Light and Obscurity in Symbolism

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Edited by

Rosina Neginsky and Deborah Cibelli

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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8512-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8512-6

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART THREE: Visual Arts, Literature and Philosophy

PART SIX: Music

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Thirteen

Lasner.

Fig. 13-7. Aubrey Beardsley, No. I of *The Comedy Ballet of Marionettes*, from *The Yellow Book*, Vol. II, July 1894, published by Elkin Matthews and John Lane, London, and Copeland and Day, Boston. Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Eugene McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

Fig. 13-8. Aubrey Beardsley, No. II of *The Comedy Ballet of Marionettes*, from *The Yellow Book*, Vol. II, July 1894, published by Elkin Matthews and John Lane, London, and Copeland and Day, Boston. Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Eugene McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

Fig. 13-9. Aubrey Beardsley, No. III of *The Comedy Ballet of Marionettes*, from *The Yellow Book*, Vol. II, July 1894, published by Elkin Matthews and John Lane, London, and Copeland and Day, Boston. Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Eugene McDermott Library, University of Texas at Dallas.

Fig. 13-10. *Caprice. Verso: Masked Woman with a White Mouse*, c. 1894, Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898). © Tate, London 2013.

Fig. 13-11. Aubrey Beardsley, *A Repetition of Tristan und Isolde*, from *The Savoy*, No. 8, December 1896, published by Leonard Smithers, London. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, on loan to the University of Delaware Library. Photo courtesy of Mark Samuels Lasner.

Fig. 13-12. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Abbé,* for *Under the Hill*, and reproduced in *The Savoy*, No. 1, Jan. 1896, published by Leonard Smithers. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, on loan to the University of Delaware Library. Photo courtesy of Mark Samuels Lasner.

Chapter Fourteen

Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1881-82, Oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, P.1934.SC.234, Scala/Art Resources, New York.

Chapter Fifteen

Fig. 15-1. Giuseppe Cellini, "Donna Francesca, XII", illustration for *Isaotta Guttadauro*, 1886 by G. D'Annunzio.

Fig. 15-2. Alfredo Ricci, "Il dolce grappolo", illustration for *Isaotta Guttadauro*, 1886 by G. D'Annunzio.

Fig. 15-3. Vincenzo Cabianca, "Morgana", illustration for *Isaotta Guttadauro*, 1886 by G. D'Annunzio.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

INTRODUCTION

ROSINA NEGINSKY

The collection of essays published under the title of *Light and Darkness* is a result of the conference on "Light and Darkness in Symbolism, Its Origins and Its Consequences" that took place in April of 2012 at the Allerton Park in Monticello, the University of Illinois Conference Center. This was the second conference organized by the newly founded Research Center on Symbolism that goes under the title Art, Literature and Music in Symbolism and Decadence. The first conference ("Symbolism, Its Origins and Its Consequences") took place in 2009 and the conference proceedings were published in 2010. It addressed the issue of the complex origins of the Symbolist movement and its legacy in 20th-century art and literature.

Art, Literature and Music in Symbolism and Decadence is an affiliated society of the College Art Association and it sponsored four sessions (2011, 2013-2015) at CAA. The Center also organized and sponsored two sessions at the International Congress of Comparative Literature in Paris in 2013 and two sessions at the American Comparative Literature conference in Seattle in 2015, which addressed not only the issues pertaining to the Symbolist movement per se, but to the origins of this movement and especially to its role in the evolution of art and literature of the twentieth century.

The conference on light and darkness, however, is one of the most important events sponsored by the organization. Like the first conference in 2009, its goal was to promote the interdisciplinary and international nature of the Symbolist movement, as well as the role of the Symbolist movement in the development of art and literature in the twentieth century. Therefore the conference presentations centered on art, literature and music of different countries from a variety of periods. Since in the Symbolist movement visual arts and works of literature were intrinsically connected, its interdisciplinary connections are reflected in several papers which, while analyzing works of art, also weave in their inseparable connection to literary culture.

The idea of light and darkness is one of the central ideas of the

Symbolist movement, since this is a movement of contrasts. It encompasses central themes of Symbolism such as good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the visible and invisible, the divine and earthly.

This volume consists of twenty-two articles and is divided into six parts. Part One is dedicated to architecture and stained glass. Part Two contains essays strictly on visual arts: engravings, works on paper, and paintings. Part Three combines the discussion of visual arts (painting, engravings, works on paper) and literature, when both are interwoven. Part Four discusses Symbolist sculpture. Part Five is on literary works, and the final section, Part Six, is dedicated to music.

