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Literary Symbolism

Marshall C. Olds

As a school of literature, Symbolism refers to three phases of a vital part of the development of literary modernism: first to an artistic movement in France and Belgium during the last decade and a half of the nineteenth century; then, retrospectively and most importantly, to its immediate sources in French poetry beginning in the 1850s; and finally to the influence that both of these had on European and American literatures throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The designation then, had its original and official application to the second and, it must be owned, from a literary point of view the least significant of these phases. The perceived failure of the Symbolist movement to generate major works drew attention to the writers from whom it drew inspiration, and so by the 1920s the especially suggestive term Symbolist had come to be associated primarily with the movement's four great predecessors who remain among the most influential writers of the French tradition, not only with respect to France's poetry but across national boundaries and genres. While the emphasis in this brief introduction will be predominantly literary, it must be pointed out, too, that the second phase, the Symbolist movement proper, played a vital cultural role and is an area where much original research is currently being conducted.

In its primary context, then, Symbolism refers to the four poets who preceded the Symbolist movement: Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98), Paul Verlaine (1844–96), and Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91). They are also the principal sources of influence on many of the writers outside of France who were drawn to the new aesthetic tendency they helped define. Each in his own way was responsible for powerful innovation, having gathered up the principal threads of the French poetic tradition since the sixteenth century along with German, British, and American contributions to Romanticism. Beyond the simple designation of an aesthetic tendency, Symbolism is a useful term as applied to the works of these poets in that it refers at once to an important feature of poetic content and to an attitude toward the figurative operation of literary language.

The symbol became prevalent in modern literature with Romantic poetry and was tied to the visual image. Tropes such as the symbol were especially prominent in nineteenth-century literature which, as Philippe Hamon and others have pointed out, is marked by an increased tendency toward the visual referent. The Romantic symbol is generally an isolated referent — a thing or a place — presented as the embodiment of some greater truth. Moreover, the Romantic poem is usually unambiguous as to what that greater truth is.

Charles Baudelaire is generally credited with having extended the application of the literary symbol beyond the individual instance as it was practiced by the Romantics to reveal the principal function of poetic language. In the sonnet “Correspondances” (Correspondences, 1857), he points to the way in which every element in nature — that is, in all material reality — evokes, or corresponds to, an immaterial essence in much the same way as words evoke images of the things they name:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisser parfois échapper de confuses paroles;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.

(Nature is a temple where living pillars sometimes emit words that blend together; in passing through it, Man traverses forests of symbols that observe him with a familiar eye.)

Unlike the Romantics for whom symbolic value was invested in a privileged object, for Baudelaire all things have symbolic value. The physical universe, then, is a kind of language that invites a privileged spectator to decipher it, although this does not yield a single message so much as a superior network of associations. In the rest of the sonnet, Baudelaire demonstrates how this “language” works by a process of almost infinite suggestion and cross-reference. Baudelaire likened this to the psychological disorder of synesthesia, whereby a stimulus to one of the five senses elicits a response normally associated with another sense: for instance, when seeing a certain color the viewer will hear a particular sound. Poetically, this allows for great figurative leaps that are presented as metonymy. In the sonnet, Baudelaire’s examples come from among the least tangible of stimuli, smells:

“Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
— Et d’autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,
Ayant l’expansion des choses infinies,
. . .
Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens.

(There are smells that are cool like the touch of children’s skin, sweet like oboes, green like prairies, — And others, corrupt, rich and triumphant, having the expansion of infinite things, . . . that sing the transports of the mind and the senses.)

Baudelaire's thought is sometimes associated with the Neoplatonism of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) for whom the material world was but the imperfect image of an ideal one. While Baudelaire often used the vocabulary of an ideal Platonic reality, it was principally to express the distillation that art operates both on the physical world and on memory and experience. Many of his poems show how poetic language operates in creating symbolic value and how the poem itself acquires the status of symbol. Indeed, language is at the heart of the issue and, while Baudelaire did not invent the modern prose poem, he did develop it considerably in his collection of short prose works. *Le Spleen de Paris* (Paris Spleen, 1869), where the narrative symbolic form of allegory replaces the lyric symbol. It is just this insistence on the unique role of literary language that will be a distinguishing feature of Symbolism.

