

# Symbolism, Its Origins and Its Consequences



# Symbolism, Its Origins and Its Consequences

Edited by

Rosina Neginsky

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

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Fig. 32-1. Robert Motherwell, *A Throw of the Dice No. 1*, 1963, lithograph on white woven Rives BFK paper, 30 x 22 in. (76.2 x 55.9 cm). Art © Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

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Fig. 32-3. Robert Motherwell, *Beside the Sea No. 5*, 1962, Oil on Strathmore paper, sheet: 29 x 23 in.; 73.66 x 58.42 cm Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts. Purchased with the gift of Bonnie Johnson Sacerdote, class of 1964, and Louisa Stude Sarofim, class of 1958 and the Dedalus Foundation Art © Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

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### Chapter Thirty-Three

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#### **Chapter Thirty-Four**

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#### **Chapter Thirty-Five**

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# INTRODUCTION

## ROSINA NEGINSKY

Without symbolism there can be no literature; indeed, not even language. What are the words themselves but symbols, almost as arbitrary as the letters which compose them, mere sounds of the voice to which we have agreed to give certain significations, as we have agreed to translate these sounds by those combinations of letters?

Symbolism began with the first words uttered by the first man, as he named every living thing; or before them, in heaven, when God named the world into being. And we see, in these beginnings, precisely what Symbolism in literature really is: a form of expression, at the best but approximately, essentially but arbitrary, until it has obtained the force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness.

—Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*<sup>1</sup>

Since the birth of the Symbolist movement in the middle of the nineteenth century, there have been many attempts to define, explain, and expose different sides of this movement. Russian literary critic Zinaida Vengerova, while analyzing and documenting the evolution of Western European Symbolism as it emerged, wrote that

Symbolism is everything that reflects the essential as a sign of the unincarnated. The Symbolist is the one who does not merge with the existing moment, is not immersed in it, but perceives it as a search for the purpose of existence, as a path.<sup>2</sup>

Probably the key word that describes the Symbolist movement is *imagination*. The role of imagination was identified in the Saint-Simonist dialog of 1825, which compared artists, scientists, and industrialists. It contends that “*Artist means the man of imagination*, and the artist embraces at once the works of the painter, the musician, the poet, the man of letters.”<sup>3</sup> Although Symbolism flourished throughout Western and Eastern Europe, in the English, French, and Spanish-speaking Americas, and even in Turkey, Symbolist aesthetics and sensibility developed first in France and in England. It was the French Symbolist aesthetic that first became known and affected the development of Symbolist trends in other countries. Even in England, where the Symbolist aesthetic started with the Pre-Raphaelite movement and developed very early, it was predominantly French Symbolism that influenced the Aesthete movement that formed around Oscar Wilde.

At the root of the Symbolism there is a discontent with and a withdrawal from the society. The Symbolist sensibility, as Wallace Fowlie notes, could be born and developed only in “a blatantly materialistic age.”<sup>4</sup> Symbolist art and literature originated in opposition to the industrialized and materialist society and opposed rationalist and positivist doctrines. Overall, the Symbolist sensibility rejects society, is intolerant to humanity, revolts against life, and has a complex relationship with nature. When nature represents an alternative to the industrial world, it is attractive to Symbolists, but when it is a symbol of perishable, life-related phenomena, Symbolists rebel against it and reject it. One of the reasons why Symbolists often portrayed Woman as a monster is because she was the one who gave birth and was perceived as the origin and the essence of the physical life; she was a part of matter, of a perishable physical existence. Imagination is a key word and concept for Symbolism, because it is through imagination that one can escape from unsatisfactory surroundings to more attractive worlds created by the imagination.

Among those who embraced the new sensibility, imagination led toward new inventions in art and literature. Those new “inventors” used themselves as a basis of their creativity, celebrating their own subjective experiences. They were interested in the past, which they usually invented and represented differently from historical reality. They were attracted to the folkloric and imprecise aspects of the Middle Ages and to pagan primitive and archaic cultures. They were fascinated by the transcendental and mystical aspects of existence in a search that manifested itself as a metaphysical quest. Those “inventors” created their own societies. They gathered in cafés, published their own magazines, created groups and circles. As the *Encyclopédie du Symbolisme* points out,



All that was colored by the asocial and antisocial spirit of subversion. As a result, the communities of those artists and poets kept an air of secrecy and were overall communities of an anarchic individualism.”<sup>5</sup>