Part One, Architecture and Stained Glass, contains two articles: "Symbolist Aspects of Macintosh's Architecture" by Larry Shiner and "Symbolist Interiors: Figures, Light, and Colors in Early Twentieth-Century Italian Stained Glass" by Lucia Mannini. "Symbolist Aspects of Mackintosh's Architecture" introduces readers to the interior design of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his wife Margaret and to Mackintosh's architectural works. Shiner asks whether we are "justified in considering Mackintosh's architecture as having a Symbolist and not just symbolic tendencies?" He shows that in his interior design Mackintosh created an interior that has a Symbolist soul and his usages of light play an important role. According to Shiner however, Mackintosh is only partially Symbolist and only partially embraced the ideas of the Symbolist movement, particularly because "Mackintosh was too creative and too much of an individualist to fit comfortably into any of the art historical categories that have been associated with his work, whether Symbolist, Art Nouveau, or Arts and Crafts."

Mannini in her article asserts that "the coloured glass, both luminous and opalescent, enclosing the space but not confining it, was effectively very congenial to the Symbolist metaphorical vision of reality," because "stained glass was suited to the illusionistic vision, with the taste for the artificial," essential in Symbolism and especially favored by Symbolist literature, for example in Huysmans' novel *A rebours.*

Part Two, on visual arts, consists of four articles. The article "The Symbolist Path of Armand Point" by Robert Dore examines different Symbolist themes relating to women such as death, hair, Christianity, mythology, etc. that Point explored in his art.

Joelle Joffe in "Light and Shadow in *The Dream* by Odilon Redon" inquires into the role of *chiaroscuro* in Redon's *noirs.* Adapting a psychoanalytical approach, she argues that Redon's *chiaroscuro* "is not a technique of representation. It is evidence of the gaze of the artist, the core of a man who is looking for a solution to his distress or what Freud called

'Hilfslosigkeit' or helplessness." She demonstrates that through light and shadows of his *noirs* and *chiaroscuro*, Redon conveys the undetermined state of his suffering soul and the effect that his childhood had on him. In her article, she also explains how the Symbolist movement allows the process of evocation through minimalist images of light and shadow.

Irena Kossowska in her article "A Flight from Colour: The Aesthetics of Black-and-White in Polish Symbolism," analyzing the works of Polish Symbolist artists who she often compares to Western European artists such as Whistler and Rembrandt, explains that etching could be perceived as "a perfect vehicle for creating imaginary worlds," while quoting Siedlecki that "etching is ideal for Dionysiac dreams, it marks . . . the threatening opposition between brightness and the depth of darkness." By introducing the reader to the notion of the metaphysics of night in etching, Kossowska demonstrates that in order to personify anxiety, apathy, melancholy, the blackness of night is often represented through "the tenebrous extreme of monochromatic depiction" and through blurring the contours of objects. In her discussion of the metaphysics of sex, Kossowska shows that in order to stress the negative view of a woman whose image dominates the turn of the century art and literature as well as social perception, Polish etchers represented a woman in shapeless patches of aquatint (in *Moulin Rouge* for example), or in colour that would contrast with the background of the story. For example, Kossowska points out that "the contrast between light and shadow comes into focus in Weiss's etched nocturne *Place Vendôme w Paryżu,* 1900 (Place Vendôme in Paris)," so the woman would be represented as a white female figure "tempting the viewer to plunge into the whirl of the metropolis' nightlife." Kossowska asserts that the art of etching began to disappear in the early 20th century in order to give space to art posters, an emerging new form of art that would eventually replace etching.

Jonathan Perkins in "Fantastic Nature: Associations between Paul Klee and Odilon Redon" shows the similarities between Odilon Redon and Paul Klee, which especially arise in their depictions of nature. Perkins stresses the fact that for both artists the representation of nature "might be termed a pseudo-scientific approach with a deeply personal impulse inspired by a desire to approach the spiritual."

Part Three, "Visual Arts, Literature and Philosophy," the largest part of the book, consists of articles that address the works of visual arts such as painting, engravings, or works on paper and their relationship to literature and philosophy.

