



The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages by Anna Balakian
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succeeding movements? Although this may be possible, there is no need, of course, to upset the hierarchies of quality that Goldwater has already established.

Notes

- 1 Phillippe Jullian, *The Symbolists*, London, Phaidon, 1973; Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art*, New York, Praeger, 1972.
- 2 Arts Council of Great Britain, *French Symbolist Painters*, London, 1972, p. 11.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–20.
- 4 Alan Bowness, in *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 5 Ary Renan, *Gustave Moreau*, Paris, 1900, p. 42. These issues are discussed at greater length in Roald Nasgaard, "Willumsen and Symbolist Art, 1888–1910," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1973, pp. 140–44.
- 6 Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America, 1890–1940*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984.

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The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages, ed., Anna Balakian, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiado, 1982. Pp. 732; no ills.

A major contribution to Symbolist studies and an important publication in the field of comparative literature, *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages* is a copious and intelligently structured anthology of essays dealing with the most significant exponents of literary Symbolism, the essential themes and major theoretical issues. It should be of value to the art historian coping with the interdisciplinary and international complexity of Symbolism. It may be used essentially as a reference book, a kind of overstuffed grab bag of information on a wide variety of subjects. Indeed, the variety of subject matter is complemented by the many distinct critical viewpoints offered by the international array of distinguished specialists. A more coherent picture both of Symbolism and of the state of comparatist literary studies emerges, however, if one scrutinizes the overall organization of the book. In fact, the structure of the book constitutes a methodological and conceptual model for studying this historically and theoretically complex subject.

The focus moves from issues of definition to broad theoretical issues and general themes; from the most narrowly circumscribed historical and geographical center, Paris between 1885 and 1890, to Symbolism's subsequent international diffusion in the literatures of Latin America, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, and Bulgaria, among others.

Part I, "The Delimitation of Symbolism as a Literary Movement," starts with the basics: René Wellek's "What is Symbolism?" Wellek strives to establish the historical perimeters of Symbolism and to clarify the definition of "symbol" peculiar to that period or movement and distinguishable from its more general significance in the history of world literatures. Wellek's historical model in this process of definition and clarification consists of four concentric circles: "the coterie in Paris in the eighteen-eighties and nineties; the French movement from Baudelaire to Valéry; the international movement that spans the continents and includes all or almost all literatures between 1880 and 1920; and the Symbolism of all ages and places" (p. 28). It is the third circle that Wellek finds the most useful in the context of this comparative study.

Wellek then turns his attention to the problem of definition, that is, what the Symbolists meant by "symbol."

One could develop this by saying that in most older poetry the "thing" was the theme and the "image" illustrated it, while in Symbolism the image assumes materiality and the thing is merely its accompaniment. Grammatically, Symbolist poetry could be called poetry of the predicate. It speaks of something or somebody, but the subject, and the person or the thing, remains hidden. Symbolist poetry thus tries to distance the language utterance from the extra-linguistic situation. . . . It is what Christine Brooke-Rose in her *Grammar of Metaphor* calls Simple Replacement: "the proper term is replaced altogether by the metaphor, without being mentioned at all" (London: 1958, p. 24). . . . This clearly will not do. We have to limit "simple replacement." The hidden tenor cannot be simply "man" or, in the case of this proverb, "the footloose man, the wanderer," but it must be some internal event or experience that hints at something transcendent and, with many symbolists, at something supernatural or even occult. . . . The Symbolist symbol has its special character: simple replacement and the suggestion of the mystery. (Pp. 26–27)

A bit of this same rigorous attention to definition would be a welcome ingredient in art historical studies of Symbolism, which have, instead, frequently exploited the term's elusiveness, using "Symbolism" as the excuse for assembling a tantalizing but, alas, often meaningless array of aesthetically, chronologically, and geographically diverse artists.

