DICTIONARY OF SYMBOLS

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The Third Branch may be called *semeiotike*, or *the Doctrine of Signs*,
the most usual whereof being *Words*, . . .
the business whereof, is to consider the Nature of Signs,
the Mind makes use of for the understanding of Things,
or conveying its Knowledge to others.

John Locke
*Essay on Human Understanding*
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The intention of this work is that it should function both as a reference work in Western cultural history and as a tool for those working with ideograms, e.g., logotype and trademark designers, those engaged in advertising, interior designers, researchers in communication, art historians, art and history teachers, etc.

*Dictionary of Symbols* is also a voyage of discovery into the realm of Western thought. Ideograms such as $, *, and + illustrate the ways in which we perceive relationships, functions, and continuity in the world. The historical development of these different forms reflects the ways in which our understanding and perception of the world have changed.

Basic graphic gestalts such as $, +, and * were created thousands of years ago (or discovered, see $) in specific historical situations. They later became integrated parts of Western culture. For example, there is a distinct relationship between the way that the sign * is used on military uniforms, tanks, and airplanes and the discovery made in the Euphrates-Tigris area, approximately 4000 B.C., of the way in which the planet Venus moves around the earth.

A strong parallel can be found between the ancient, ideographic basic forms and the collective archetypes that exist in our subconscious. One cannot discount their influence and correlation with basic psychological functions. The Nazi movement in Germany between 1930 and 1945 would not have had the same success over such a short period of time if its rallying sign had been $ instead of *.

Apart from its function as a cultural historical reference book, *Dictionary of Symbols* is also intended to provide guidance in the design of new ideograms on signposts and instrument panels. For this reason the graphic index lists both modern ideograms, such as $, *, and +, and older ideograms that are no longer in use, such as $ and $. Those who advocate ideals of standardization and uniformity will perhaps be annoyed when they discover ideograms like $, $, and $ on the same page, but this is unavoidable. Versatility and usefulness
Dictionary of Symbols
Part I: Introduction
Signs, symbols, and ideograms

Any object can be called a symbol as long as a group of people agrees that it means more than just itself. A rose can be a symbol for love; two crossed swords, a symbol for war. Graphic symbols are signs or pictures that have been drawn, written, painted, or engraved. They can also be called graphs. Drawings found on toilet stall doors or along the walls in the underground are called graffiti.

In this book I have chosen to refer to graphs like ❗ as signs rather than symbols. This is because the word symbol is sometimes used in a special way. For example, the sign ❗ depicts or represents a pair of scales, which is a symbol for the part of the zodiac called Libra.

The word symbol is derived from the Greek word symbolon. In ancient Greece it was a custom to break a slate of burned clay into several pieces and give each individual in a group one piece as a mark of identification. When, at a later date, they met and fitted the pieces together (Greek symbollein) it confirmed that the persons were the same ones, or representatives of those, who had received the pieces of clay in the first place.

The use of the word symbol was widened to include the engraved shells that were employed by those initiated in the mysteries, both as marks of identification and as essential components in ritual gatherings. It was only a short step away to the word's eventual meaning, in which an object, either through a visual similarity or a common agreement between those using it, represented something other than itself.

An ideogram is a special type of symbol, a graphic sign that illustrates an idea or a concept. The graph 🌈 represents the G-clef in musical notation, the treble range on sound reproducing appliances, and is, in a variety of ways, always related to music. 🌈 is an ideogram.

The concept or idea of rain and the physical phenomenon of raindrops falling from clouds is symbolized by the graph ⛲. This graph is therefore an ideogram. There also exists a large group of non-iconic graphs that represent different sounds rather than things or relationships – i.e., letters
and syllabic signs. K, G, and Q are not considered as ideograms in this book and therefore are not listed in the dictionary section or the graphic index.

The letter A, however, not only is a sign for a specific sound but is also a true ideogram. A is the first letter of the alphabet and because of this has been used to denote the idea of something that comes first, which indirectly suggests the idea of something good, the best, of the highest quality, etc. Consider expressions like “A-child,” the “A-team,” or the “A grade.”

**Iconic and non-iconic signs**

To say that a graphic sign, a graph, is iconic means that it is an icon (Greek eikon = image) of something or someone. بوابة is an iconic graph representing the crescent of the moon. Twice a month, for a few days only, the moon is visible as a crescent against the evening or morning sky.

I have decided to refer to all graphic symbols and signs that are not pictures of easily recognized objects as non-iconic. These non-iconic symbols and signs are the subject matter of this book.