Deborah Cibelli's "The Duality of Light in Rossetti's Ekphrastic Poems and Paintings" analyzes three Rossetti's ekphrastic paintings *The*

Girlhood of Mary Virgin, Ecce Ancilla Domini (The Annunciation), and *The Blessed Damozel.* Deborah Cibelli demonstrates how Rossetti, "using motifs from the Renaissance, contrasted the earthly and heavenly realms and conveyed the idea that light had the ability to unify the earthly and the spiritual and to represent transcendence." Cibelli explains that "Rossetti used light to separate and distinguish earth from heaven, to create a celestial hierarchy, and to represent physical form imbued with spiritual beauty." She explains that Rossetti's white palette in *Ecce Ancilla Domini* is enhanced by his treatment of light. She stresses the importance of ekphrasis in Rossetti's poetry as a way to translate in words the range of colors through the description of emotions, derived from paintings' colors and light. We learn that Rossetti's work was shaped by the conception of painting as mute poetry and by his perception of his paintings as "silent poems." Cibelli also shows that light played an important role in the representation of the transcendent qualities, especially in the depiction of woman, whose "beauty was embodied in the woman inherent to 'four fantasies,' which included 'the beautiful woman in heaven, *femmes fatales*, sinful women who appeal for help, and the victimized women who cannot be saved (Sonstroem 1970, 3-4).'" Cibelli's analysis convinces readers that "Rossetti developed an aesthetic sense of beauty based upon a duality of light."

Peter Cooke's article "The Ideal and Matter: Gustave Moreau's Ambiguous Dualities" stresses Moreau's constant interplay of complex dualities of an allegorical light and darkness. Cooke asserts that "the artist saw life in terms of the play of interdependent polar opposites founded on the essential duality of the Ideal and Matter." To these ends, Cooke examines Moreau's paintings such as *Oedipus and the Sphinx,* in which "the beautiful yet monstrous sphinx both attracts with its feminine face and breast and repels with its feline animal body," *Orpheus* and *Salome* of 1876, *The Chimeras*, and *Jupiter and Semele.* In analyzing *Oedipus and the Sphinx* Cooke demonstrates how this painting could be interpreted allegorically "as an idealist affirmation of the superiority of mind over matter, of the ideal over the treacherous promises of earthly honours, power and glory," or how it "could be read as a comment on the sensuality of the mythological nude," or as a mythological temptation of St Anthony presenting a form of "iconographical syncretism, mingling pagan mythology with a Christian subject." As Cooke states in his conclusion Moreau's world "is a world of co-existing dualities, of unresolved contradictions in which the Ideal and Matter are eternally co-dependent, forever locked together, in both iconography and style."

"Edward Burne-Jones' *The Sirens"* by Liana de Girolami Cheney

stresses the duality of the Sirens, their "light" beautiful appearance and dark hidden nature. As Cheney argues, "the siren in Burne-Jones' painting functions much like the Symbolist conception of the *femme fatale* because the siren evokes the dual symbolism of water, represented in light and darkness, as the source of life and death." Girolami Cheney stresses that in Burne-Jones' painting and studies, the Sirens are beautifully portrayed creatures with slender beauty "revealed through the wet drapery motif while their gentle expressions conceal their sinister plan."

Alison Hokanson in "The Soul of Things: Henri de Brakeleer as a Forerunner of the Treatment of Light in Belgian Symbolism" demonstrates de Brakeleer's influence on the "portrayal" of light of the Belgian Symbolist artists. She argues that De Braekeleer, as a Realist artist, was the first to "paint" the light of the interior as an embodiment of the emotional and psychological events that occurred in the given location. She analyzes how Belgian Symbolist artists borrowed from de Brakeleer the ability to paint light and how instead of depicting "a mirror of a person's psyche" as did de Brakeleer, their depiction of light created an interior space "with its own soul."

Liesbeth Grotenhuis in her article "Isis' Fingertips: A Symbolist Reading of Lévy-Dhurmer's *Silence*", a study of the work *Silence* by Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer discloses the complex meaning of the initiate figure of Silence which takes us from darkness to light through the long history of the process of initiation.

François Lachance-Provençal in his article "Apollo's Triumph. The Notion of Art for Art's Sake at the Center of Nietzsche and Redon's Parallel Shifts from Darkness to Light" explores the duality of Apollonian versus Dionysian aesthetics in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and how that aesthetics could be perceived in parallel with Odilon Redon's aesthetics of art for art's sake. Although he demonstrates that "this attempt at a comparative study of a philosopher and a painter was meant, in a way, to illustrate the difficulty, even the impossibility, of using Nietzsche's aesthetics as a tool in pictorial analysis," Lachance-Provençal argues that Redon's earlier art, his "Noirs" are a reflection of Dionysian aesthetics, whereas his later works, works of colors, irradiate "contagious fullness and love of life," the result of Apollonian aesthetics.