Romanticism played an important role in the development of Symbolist aesthetics and sensibility. For example, for English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who influenced English Symbolism, the role of poetry was to evoke the mystery of the world.<sup>6</sup> For Novalis, a German philosopher and writer of early Romanticism, who also had an impact on Symbolists, nature was a symbol for something grander than philosophy. The French poet Charles Baudelaire, who was considered the “founder” of French Symbolist aesthetics, was influenced by the German Romantic writer, E.T.A. Hoffman, who was famous for his fantastic horror works. The novel *Aurélia* by French writer Gerard de Nerval, in which daydreams replace reality, and his twelve sonnets published under the title *Chimères* at the end of the novel *Filles du feu*, played an important role in the development of a mysterious and dreamy side of Symbolist sensibility. The pessimism of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, as stated in the following citation, played an important role in the evolution of the symbolist worldview:

our ordinary existence, driven by will, is subject to an endless dialectic of desire and boredom, and the only way to escape it is either ascetic renunciation or art. Fine art can give us temporary relief from ceaseless striving by making us forget our desiring individuality in the aesthetic act of rapt contemplation.<sup>7</sup>

Schopenhauer significantly influenced J-K Huysmans’ novel, *A rebours* (*Against Nature*), and Decadence, a branch of the Symbolist movement.

One of the most important concepts on which Symbolist aesthetics were constructed is *art for art’s sake*. For centuries human beings have been preoccupied with this concept, but the first reference to *l’art pour l’art*, as it was referred to by nineteenth century artists, writers, and poets, appeared in Victor Cousin’s *Questions esthétiques et religieuses* (*Aesthetic and Religious Questions*, 1818), in which Cousin developed the idea that “art is not enrolled in the service of religion and morals or in the service of what is pleasing and useful.” As Cousin states, “Religion exists for the sake of religion, the moral exists for the sake of the moral, and art should exist for its own sake.”<sup>8</sup> Art is a purpose in itself, and, as Alfred de Vigny pointed out, “the modern . . . spiritual belief.”<sup>9</sup>

In France, the idea of “art for art’s sake” began to take hold among French artists and writers as a doctrine from 1835, when Théophile

Gautier proclaimed the importance of art for art's sake in the preface to his novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. At the same time, Gautier published a poem "L'Hippopotame," in which he established the poet's mocking attitude toward bourgeois society and bourgeois literary criticism. With the foundation of the Second Empire in 1852, French poets and writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle, Gustave Flaubert, Théodore de Banville, and Théophile Gautier proclaimed that the bourgeois art did not have any originality or style, and bourgeois social values were meaningless and laughable.

In his 1857 poem "L'Art,"<sup>10</sup> published in the second edition of the collection of poetry entitled *Emaux et Camées*, Théophile Gautier reinforces the idea found in Alfred de Vigny's works that "a book must be composed, cut, and sculptured as if it were a statue of Parian marble."<sup>11</sup> When in 1866, 1869 and 1877, the publisher Alfred Lemerre published three anthologies of the new poets under the title *Le Parnasse Contemporain*, the editor, Catulle Mendès, was guided by the ideas stated in Gautier's poetry and works, such as art for art's sake, the cult of formal beauty embodied in faultless workmanship, and the contempt for contemporary bourgeois society. Worship of beauty was essential for Parnassian poets, since it separated the artist from everything that is banal and vulgar. "Hatred of successful mediocrity," of a society in which those poets lived, was the basis for that attitude. Their style indicated the withdrawal from the world around them and the aspiration to stand aside and be above the society in which they lived.

Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*), published in 1857 and dedicated to Gautier, is a revolt against the society he deeply hated and despised. "Le beau est toujours bizarre" (beauty is always strange), a statement associated with Baudelaire, becomes the foundation of the new aesthetic credo."<sup>12</sup>

It stresses the artist's attraction to the strange as an element of the artist's personality and his aspiration to separate himself from most men, who submit easily to the conventional and the traditional, who prefer not to be startled by originality. Those impulses that often manifest themselves in the subconscious—fantasies, hallucinations, and sentiments of fear—and which in most men are not allowed to develop, represent the sources of experiences in man's moral and physical life. The artist, for Baudelaire, feels a desire to know and explore such fantasies that border on dreams and nightmares.<sup>13</sup>

Baudelaire was very much under the spell of an American writer, Edgar Allan Poe, for whom the bizarre and unusual were at the root of his

art. Baudelaire and later Mallarmé, who was also fascinated by Poe, together with Emile Hennequin, a friend of French writer J-K Huysmans, who wrote the famous decadent novel *A rebours*, translated into French all of Poe's works. Poe's works were published in France beginning in the 1880s. Poe's *Philosophy of Composition* also influenced Baudelaire's concept of imagination. Baudelaire perceived imagination as "the queen of the faculties" and "quasi-divine."<sup>14</sup> For him,