In Part II, "The French Cénacle," the focus is on the evolution of Symbolism in Paris from 1885 to 1890. Like Wellek, Claude Abastado ("The Language of Symbolism," pp. 85–99) is concerned with definition, with the meaning of "symbol" to that generation of writers. "In order to comprehend and interpret the experience which led the poets of 1885–90 to speak of the 'symbol,' we must separate linguistics from poetics, sign from symbol, the *process* of signification from the *function* of symbolization" (p. 94). Abastado underlines that crucial link which the Symbolists establish between language and symbol, and mythology and religion. Like the Romantics, the Symbolists were fascinated by the notion of a lost paradise—cultural, linguistic, mythological, and religious. They became increasingly preoccupied with spirituality and poetry as

a form of knowledge like science or religion. Abastado concludes:

Symbolism heralded a new consciousness of the nature and "attributions" of language—that of an opposition between a function of communication and a function of symbolization. Literature then assumed a new responsibility, that of exercising the symbolic function and observing the production of meaning. Work on the signifier reveals the work of the signifier. If the generation of 1885 had neither the time nor the inclination required to engage in a truly novel poetic practice, if it limited itself to a negation of *mimesis*, it nevertheless created the intellectual context in which Mallarmé pursued his theories, and in which the research of Gide, Claudel and especially Valéry was generated. It laid the groundwork for the Surrealist efforts aimed at transforming writing. (P. 99)

The wider focus of Part III, "The Emergence of the International Symbolist Movement" (A. "Catalysts and Intermediaries" and B. "Diffusion and Symbiosis") is consistent with the third of Wellek's concentric circles. It is broad in scope—including the literatures of England, Germany, Spain, Hungary, and Spanish America—and varied in the specific topics explored.

Manfred Durzak's essay, "Models for Symbolism and Expressionism: Stefan George and Herwarth Walden" (pp. 191–212), deals with the literary world in Germany from about 1890 through the first two decades of the twentieth century. With George and Walden as the focus, Durzak emphasizes the elusive meaning of Expressionism and Symbolism, the difficulty in establishing clear-cut critical definitions. Despite the aesthetic antipathy, suggested for instance by Walden's antagonistic treatment of George in the periodical *Der Sturm*, Durzak finds a significant degree of crossover and aesthetic consonance, especially as the individuals' artistic self-concepts evolved.

Gordon Brotherston ("A Graver Decadence: Reactions to Symbolism in Spain," pp. 157–63) divides the turn-of-the-century literary scene in Spain into two camps: the nationalist '98s (Unamuno, Antonio Machado, Pío Baroja, Azorín) and the modernist (Rubén Darío, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Ramón del Valle-Inclán, Manuel Machado) oriented towards France and the French Symbolists. His analysis of the political and cultural factors in the Spaniards' reception of Symbolism is fascinating:

The Spaniards, even at the height of the Symbolist influence, can be said to have lacked the specifically metropolitan consciousness that is so important to the French, the ambiguous awareness that reality has been gained and diminished by Europe's godless imperialism. . . . It was as if a certain cultural vocabulary, a certain range of reference, a certain gallantry in the fullest sense, could simply not work in the Madrid of the time, however powerful the private conviction of the poet. This is why it has been so easy for hostile critics to pick out the "excesses" of the Spanish Modernists and scornfully list their "affectations": roses, swans, champagne, stars, peacocks, malachite, princesses, pearls and marchionesses . . . it is also why the Modernists, sooner than follow the path that leads from the Parnassians to Mallarmé, renaturalized themselves, each in his own way, and to that extent ceased to be Symbolists. (P. 161)

Part IV, "The Consolidation and Metamorphosis of the Symbolist Imprint," is similarly international in scope. This section of the book, however, is focused less on identifying the heritage or impact of the French Symbolists than on tracing the evolution of Symbolism in the production of the major writers of the subsequent generation, the first two decades of the twentieth century: Stefan George, Valéry, Yeats, Eliot, D'Annunzio, Jiménez, Guillén, Ady, and Bely.