Stéphane Mallarmé was Baudelaire's principal literary heir in the following generation. The younger man's first mature poems were strongly and consciously marked by the elder's. From Baudelaire, Mallarmé also acquired his admiration for Edgar Allan Poe and his appreciation of contemporary poetry's sister arts, music and painting. Beginning in the mid-1860s, however, in poems elaborated painstakingly over years and sometimes decades, Mallarmé developed a poetics that severely challenged the representational function of literary language while maintaining post-Romantic poetry's fundamental relationship to the visual image. Reacting in part against journalism, against literary Realism and, increasingly as the years passed, against the naturalism of Emile Zola, Mallarmé sought an idiom that would suggest rather than describe, invoke speculative doubt rather than analytic certainty, and emphasize words at least as much as their referents. Such an approach puts self-conscious operations of language on an equal footing with the images created by them, so that the symbolic value of the image refers more to associations created within the poem than to relationships outside it. A famous example of Mallarmé's Symbolist poetics is found in the "Swan" sonnet (1885). The poem presents the visually tenuous image of a white, or blank, nothingness: a swan at first light trapped in the winter ice of a lake and covered with frost. With one wing free, the poem speculates, the bird may attempt to liberate itself, but in vain.

Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui
 Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre
 Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
 Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!
 Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui
 Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre . . .

(The virginal, ever-recurring, and beautiful new day, might it tear for us with a stroke of its wild wing this hard lake haunted beneath the frost by the transparent glacier of flights not taken! A swan of yesteryear remembers that it is he, magnificent but without hope, who breaks free).

The spasm of its death-song will shake its neck:

Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
Par l'espace infligée à l'oiseau qui le nie . . .

(Its entire neck will shake this white agony inflicted by the space on the bird who denies it).

The end of the poem shifts to the night sky and to the constellation of the Swan (Cygne):

Fantôme qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris
Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne.

(Phantom assigned to this place by its pure brilliance, it goes motionless in its cold dream of scorn which, amid useless exile, is donned by the Swan.)

The capitalized “Cygne” designates both the constellation and, as an ideal and apotheosized form, the now absent “swan of yesteryear.” For many readers, this word suggests its homonym (*Signe*), or “Sign,” here referring back to the suggestive absence that has generated it. The poem has produced a symbol, but one that is fundamentally self-referential in pointing to its own origins. (The title of another poem was “Sonnet allégorique de lui-même” (A sonnet, allegorical of itself)). Mallarmé’s poetics often rely on such extended meanings suggested through intricate word play, erudite neologisms, the multiple meanings that words may have, and an idiosyncratic though quite consistent practice of syntax allowing for an aleatory sentence structure. As his predecessor had done, Mallarmé applied his understanding of language to prose, especially to his essays (of all genres!), which he referred to as “poèmes critiques” (critical poems). Mallarmé’s difficult and somewhat precious style at once is absolutely unique and has come to be viewed as representative of the *fin de siècle* because it was so often imitated, especially by the poets of the Symbolist movement.

The contributions of Paul Verlaine to the aesthetics of Symbolism are two. The first concerns the symbol. His fleeting visual images, often made even less precise by the evocation of indistinct sounds — voices overheard, the wind in the leaves, far-off musical instruments — tend to correspond to feelings, dreams, or imperfectly grasped perceptions. Verlaine’s use of the symbol, then, is not to establish correspondences between our material world and an ideal one (even of art or language), but rather to create parallels between external reality and the succession of affective responses that make up much of our inner life. To blur further this boundary between outer and inner worlds, Verlaine often chooses images of an already mediated reality — from literary and or painterly sources, even from garden statuary — instead of drawing directly from nature. Known almost exclusively for his verse, Verlaine made his second major contribution to Symbolist poetics in relation to meter. Possessing an unusual facility with the French poetic

idiom, he used rare rhythmic combinations to great effect, as in “Chanson d’automne” (Autumn Song, 1866) which establishes a pattern of two lines of four syllables followed by a line of three:

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l’automne
Blessent mon cœur
D’une langueur
Monotone. ...

