the symbol in an unfavourable manner.

If we return to the chapter Intransitivity to provide a further definition for the symbol as opposed to the conventional notion of the sign, we can discover other interesting ideas among the comments on Novalis's language concept. Todorov states that the “expressive, emotive and referential functions of language are contrasted to another, unnamed function by which language is appreciated for itself.” Furthermore, he affirms that this function – which is opposed (along the Kantian ideas) to the instrumental roles of rhetoric as self-referenced communication – is later called the “poetic function” of language.

Considering this statement, it is not surprising at all that Todorov regards Roman Jakobson's theory as one of the few exceptions in the scientific discourse after the 1900s which bears the impact of the “Romantic crisis”. In contrast to Saussure, who is sometimes labelled as new-classicist, Jakobson defends the “Romantic definition” (273) by assigning priority to the poetic function over the referential, evaluating poeticalness as an autotelic statement. According to the author, the Russian linguist and literary theorist differs from his contemporaries (avant-garde movements and Russian formalism) and from the Romantics (Novalis) committed to the idea of existence of literature in its own
right, who had a powerful impact on Jakobson. The primary difference between them and Jakobson lies in the elaboration of a poetics which, through the examination of “literariness”, is capable of providing scientific evidence for immanence of a work of art, which, in Jakobson’s words, is the “fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects”.

Appreciating the elaboration of the self-referential aspect of language focusing on the way of expression, Todorov primarily highlights the essential role of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in creating structure, as these capture the poetic function best, which is substantially compatible with symbolic signification in his view. However, his description of Jakobson’s linguistic model precisely regarding poetic language fails to notice its progressive elements compared to the Saussurian system. It may be just to state that such a shortcoming reveals the limits of Todorov’s semiotic perspective: he tries to grasp the idea of the motivated sign through self-reflexivity as interpreted from the perspective of a non-dynamic semiotic language concept. As a result, he fails to notice the crucial component which makes the sign in this model self-referential. For when Todorov quotes Jakobson, he assumes that poetic quality can be formalised as an element of a closed system; therefore, he doesn’t acknowledge the fact that the Russian linguist designated its place (precisely as a criticism towards Saussure) within the framework of verbal communication. Thus, Todorov no longer links the model of the paradigmatic axis projected onto the syntagmatic one with the langue-parole dichotomy derived from the Saussurian principle of difference; consequently, ignoring the paradigmatic openness of poetic function, he replaces poetic language with the abstract, timeless and closed grammatical system of language.

Again, Todorov’s perspective is presumably aligned to the advocates of new rhetoric centred around the figure, who, as it is well-known, strived to create a scientific approach to Jakobson’s poetic function. In other words, similarly to the modern theoreticians who elaborated the rhetoric of expression along the lines of structural linguistics, in the interpretation of the symbol Todorov joins the analysis of the figure to Jakobson’s model which is clearly expressed in his structuralist manifesto of 1973:

> The study of meanings other than the “literal” meaning traditionally constituted the part of rhetoric, more specifically to be found under the heading of tropes. Nowadays we no longer sustain the opposition between proper and derived meaning whether of historical or normative origin; but we distinguish the process of signification (in which a signifier means a signified) from that of symbolization, in which a first signified symbolises a second; signification is given in vocabulary (in the paradigms of words) symbolization occurs in discourse (the syntagm).  

Such a statement is contestable for various reasons (mostly for defining symbolization at the level of the signified), though it does correlate to a certain degree with Jakobson’s complex linguistic model as long as they both assign secondary importance to the apparent referential relations of the syntagm. It seems to give credence to Jakobson’s idea that “poeticalness is not a supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment but a total re-evaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever”; however, this statement defines symbolization as a notion of the trope theory rooted in a static semiotic base, without taking into account the paradigmatization founded on the syntagm of the expression and presuming subjective assignation.

In his book, the author states the present day existence of a plural aesthetic norm which comprises both the classicist and romantic view on language and art, though his views mark a different standpoint which lies in a certain space between the two described significant paradigms of language theory. Such a position reinforces the framework
adopted throughout the book (and established in fact by the chapter on the birth of semiotics), which, in our opinion, falls short of grasping the obvious that the opposition of the linguistic and aesthetic paradigms, which Todorov considers contrasting, is a construction created by one of the above defined – traditional concepts of the sign. As a consequence, neither the opposition, nor the hierarchy of the sign and the symbol is an everlasting truth – their relation depends on the (changing) views of the sign. If this is true indeed, the relation of sign and symbol (of symbol and allegory) is subject to further reinterpretations, since the origins and consequences of diverse concepts of the sign have to be reevaluated as well from time to time.

Todorov’s theory is undeniably difficult to interpret along the lines of contemporary and post-structuralist linguistic, philosophical, and literary theoretical trends, which, in light of the differential dynamics or even inherent rhetoricity of language and that of the semiotic concept of the sign, question both the symbolic unity of the sign and signified, and the tendency of language signs and symbols to achieve a totality of meaning, and assign new interpretations to the sign and the symbol, beyond the semiotic perspective of Todorov’s book. In conclusion, it is just to state that Todorov’s work presents the two thousand year old history of the scientific discussion on the symbol as a kind of storytelling (suggesting a certain teleology), which is supplemented by an abundant quantity of materials in cultural history, several fields of art and theory. All in all, Todorov’s rich account is by all means an indispensable source for the future chapters of the history of the theories of the symbol.

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NOTES


2. It has to be noted that in the first chapter Todorov uses the expression semiotics in an anachronistic sense, because from the Greek thinkers to Pierce’s system, the science of the sign (semiotics) only refers to a system deducted from various disciplines.

3. « Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of – affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of – actual things – are also the same. » Aristotle, «De Interpretatione», trans. Jenkinson, A.J., in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991, vol.1., p. 25.


8. An analysis comparing the symbol with the features of the sign should have taken into account the other great harbinger of semiotics besides Saussure; Pierce, and his tertiary sign typology which divides the sign into the categories of icons, indices and symbols. Pierce’s assumption restricts the Saussurian idea of « arbitrary linguistic sign » to a certain degree.


ABSTRACTS

This paper analyses Tzvetan Todorov’s *Theories of the Symbol*, which describes the history of the theories of the symbol. Considering the literary achievements of Todorov’s undertaking, the essay reflects on the shortcomings of the history of the symbol presented and the inadequacy of the chosen semiotic method. The author assumes that Todorov’s book adopts the views of the 20th century neo-rhetorics on several points, and she intends to point out some basic consequences of this correlation that relate to the methodology of the book.
Cet article analyse l’ouvrage de Tzvetan Todorov intitulé *Théories du symbole*, qui présente l’histoire des théories du symbole. Évaluant les conclusions en matière de sciences littéraires de l’entreprise de Todorov, l’étude relève les lacunes de cette histoire et les insuffisances de la méthode sémiotique choisie. L’auteur suspecte l’œuvre de Todorov de véhiculer en plusieurs endroits les marques de la néorhétorique du XXe siècle et cherche à mettre en évidence les conséquences de cette corrélation qui touche à la méthodologie de l’œuvre.

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