Part V, "Typological Studies," moves from the monographic approach to the thematic or even iconographic. The editor of this volume, Anna Balakian, describes this section as "synchronic" in approach, an investigation of "horizontal perspective."

Surely one of the most important essays in this section is Pierre Brunel's "The 'Beyond' and the 'Within': The Place and Function of Myths in Symbolist Literature" (pp. 399–411). Brunel explores the Symbolists' penchant for a syncretic manipulation of mythology. Their preoccupation with myth, generally, is linked to the metaphysical basis of the Symbolist aesthetic. Myth is key to the Symbolists' differentiation of allegory and symbol: "By means of a myth, true symbolism would thus grasp a mystery that never fully reveals itself and should never be dispelled and destroyed" (p. 405). Myth is linked to mystery understood in a religious sense:

The mythical quest then becomes

the image of a true mystical quest. . . . The path of such a quest must in itself be mysterious. . . . This may well explain why the poets of the period which we call Symbolist were not only attracted by the ambiguity of myth, but also towards myths so ambiguous that one is tempted to view them as symbols of ambiguity as such. (P. 405)

Brunel discusses not only the role of myths in Symbolist literature but also the crucial importance of the numerous comparative mythographies that proliferated in the middle of the nineteenth century. In general, these comparative studies of world religions and mythology emphasize the archetypal nature, the essential meaning, a primary or elementary image behind the myth. Mallarmé, of course, was a serious student of mythology, producing a translation of George William Cox's *Manual of Mythology in the Form of Question and Answer*. Brunel stresses the link between Mallarmé's notion of myth and the evolution of his metaphysics: "He thereby abandoned 'fixed,' 'secular,' and 'notorious' myths only to imagine one that would be 'utterly Virgin,' 'the Figure that Nothing is'" (p. 411; from "Richard Wagner, rêverie d'un poète français," *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1967, pp. 544–45).

This section also includes investigations of "Symbolist Theatre," "The Symbol in the Austrian Literature of the Turn of the Century," "Contribution to a Typology of Symbolist Painting," and "Displacements of Parental Space: American Poetry and French Symbolism."

In the last-mentioned essay Michel Benamou considers the main post-Symbolist American poet, Wallace Stevens, in light of the semiotic criticism of J.-F. Lyotard, J. Derrida, and J. Kristeva. For Benamou and most critics of this period, Mallarmé is the dominant voice of Symbolism, the turning point to a modern poetic. Benamou's concern is with the act or process of creating poetry:

How will Mallarmé proceed? Instead of an abysmal descent *within* the words, he will effect his metamorphosis between the *words*, in the "play" afforded by the gaps. The point is capital. For it defines symbolism in a new way, no longer fraught with the nostalgia of original unity, no longer obsessed with a return, through symbols, to an interior, anterior belly of substitutions, but now syntaxing its way forward in the only

space left mother-free, father-free, the space which separates words from one another. . . . Rather than a natural belly, whose grotto inspired Baudelaire's *Correspondances*, Mallarmé will use an artificial womb of silence, a resonant space between the words of a line, for *something* to have birth. Something which is no longer the child of a poet: "The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, he leaves the initiative to the words." (P. 455; from Mallarmé, "Crise de vers," *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1945, p. 366)

Lajos Nemeth's "Contribution to a Typology of Symbolist Painting" (pp. 437-53) attempts to differentiate between the symbol in Romanticism and Symbolism. Nemeth focuses on nature motifs—the landscape, flowers, but especially trees, and with special emphasis on this motif in the work of Vincent van Gogh. Concentrating, like other contributors to this volume, on definitions and codifications, Nemeth identifies Van Gogh's symbolism as "sensorial-expressive" (p. 442). He elaborates:

In the Symbolist art of the nineteenth century it is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between two sharply distinct types: one which is still contiguous with Romanticism, the metaphoric-allegoric type which can still be qualified as late Romantic, where the signified and the signifier remain in a subordinate relationship; and the other, the sensorial-concrete, expressive type, where the signified and signifier fuse into one. The former belongs more to the domain of illustrative, literary, esoteric philosophical concepts and to conventional content; the latter is closer to the various trends of subjective self-expression dominating the twentieth century. (P. 453)

Part VI, "The Symbolist Impact on Music and Art," addresses the crucial interdisciplinary aspect of Symbolism. The three essays concerning the visual arts are: "The Spread and Evolution of Symbolist Ideals in Art," by Edouard Roditi (pp. 499-518); "The Other Symbolist Inheritance in Painting," by Dore Ashton (pp. 519-27); and "The Aesthetics of Symbolism in French and Belgian Art," by Philippe Jullian (pp. 529-46).

Roditi's lament over the lack of art historical attention given to Symbolism seems, by now, somewhat out-of-date. The situation has, of course, been significantly rectified by a number of catalogues and monographs that reflect the

more general revisionist reappraisal of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Roditi's overview of the period does provide a useful outline of Symbolism's major themes and a quick digest of major, as well as decidedly minor, artists in France and Belgium, and also in North Central and Eastern European countries. Roditi's emphasis on the importance of iconographic studies is to the point:

Before we can develop a serious historical method of studying Symbolist art, there is a need for research on the chronological and morphological evolution of such individual iconographic themes as Salomé, the Holy Grail, Sappho, Orpheus and his Lyre, Lohengrin and the Swan, and Heliogabalus—to name just a few of those themes that spring more readily to mind. (P. 503)

Only recently have such studies been produced, and there still remains a pressing need.

The inevitable delay involved in the assembling and publication of such an ambitious volume is also apparent in Dore Ashton's essay. Ashton discusses the evolution of abstraction from the theoretical bases of Symbolism. The most important concepts in this context—that of art-for-art's sake, a primal language of forms, music as the aesthetic ideal, and the primacy of suggestion over description—have been extensively covered in more recent publications on Kandinsky, Kupka, and Mondrian. Ashton, on the other hand, emphasizes Matisse's interest in Gauguin and especially Mallarmé.

Philippe Jullian's works are, of course, familiar to anyone interested in Symbolism. His contribution here, however, is simply a broad overview of the subject, laying out the antecedents, the evolution, and the dissolution of Symbolism. This brief and very general essay has been superseded by any number of more recent and extensive publications.

Part VII, "Some National Perspectives," comprises twelve essays devoted to contemporaneous Symbolist literature in Portugal, Belgium, Scandinavia, Denmark, Finland, the Baltic, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and the United States. It is somewhat unclear whether the geographical selection in this section is intended to suggest the importance of Symbolism to the literary development in these particular countries or to indicate the relative sophistication or development of the scholarship of those countries.

As the sensitive editor of this volume, Anna Balakian provides a conclusion

that synthesizes the major issues analyzed in the book but reframes them; indeed, she reinvigorates even some of those which seem to have been thoroughly dissected and defined. Although her overriding emphasis is on the distinction between Romanticism and Symbolism, she also explores the Symbolists' insistence on the religious character of art, the sacerdotal quality of the poetic process.

The text is complemented by an extensive bibliography compiled by Ulrich Weisstein. Its organization, paralleling the overall structure of the text, makes for easy consultation of the entries. Inevitably, for the specialist this bibliography merely skims the surface of a vast literature. The art historian, for instance, would want to consult the extensive bibliographies published in recent catalogues and monographs.

The most thorough bibliography remains that of David L. Anderson, *Symbolism: A Bibliography of Symbolism as an International and Interdisciplinary Movement* (New York, New York University Press, 1975). Weisstein acknowledges his own debt to that exhaustive work. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Weisstein's bibliography is the information pertaining to the literature of countries that are somewhat off the beaten scholarly track—Greece, India, Hungary, Estonia, Japan, Romania, Turkey, among others.

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