Imagination is not a fantasy; it is not a sensitivity either, though it would not be possible to imagine a man with an imagination who is not sensitive. Imagination is an almost divine ability which perceives intuitively the intimate and secret relationship, the correspondences and analogies.<sup>15</sup>

Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences" confirms and establishes in a poetic form the key role of the imagination.<sup>16</sup> Baudelaire also popularized the notion of non-belonging. It is especially pronounced in his poem "Le Cygne" (The Swan), which stresses the feelings of a constant exile from the world around him, exile that occurs either in myths, or dreams, or fantasies, or memories.<sup>17</sup> As one critic pointed out:

That feeling of exile introduces us already to Baudelaire's symbolism, to the world of the Ideal from which he was originally exiled but to which he is conscious to belong. It is a world that has something in common with the Platonic world of Ideas. For the poet, the forms are the presentations, the symbols of the ideal and more real reality. The "painful secret" which is in the center of the sonnet "La Vie antérieure" (The Anterior Life) is a hidden desire to arrive to that supreme state of elevation. ... The elevation will be the privileged mode of the access to the Ideal, but it will remain in a state of a dream.<sup>18</sup>

If the word associated with Baudelaire and early evolution of the Symbolist sensibility was *bizarre*, Paul Verlaine in his three essays written in 1883 about three French poets — Corbière, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé — introduced a concept of a *maudit*, *cursed* poet. In his essays he also calls these poets *Satanic*. They were a threat to the bourgeois society because they potentially could "contaminate" the society with their ideas and sow a germ of destruction.

At the time of Verlaine, *vers libre* (free verse), a new phenomenon in writing poetry, was born. Verlaine was at the center of this phenomenon, although at the same time, other poets with the same Symbolist sensibility began to write in *vers libre*. Verlaine describes the art and principles of writing in his poem "Art Poétique" (Ars Poetica).<sup>19</sup> One of the major precepts of this "new" poetry is that it should follow the music of the

poet's soul, and the rhyme of the poetry is determined by the rhyme of poet's soul. Hence, the number of sounds in the line loses its importance; only rhyme, the pulse of poet's soul, remains.

\*

Paintings from artists such as Francisco Goya, William Blake, and Henry Fuseli contributed to the development of the spiritual and the mysterious in art. Those artists did not reproduce reality around them but concentrated on dreams, hallucinations, and nightmares—that is, on everything that is an extension of the inner life and of the world of mystery.

Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman Hunt, William Morris, John Everett Millais, Edward Burne-Jones, and art critic John Ruskin, all contributed to the development of English Symbolism and Symbolist aesthetics, which manifested itself at first in the revolt against academic art that the Pre-Raphaelites considered deprived of any life. They were searching in early Renaissance and Gothic art for inspiration for new forms and ideas. The Pre-Raphaelites were influenced in part by the mysticism, spirituality, and imagination of William Blake and were his followers. They regarded him as one of the precursors of their Brotherhood. Nonetheless, the English cult for beauty started with the poetry of the English poet John Keats and was reformulated by the Pre-Raphaelites. The Pre-Raphaelites were also followers of the German Nazarene movement, which reacted against the art of the academy and tried to revive in their art spiritual values while searching for inspiration in late Middle Ages and early Renaissance.

The Pre-Raphaelites questioned artistic techniques. In their works they used much brighter colors; they tried to recreate a depiction of the world around them, not in the conventional required-by-the-academic-art way, but in a new way. They aspired to be true to the perception of reality they painted. They endowed it with precise details that were supposed to convey the spirit of “real” life and the soul of their characters. For topics, they used as a point of departure history, which they reinvented, and literary works, which they reinterpreted; nature, which they endowed with the spirit of primitive innocence, distant from social tumult and the industrial spirit of big cities; and social situations, in which they depicted an awaking of the human soul yearning to be free from social constraints. The inspiration from nature became pivotal in Art Nouveau, which manifested itself in architecture, decorative arts and jewelry. The Pre-Raphaelite sensibility and inspirations led to the development of the Arts

and Crafts movement, whose leader and founder was William Morris. The movement reinvented new styles of furniture and new objects of art that could be used in daily activities and were priced to be accessible to the middle and lower classes. The Arts and Crafts movement also influenced architectural styles and the Art Modern that developed at the end of the nineteenth century across Europe.