The article "The Androgyne, the Transvestite and the Herm: Aubrey Beardsley's Hybrid Forms for the Yellow Book, Volume III" by Britten LaRue examines Beardsley's four illustrations *Portrait of Himself*, *Lady Gold's Escort*, *The Wagnerites*, and *La Dame aux Camélias* and explains the reasons for the sexual duality of his images. She argues that Beardsley creates the new area of illumination, the area of the third sex expressed in

the androgyne, the transvestite and the herm. She demonstrates that "These hybrid figures are not false identities, but empowering forms. Their presence in his illustrations marks the field of the image as a redeeming space which permits independence, autonomy and freedom from the constraints of the world outside the frame."

"Reflections of Mallarmé: A Comparative Study of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère"* by Marguerite Li Bassi explores the relationship between Stéphane Mallarmé and Édouard Manet. She argues that these relationships greatly affected both artists. She demonstrates how Mallarmé's view of poetry and some of his poems served as an inspiration for Manet's painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère.* She explains how "the *Bar*'s topography concomitantly recreates Mallarmé's favorite paradoxes: reality/dream, absence/presence, exterior/interior, sacred/profane, allusion/description."

Anna Mazzanti's "From 'Fuoco' to 'Notturno': The Interpretation of Light and Shade in d'Annunzio's Work by His Friends Among Italian Symbolist Illustrators" introduces readers to illustrators of works by the Italian poet and writer Gabriel d'Annunzio. In her article, Mazzanti compares Redon's images inspired by literature with the images inspired by d'Annunzio's literary works. She explains the essential difference between Redon's works and the images that were created to illustrate d'Annunzio's works. She stresses the idea of an illustration in d'Annunzio's case as opposed to the idea of an evocation in works by Redon. She explains that like the Symbolist French writer Huysmans, d'Annunzio promoted art in his literary works. Mazzanti examines a variety of artistic techniques that were used at the turn of the century to illustrate literary works. She shows their similarities with the Pre-Raphaelites, the importance of monochromatic light in lithography, and the development of illustrations in which the woodcutters "preferred a greater clarity of light and shade, abandoning the 'school which gropes in the darkness.'"

Rosina Neginsky in her article "The Dual Nature of Beheadings: Moreau and Redon" explains the different meanings – light and dark, positive and negative – of the decapitated heads in Moreau's and Redon's works.

Part Four, "Sculpture," contains two articles on Symbolist sculpture. This is an area little studied but filled with potential. The article "Art Between Luminous Fluidity and Expressionist Shading: Defining Symbolist Sculpture Using Modeling" by Dominique Jarassé is of particular interest since it explains what type of sculptures could be treated as a part of the Symbolist movement and the role of light, in particular luminosity and shadows, in making sculpture Symbolist. Jarassé

especially focuses on sculptures of the Russian Jewish sculptor, Naoum Aronson, whose work Jarassé describes in the following way: “Here we immediately encounter the dual Baudelairean postulation inherent in Symbolism, the ambivalent nature – profoundly mystical and human – of the Symbolist aesthetic, an aspiration towards the Ideal and the distress caused by a confrontation with the real and with society.” The most important feature of Aronson, as Jarassé demonstrates, is to be able to convey “the 'flow of inner life,'” the psychology of his subjects through light and lines, in ways similar and different from Rodin, who was partially Aronson's inspiration. Jarrassé explains that Aronson's works are interesting not only for their humanistic value, but also artistically. He shows that “by using the double potential of modelling, and by mastering the language of light and shade, Aronson was able, at the same time as Rodin, to produce a profoundly Symbolist work by combining the two idealistic and expressionistic tendencies.” The analysis of Symbolist sculpture encourages Jarassé to provide a definition of it as “a use of the potential of the modelling, understood as the French ‘modelé’.”

Susan Martis in “Light, Obscurity and Symbolist Themes in American Sculpture, 1890-1920” examines the works of the American sculptors George Grey Barnard, Lorado Taft and Malvina Hoffman. Martis demonstrates that Barnard and Taft, being particularly sensitive to the effects of light and shadow, “manipulated them by leaving portions of their works unfinished . . .” Martis explains that one of Taft’s techniques was his ability to create a contrast between emotions represented through exaggerated gestures and the universality of his subjects’ garments. Malvina Hoffman came after Barnard and Taft, when the Symbolist technique in sculpture was already put in place. Hoffman was specifically interested in the body’s reactions to a variety of emotions, such as the body’s response to music, passion, and spirituality. She tried to create sculpture which captures the movement of the soul. Martis stresses that Hoffman was also an art critic. In her book *Sculpture Inside and Out* (1939), she argues that any object created must be “infused with the passionate essence of your own thought,” so the result will be “the merging of matter and spirit.”