Iconic signs such as pictures, photographs, and stylized reproductions of the type used for certain road signs only mean something if the observer is able to associate them with what they portray or with something closely related to it. The signs dealt with in this book, however, are given their meaning in another way. They might be said to be similar to the idea represented, not in the same way as a picture of a cow is similar to a living cow, but more like ～ is “similar” to two witnesses, one who speaks the truth and one who lies. ～ is an ideogram in which the idea of truth is represented by the straight line and the idea of dishonesty is represented by the wavy line, the two lines woven together symbolizing two statements about the same reality.

Although non-iconic signs can be considered as pictures resembling something, they reflect the way in which we think, our knowledge of the world, and the way we create visual interpretations of the world’s relations rather than the things and relationships themselves.
Signs and meanings

The meaning of a sign is something collective. Each person, during his or her childhood, acquires a whole series of conventions (implicit and often subconscious, tacit agreements). Graphic structures rely upon these conventions for their various meanings.

There are, for example, analogical conventions – something that is placed above something, as \( x \) in \( \frac{x}{y} \), is also evident in the relationship between heaven and earth, father and son, cause and effect, etc.; conventions that decide the way in which time is to be represented graphically – the future to the right or under, the past to the left or above (in the Western world); and conventions that determine the way in which we experience what is outside and what is inside – on the one hand \( \Box \), and \( \bigcirc \) on the other, etc.

The meaning of a sign can, in this way, be either related to a specific cultural sphere or accepted universally. The former can be exemplified by comparing the meaning of a vertical line, \( \| \), in the West with the meaning of a horizontal line, \( - \), in the East. Both have approximately the same spectrum of meaning.

The central nervous systems of human bodies are organized in a similar way. Most people live the greater part of their lives in a vertical position and all people experience the horizon as something horizontal, etc. Moreover, there undoubtedly exist certain genetically inherited mechanisms in the human nervous system that are similar to those found, for example, in an octopus. An animal of this type can perceive certain visual structures but not others. It is probably this last element that accounts for the fact that \( \bigcirc \) implies the same thing today as it did in Babylon, China, pre-Columbian America, and many other areas over thousands of years.

The meaning of a sign (as meaning is used in this book) can be interpreted as consisting of the ideas shared by the majority of the people familiar with the sign – that which remains when the associations unique to each individual's experiences are neglected.

At any given moment, the meaning of a sign will depend upon its historical background. For example, \( \bigcirc \) and what it stood for changed dramatically after 1935. Its historical background and, as a result, its meaning as a sign were altered.

A sign and the way it is experienced are affected by the sign's immediate surroundings. Take, for example, \( \$ \) on a banknote and the same sign in the eyes of a Donald Duck on a political poster, or otherwise compare \( + \) in the expression \( 1+1 \) with the \( + \) on one end of a torch battery.

Nor can the observer of the sign be ignored, the individual whose experiences, education, and general frame of mind will affect the way in which a given sign is understood.

To summarize the main elements that constitute and affect the meaning of a sign, the meaning is a function of:

1. the structure of a sign,
2. the immediate background of the sign and whether there are other signs in the vicinity,
3. the individual observer's background,
4. the social and historical background of the sign.

It is easy to see that the meaning of a sign is constantly changing. Only such signs as those for the sun, moon, and planets can be said to be relatively stable. Their immediate backgrounds are similar – natal charts, astrological tables – and they are often observed by individuals with a similar background – astronomers, astrologers, and psychologists.

In the case of this type of signs, it is their social and historical background, the fourth factor, that, over a span of thousands of years, has undergone the greatest change. Such changes, often slow and hardly discernible, are reflected in the way a sign changes in meaning.

The sign \( \bigcirc \), 2000 years ago, represented Mars, the god of war and aggression. Today it stands for the planet Mars. The earlier associations with war and aggression have weakened considerably. In some cases they have disappeared altogether or been replaced with other meanings such as self-assertion, the planetary system, iron, cars, etc.
The polarity of meanings of elementary graphs

Dr. Liz Greene, a psychoanalyst who has done considerable research on the subject of symbols, writes in her book *Relating*:

A symbol is not the same thing as a sign – something which merely represents something else. Road signs, for example, are signs with a specific meaning: *one-way traffic, road works, waiting is prohibited*. A symbol, on the other hand, suggests or generates an aspect of life where the number of possible interpretations is infinite and eludes all attempts on the part of the intellect to fix or establish a single meaning.

One can never fully account for the manifold meanings that any given symbol has, nor is it possible to categorize them in intellectual terms because there is often an antithesis – an opposite – which the conscious mind is unable to grasp simultaneously.

Liz Greene writes about something that I will call the *polarity of meanings of elementary graphs*. The simplest or most elementary signs have diametrically opposed meanings.

The initial or primary meaning of a vertical straight line, |, in the West, is *one thing, something unique, and its opposite, something that is continuous, endless*. The line in a vertical position will more often, although not always, bear the former meaning, while in a horizontal position it will have the latter meaning.