(The long sobbings of the violins of autumn wound my heart with monotonous languor).

In his important essay “Music and Letters” (1896), Mallarmé pointed out Verlaine as the source of the new poetry’s divergence from the national tradition to become an increasingly individualized mode of expression.

Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91) was literarily precocious, his finest poetry written in the brief period between the ages of fifteen and twenty (1870–5), after which time he abandoned literature altogether. His styles changed rapidly, often within weeks. The earliest poems from this period, some of which would later influence Surrealist poets like René Char, were already intensely visual, even visionary in their imaginative reach. Symbolic content was often related to the child-seer himself, as in “Le Bateau ivre” (The Drunken Boat, 1871), or to a very personal universe cryptically revealed through language, as in “Voyelles” (Vowels, 1871). *Illuminations*, the collection of prose poems composed during the last year and a half of poetic activity and published in 1886 by Verlaine, are landscapes and brief narratives in which Rimbaud makes use of an impressive range of sentence structures. The narratives are animated visions (“Royauté,” “Conte,” “Being Beauteous”). Visual movement is also central to the landscapes which often rely on the motion of the sun (“Ornières,” “Marine”). All of the illuminated scenes suggest great change, whether toward strength and beauty or toward decline, not only in the observer or protagonist, but in entire populations or civilizations (“Villes,” “Mystique”). The symbolic or allegorical meaning of these pieces remains intensely personal and enigmatic. A rare intervention by the poet-narrator seems to speak to the entire collection, “J’ai seul la clé de cette parade sauvage” (I alone have the key to this barbarous parade) (“Parade”).

In its specifically literary context, the term Symbolist was first used in the 1886 manifesto published by Jean Moréas in the literary review *La Vogue*. Moréas was defending the group of young poets of which he was a part from the charge of decadence leveled against a poetics that relied on a “musical” understanding of syntax, preciousness of diction, arcane references, and non-mimetic images springing from the personal imagination. Decadence was a term in wide circulation. In J.-K. Huysmans’s influential novel *A rebours* (*Against the Grain*, 1884), a naturalist though not unsympathetic *summum* of the period,

the aesthete hero des Esseintes professes admiration for the poetry of Rome's decadent period, with which he sees contemporary parallels, Mallarmé prominent among them. By the late 1880s, the terms Decadent and Symbolist were nearly synonymous, both referring to a high degree of individuality and a disregard for aesthetic norms, the latter, though, specifically designating a sensibility associated with "le rêve" (dream) or "l'idée" (the idea). The Decadence and Symbolism of the last fifteen years of the nineteenth century may be viewed as two different emphases within the same movement.

Much of this Symbolist writing is considered today to be stylistically and thematically derivative of the four poets discussed above. A few major writers did emerge from this generation, however. Paul Valéry (1871–1945), Mallarmé's most prominent disciple, combined psychological states of anticipation with abstract speculation (*Monsieur Teste*, *Charmes*); poet and playwright Paul Claudel (1868–1955) revitalized Christian symbolism (*L'Hôteage*, *Cinq grandes odes*), and Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) applied Germanic folk sources and the fantastic to the new hermetic style (*Pelléas et Mélisande*, *L'Oiseau bleu*).