Part Five, “Literature,” includes three articles. In his article “Light and Darkness in Dostoevsky’s *White Nights* and Kafka’s ‘Hunger Artist,’” Brent Judd argues that “contrasting opposites, whether they be light and darkness, body and soul, or real and imaginary, are the privileged points of access to the truth that the artist seeks to uncover.” Judd compares the encounter of the Dreamer and Nasten’ka in *White Nights* with the relationship of the hunger artist and the audience/overseer in “Hunger

Artist." He explains that the encounter of opposites is necessary for the production of art and shows that both Dostoevsky and Kafka bring us to the understanding "that Meaning is encountered only in the absence that opposites expose. Light has no meaning without darkness," and "the truth otherwise hidden" could be revealed through art, the result of the encounter of opposites, the intersection necessary for creativity.

Natalia Gamalova in "Colored Lighting in the Poetry of Innokentij Annenskij" analyses Annenskij's rich usage of colors in his literary works. She explains that Annenskij's aspiration for colors comes from classical culture, but his usage of colors in his poetry gives his work a Symbolist flavor.

Luba Jurgenson in her article "Anguish and Modernist Aesthetics" asserts that the Symbolist movement created a new worldview, which lives in dark, light, and in shadow. She contends that the new worldview reflects new human experiences for which there was no language, therefore it caused the creation of a language to express that new experience, a new reality. Jurgenson shows that this reality, as well as the language that describes it, are rooted in anguish, negation and a vacuum.

Part Six, "Music," contains one article, "Symbolic Touch in the Playing of Debussy's Piano Music" by Jean-Pierre Armengaud. In this article Armengaud argues that Debussy's symbolism is very suggestive and that quality is specifically achieved through "first and foremost a symbolism of opposites. . ." such as "immobility/movement, clear image/ blurred resonances, repetition/intermittence, distance/precision or proximity, physicality/sublimity, pale/colorful, narrative/silence, desire for life/ languishing death…his music favors nuance over discourse and the infinite gradation of timbres over the pursuit of a musical construction."

This volume consists of a range of studies for understanding the notion of light and darkness and a variety of its Symbolist interpretations. The articles acknowledge the complexity of meaning attached to light and darkness. They discuss and examine these images' significance for iconography, subject matter, and for aesthetics. The studies stress the interdisciplinary nature of light and darkness in Symbolism as well as a cohabitation and a symbiosis of both, which are together or separately at the core of the Symbolist movement.

PART ONE:

ARCHITECTURE AND STAINED GLASS

CHAPTER ONE

SYMBOLIST ASPECTS OF MACKINTOSH'S ARCHITECTURE

LARRY SHINER

Although the existence of a Symbolist stream in late nineteenth-century literature and painting is widely accepted, there have been few attempts to determine if there was also a Symbolist tendency in architecture. The dominant architectural approach in the nineteenth century, of course, was Historicism, which meant designing buildings in one of the historical styles, Classical, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and so on. Even the Symbolist painter, Franz von Stuck, designed his own villa in a Renaissance style.

The one genuinely new architectural and design approach at the end of the century, Art Nouveau is often treated simply as a curvilinear, organic style and an architectural dead end. But some have argued that Art Nouveau also had affinities with the contemporaneous Symbolist movement in literature and painting, and, among those considered Art Nouveau architects, Antonio Gaudi and Charles Rennie Mackintosh are most often mentioned as reflecting Symbolist tendencies.

Of course, all architecture has a symbolic aspect whether in the more general sense of a poetics of space or in the more specific sense of using traditional symbols. Thus, we need to identify some criteria for distinguishing a specifically Symbolist approach to architecture from a traditional symbolic approach.

First, with respect to method or approach, Symbolists typically avoided explicit statement in favor of suggestion or indirection. This was part of a more general tendency of Symbolists to emphasize imagination and subjectivity over reason. Thus, although Gaudi's celebrated Sagrada Família church deploys strangely biomorphic versions of traditional symbols, the façade of his delightful Casa Batlló has more suggestive