The cross, †, stands for *death and sorrow* and their opposites: *eternal life and salvation*.

The circle, Ø, means primarily *all that exists, all time, all possibilities*. But it also means *nothingness, zero, no entry, no possibilities, disconnect*.

The triangle, Δ, means not only *the supreme power, prosperity, fire* but also *danger, evil power, water*.

The square, [], is synonymous with *the ground, the earth* and also with *a house, a building* — *i.e.*, something that removes a person from the ground.

Finally, the five-pointed star, ★, is the sign for both *war* and *pain* and their opposites: *festivities, favorable opportunities, enjoyment*.

From this we can infer the following rule: *the most elementary signs always signify at least two opposite or almost opposite meanings.*

This rule, however, seems only to apply to the most elementary structures. As soon as a sign structure becomes slightly more complex its meanings no longer present themselves as opposites. Ø stands for the *sun and gold* but nothing else. Δ only means *danger*.

There are also other elementary signs that do not carry opposite meanings. ♀ does not mean both *love* and *hate*. ♀ does not mean both *heat* and *power* and *weakness* and *cold*. The six-pointed star, ☉, is the sign for *Judaism*, but not its opposite, *heathenism*. Nor does it stand for other beliefs or religion in general.
The basic ideographic structures

There are four or five basic elements in Western ideography, depending on how one chooses to count. They include the straight line, —; the circle segment, ⊙; the spiral or exponential curve, ⊝ and ⊘ (or in one form ⊙); and •, the dot or small, filled circle. With these basic components it is possible to draw all the ideograms in Western ideography.

Gestalts in Western ideography are those basic signs that have been created as complete entities, i.e., those that have not been built up by more elementary components or are not the result of a dividing of a larger structure. It is, however, difficult to draw a clear dividing line between basic elements and gestalts. Is it possible for the human mind to combine \( V \) with a straight line and produce \( \downarrow \), or is \( \downarrow \) a holistic psychological gestalt? Is \( \bowtie \) a gestalt or does the human mind create a uniformly curved line \( \bowtie \) by dividing \( \circ \), which would mean that \( \bowtie \) is not a gestalt?

Here are some structures that could be considered gestalts: \( +, \triangle, \bowtie, \square, \bowtie, \gamma, \Theta, \Gamma, \bowtie \). One only has to look at some of the signs from prehistoric ideography to see that all basic elements were being used between 10,000 and 20,000 years ago, during the Neolithic Age: \( +, \bowtie, \gamma, \Theta, \bowtie, \square \). Primary gestalts such as \( \triangle, \bowtie, \delta, \bowtie \) came into use thousands of years later.

The development of sign structures through the ages

It would be logical to assume that signs like \( +, \square, \triangle, \bowtie \) and \( \bowtie \) were among the first to be used by the human race - if we disregard the iconic signs that represented animals in paintings and engravings, etc. - but in reality this is not the case.

The oldest signs consisted of strange combinations of the five basic elements: \( +, \bowtie, \gamma, \Theta, \bowtie \). Examples include signs such as \( \bowtie \) and \( \bowtie, \bowtie \) from the caves in Niaux, \( \bowtie, \bowtie \) from the El Castillo cave, and the remarkable graphic structure \( \bowtie, \bowtie \) from the La Pasiega cave. Signs such as \( \bowtie, \bowtie \), crosses combined with arches, seem to have appeared at a later stage.

The oldest engravings and paintings found in the caves of Europe are said to be between 10,000 and 20,000 years old. Whether this estimation is correct or not, it is possible to date the signs in relation to each other by studying the style of the paintings and engravings and the number of layers on cave walls.

More advanced sign structures have also been found in caves and on rock faces, such as \( \bowtie, \bowtie, \bowtie \) and \( \bowtie \). Other common signs at this time were those that depicted "hands," \( \bowtie \) and \( \bowtie \), and "footprints," \( \bowtie \) and \( \bowtie \). Even today footprints are used in Buddhist symbolism, often drawn and combined with other symbols, as in \( \bowtie \). During the Algerian war of independence, at the end of the 1950s, the French made use of the sign \( \bowtie \) on the sides of buildings and on walls. These black feet, "pieds noirs," signified the secret army organized by the French inhabitants of Algeria. The sign for the soles of feet is also common in Nordic rock engravings from about 1500 B.C.

Curiously enough, one of the oldest structures is \( \bowtie \), the heart. Furthermore, \( \bowtie \) and \( \bowtie \), the Nordic runes representing "troll" and "giants," have also been found in South European caves and even on rock faces in the interior of the Sahara.