The Symbolist movement of 1886–1900 was especially prominent in the other arts. Some of the period's most often treated subjects — Salome and Saint John, Jacob wrestling with the Angel, Narcissus — were taken up by painters such as Gustave Moreau, Paul Gauguin, and Odilon Redon. There were related developments in architecture and design, notably with the art deco style. In music, Claude Debussy's revolutionary "Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune" (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, 1894) was an orchestral response to Mallarmé's epoch-making poem, "L'Après-midi d'un faune" (1876). Debussy also set Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* as an opera (1902). Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* (1905) returned to that quintessentially Symbolist heroine. Symbolist poems were frequently set as art songs by the most innovative composers writing up to 1917 — along with Debussy, Gabriel Fauré and Maurice Ravel, among others.

The literary culture of the Symbolist movement was vibrant. The bohemian faction congregated around Verlaine in the Left Bank cafés, while those more inclined toward idealism and aesthetic theory frequented Mallarmé's Tuesday gatherings at his apartment in the Rue de Rome. Literary reviews espousing Symbolism proliferated after 1886, each having its own bias. Among the most significant were: *La Pléiade*, publishing the Belgian poets; *La Vogue* specializing in free verse and publishing Rimbaud's *Illuminations*; the *Revue Indépendante* publishing important essays on the new aesthetics, notably by Mallarmé; *La Revue Blanche* cast the widest net, publishing young non-French writers, such as the American Francis Vielé-Griffin (1864–1937), giving a voice through Léon Blum and others to Jewish culture, promoting Dreyfusism, and establishing the ties between the political anarchism of the 1880s and 1890s and the individualist tendencies inherent in Symbolist aesthetics. André Gide (1869–1951) and Marcel Proust (1871–1922), whose stylized syntax and

psychological use of metaphor would revolutionize prose narrative in France, had their first publications in these reviews. Collectively, these often ephemeral periodicals were a veritable laboratory for new aesthetic and social ideas.

From its beginnings, Symbolism had an international character. Among its major sources were Poe, Swinburne, Wagner, and later, Whitman. Early projects looked beyond national borders, as with Mallarmé's attempt in the early 1870s to create an international confraternity of poets. Finally, one must recognize the diverse nationalities represented by the young writers drawn to the movement of 1886 and to Mallarmé's Tuesdays: Belgian (Emile Verhaeren, Georges Rodenbach), Greek (Moréas), Polish (Teodor Wyzewa), American (Stuart Merrill), Irish (Oscar Wilde). This international profile (viewed by some as non-French) was not without negative repercussions in the France of the 1890s marked by the xenophobia of the Dreyfus Affair. More positively, though, it encouraged the spread of Symbolism beyond France and Belgium to other traditions reacting against Realism. Symbolism is considered today to have become a fully European literary movement, from Hungary (Endry Ady, 1877–1919) to Portugal (Eugenio de Castro, 1869–1944). Among the most important figures associated with Symbolism were the Russian poet Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921), the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), and the German poets Stefan Georg (1868–1933) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926).

In the Americas, Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916) employed Verlainian musicality to liberate Spanish verse from its prosodic traditions. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Symbolism, along with Surrealism, had a pervasive influence on Latin American literature. A major instance is that of Mexican poet and novelist, Octavio Paz (1914–98) whose work establishes ties between Mallarméan influences and mysticism.

In Britain and the United States, the role of Symbolism has been significant in the development of modernist prose and poetry. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), by British poet and critic Arthur Symonds, had widespread influence, bringing the younger French poets to the attention of William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) and James Joyce (1882–1941), both of whom would be further marked by Mallarmé's late poems and essays. The British novel of the early twentieth century saw the use of images and symbols supplanting realist narrative devices, not only in the work of Joyce but also in that of Joseph Conrad (1857–1924), D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) adapted Symbolist aesthetics to his own very individual poetic style and to his critical writing (his notion of the objective correlative, especially). Eliot's deep appreciation of Symbolism's hermetic nature and formal complexities in turn influenced, in the period between the world wars, the analytical criticism of the Cambridge Critics in England and the New Criticism in the United States, as well as American poets Ezra Pound (1885–1972), John Crowe Ransom (1888–1974), and Wallace Stevens (1879–1955).

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