The image of Woman became central in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who created a new type of Madonna—a woman who, with her penetrating glance and long red hair, was at once divine and earthly, divine and demonic. The theme of Woman dominated Symbolism. As in Christianity, there were two main tendencies. One represented an idealized woman, either distant or pure, chaste, and exceedingly religious. The other tended to represent Woman as a monster, the seducer and a destroyer of man, the symbol of evil and perversity. We find idealized and dreamy images of Woman in Maurice Denis, Aristide Maillol, Alphonse Mucha, in the later works of Puvis de Chavannes, and even in the works of Gustave Moreau—*La Sulamite*, *Orphée* in the musée d'Orsay—and Paul Gauguin. Although Gustave Moreau also created inaccessible women—Galatée—who were not evil, the demonic beauty or the beauty of anguish incarnated in women is present in his works—Eve, Dalila, Salomé, Messaline. These images of women are close to those of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In Germany, the demonic Woman is seen in the art of Franz von Stuck, in Austria, Gustave Klimt, in Belgium, Fernand Khnopff, and in Norway, Edvard Munch. All women were depicted as evil, seductive destroyers, men's lustful executioners. In their perception of women, artists successfully omitted the fact that in order to seduce, the seduced has to wish to be seduced and should have the same lustful inclinations as the seducers supposedly have. Those images certainly demonstrate a fear of women who, in the nineteenth century, began to enter the workforce, became more active in life of society, and could be easily perceived by men as their competitors. Now, not only were men sexually dependant on woman, they also had to compete with her for social recognition and for their place within society. The images of a threatening, beautiful women appeared not only in painting; they were also central in many literary works.

One might observe that the French version of the Pre-Raphaelite painting can be found in the works of French painter Gustave Moreau, who in his turn was directly influenced by the grand romantic artists such as Delacroix and Chassériau, as well as by the artists of the Renaissance. Moreau influenced the art of his students, such as Henri Matisse, George Rouault, his admirer Fernand Khnopff, and the works of French Symbolist painter Odilon Redon, who already in 1865 saw Moreau's *Oedipus and the*

*Sphinx*. Moreau's art also mesmerized the Surrealist André Breton who, while visiting the Gustave Moreau Museum in Paris, found in Moreau's work an inspiration for his movement. French artist Rodolphe Bresdin, in addition to Moreau, undoubtedly played a role in the development of the art of Odilon Redon, who was Bresdin's student and who partly under Bresdin's influence came to the conclusion that, "In art everything is accomplished through the docile submission to the orders of the unconscious."<sup>20</sup>

The Pre-Raphaelite movement was also a literary movement. Dante Gabriel Rossetti was not only a painter, he was also a poet and an editor of the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*, which, among other publications, stated the precepts of the movement. His sister Christina, a very talented poet, also participated in the meetings of the Pre-Raphaelites, and her poetic works reflect the spirit of the movement. The work of the Pre-Raphaelites, together with Baudelaire's poetry, had an impact on the English poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, who is considered one of the most important English Symbolist poets. He participated in the Pre-Raphaelite gatherings and in 1866 published *Poems and Ballads*, which was very much influenced by Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*.

Another major contributor to the development of the Symbolist aesthetic and sensibility was Walter Pater, an English literary and art critic who also wrote fiction. His *Studies of the Renaissance* (1873) and the novel *Marius The Epicurean* (1885) helped to shape English Aestheticism, the movement associated with Oscar Wilde, which was derived partly from French Symbolism, partly from the English Pre-Raphaelite movement, and partly from Pater's aesthetics. Wilde and his followers were under the spell of French literature of the second part of the nineteenth century, and they read it avidly. They were particularly sensitive to the notion of the *bizarre* and the cursed, similar to French "cursed" poets who felt disgust toward "well thinking" society.

Oscar Wilde's dandyism was, as stated in the following passage, a challenge to conformity. Dandyism was

... at its best an individual's response to society's demand for conformity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the homogenizing tendencies of bourgeois society and morals. Dandyism confronted bourgeois morality and ideology with its refusal to glorify labor, to idealize the natural, its rejection of utility, its scorn for the sacred cow of progress, and the skepticism with which it greeted the great liberal ideals of democracy and equality. The dandy felt himself set apart from society, or above it; his life's task therefore, was to *manifest* the distance he felt. He resisted society by amazing it, shocking it, testing its tolerance, by persistently going "too far" in his dress, gestures,