The next development of sign structures can be exemplified by Egyptian hieroglyphs from around 4000 B.C. Among these there are
advanced forms such as $\$, $\$, and $\$. It was at about this time that the pentagram, $\star$, appeared for the first time in the area that is now the state of Israel. Also the sign $\odot$, and $\bigodot$, the sun wheel, materialized, the latter in the form of the hieroglyph $\odot$, which was possibly an ideogram for a town or city.

In approximately the year 3000 B.C. the sign $\$\$ emerged in the Indus and Harappa cultures. Such signs as $\mathbb{Q}$, $\mathbb{P}$, $\mathbb{O}$, and $\mathbb{E}$ began to be used by the other societies around the Persian Gulf.

At about the same time, the Assyrio-Babylonian culture introduced $\$\$ and $\$, the basic cuneiform sign. It was the Cretian culture, however, that around the year 2000 B.C. introduced what might be considered the first modern alphabet with signs like $\mathbb{W}$, $\mathbb{J}$, $\mathbb{Y}$, $\mathbb{I}$, and $\mathbb{F}$.

It was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that radically new structures began to emerge. In the interval between, old and new patterns were combined in more complex and sophisticated ways, as in $\mathbb{F}$, $\mathbb{P}$, $\mathbb{E}$, and $\mathbb{P}$.

In about A.D. 1500 groups became common ideographic structures. They had existed at an earlier stage – the Egyptian hieroglyph $\mathbb{Q}$, the Roman numeral $\mathbb{I}$, and many of the Mayan hieroglyphs – but these were more often exceptions to the rule. There also appeared new forms such as $\mathbb{D}$, $\mathbb{W}$, $\mathbb{R}$, and $\mathbb{G}$.

The next significant change in graphic form occurred during the nineteenth century. Rather than the sign itself being colored, it was the background that was filled in: $\mathbb{F}$. Although this technique had already been practiced during the Neolithic period (e.g., $\mathbb{O}$), it was hardly to be seen in antiquity. With this new development signs were framed or inscribed so that the graphs did not touch one another, as in $\mathbb{F}$; sometimes signs were placed one on top of another, as in $\mathbb{F}$. Also, a cog-like form came into use, as in $\mathbb{G}$.

The groupings became gradually more advanced, for example, $\mathbb{C}$ and $\mathbb{D}$. Old, well-known structures were combined in new and innovative ways. A circle with "moveable segments," $\mathbb{G}$, and systems of co-ordinates with different types of curves appeared in different contexts. See, for example, $\mathbb{F}$ and $\mathbb{P}$.

During the twentieth century the synthesis of old patterns became more advanced, as exemplified by $\mathbb{Q}$, $\mathbb{O}$, and the larger illustration below. New structures emerged that looked like $\mathbb{H}$ and $\mathbb{I}$. The technical perfection of this age has been responsible for the creation of new variations based on the old structures, such as $\mathbb{F}$ and $\mathbb{P}$.

If one could discern the rules that have governed the development of ideographic structures one would be able to predict the forms of future structures. No one has yet been able to isolate these rules, although the network coincided with the discovery of electricity and its wider use in society. Co-ordinate structures and exponentially ordered groups (e.g., $\mathbb{I}$) became more common around the middle of the twentieth century.

Strangely enough, the period between 10,000 B.C. and 4000 B.C. seems to be totally devoid of signs. It is as if a syllabic void had occurred in the period between the birth of the first known civilizations – in Egypt, around Euphrates and Tigris, in the Indus Valley, and in China – and the time of Christ's birth, were already in the habit of using complicated, woven patterns in their work. The woven structure can only be expanded within limits set by its structure, but the network has the advantage of not being closed – it can be added to indefinitely. The same possibility also characterizes co-ordinate structures.

Around the middle of the twentieth century there appeared numerous new ideograms. They first appeared in the world of comic strips and advertising. Examples are $\mathbb{C}$, $\mathbb{W}$, $\mathbb{P}$, and $\mathbb{G}$.

It was in the twentieth century that the network first came into use as an ideographic structure. An example of this is $\mathbb{I}$, which represents part of a net of benzene rings in chemistry. It should not be forgotten, however, that interlacing patterns were in use at a much earlier stage. The Celts, the Nordic peoples, and others, at the
Neolithic and prehistoric rock paintings and engravings.

It might be that the science of history has made an error in its calculations and that the Neolithic Age occurred, not as is supposed, 10,000 years before Christ’s birth, but immediately before the appearance of the first known civilizations.

Another possibility is the occurrence of a natural catastrophe such as the shifting of the earth’s polar axis, resulting in large-scale floods and ice ages sometime between 15,000 B.C. and 10,000 B.C. The known expansion of the ice-cap of the North Pole, which principally affected the Northern European regions, can hardly account for this void in ideographic development.