

# SYMBOL AND SYMBOLISM IN LITERATURE

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The word “symbol” has had a long and complex history since antiquity. Today it may designate very different sorts of concepts in the most varied contexts. The use in mathematics or symbolic logic is almost diametrically opposed to its use in literary criticism, and even there it vacillates, for “symbol” often cannot be distinguished from “sign,” “synecdoche” and “allegory.” In Northrop Frye's influential *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957) it is defined “as any unit of any work of literature which can be isolated for critical attention” (p. 367). The word comes from the Greek verb *symbollein*, “to put together,” and the noun *symbolon*, “sign,” “token” which originally referred to a half-coin which the two parties to an agreement carried away as a pledge for its fulfillment. Late in the seventeenth century its use, e.g., in Leibniz, seems to have served often as a designation for a mathematical sign. Its application to literature with a clearly defined meaning, contrasting it with allegory, occurred first in Germany late in the eighteenth century. Symbol, *Sinnbild*, emblem, hieroglyph, allegory were used almost interchangeably by Winckelmann, Lessing, and Herder. Only Kant in *Die Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgment*; 1790) gave symbol a more precise meaning in the context of aesthetics. He expressly rejects “the modern logicians” (i.e., Leibniz and Wolff) who use it in opposition to “intuitive representation.” “Symbolic representation is only a kind of intuitive representation,” and symbols are “indirect representations of the concept through the medium of analogy.” “Beauty is a symbol of morality” (paragraph 59). Goethe, who began to use the term after 1797, drew then the distinction between symbol and allegory most clearly, particularly in *Maximen und Reflexionen*: “True symbolism is where the particular represents the more general, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable.” And perhaps most sharply: “Allegory changes a phenomenon into a concept, a concept into an image,” while symbolism “changes the phenomenon into the idea, the idea into the image, in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unapproachable in the image, and will remain inexpressible even though expressed in all languages” (Nos. 314, 1112, 1113). Schiller, a close student of Kant, had used the term as early as 1794 in a review of Matthisson's poems, suggesting that the poet needs a “symbolic operation” to change inanimate nature into human nature. Nature should become a “symbol of the internal harmony of the mind with itself” by a “symbolism (*Symbolik*) of the imagination.” In a letter to Goethe Schiller praises Shakespeare's *Richard III* for using “symbols where nature cannot be depicted” (Nov. 28, 1797) and recommends the introduction of “symbolic devices” (*Behelfe*) to take the place of an object (Dec. 29, 1797). In the Preface to *Die Braut von Messina* (1803) Schiller asserts boldly that “everything in poetry is only a symbol of the real.”

The proliferation of the term and concept is, however, due to the German romantics, to the brothers Schlegel (though in August Wilhelm's writings which stress the imagery of literature the term *Sinnbild* predominates), to F. W. Schelling, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenburg), K. W. F. Solger and many others. In Schelling's *Philosophie der Kunst* (1802, published in 1859) a distinction between schematism (the general signifying the particular, as in abstract thought), allegory (the particular signifying the general), and symbolism (the union of the general and the particular) which alone is art, is drawn. Similarly Solger considers all art symbolic. Solger defines the beautiful in his *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik* (1829), as the union of the general and the particular, of concept and appearance, of essence (*Wesen*) and reality. “The symbol is the existence of the Idea itself. It is really what it signifies. It is the Idea in its immediate reality. The symbol is thus always true in itself: not a mere copy of something true” (p. 129). Hegel, in his *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik* (1835; the lectures were delivered in the 1820's)

differs from the majority of his contemporaries by confining “symbolic” to an early stage of art, to what in their terminology would be allegorical art. Symbolic art, for Hegel, is art where there is no concrete togetherness of meaning and form: it is the first stage exemplified by the art of ancient India and Egypt. In general, German authors clung to the romantic formulas. Heinrich Heine in a passage later to be quoted by Baudelaire, proclaims himself a “supernaturalist in art.” “I believe that the artist cannot find all his types in nature, but that the most significant types, as inborn symbolism of native ideas, are revealed, as it were, in the soul.” “Colors, and forms, tones and words, appearance in general, are only symbols of the Idea” (*Sämtliche Werke*, ed. O. Walzel, Leipzig [1912-15], 6, 25, 23). Also Friedrich Hebbel, though highly Hegelian in his speculations on tragedy, sees “every genuine work of art as a mysterious, ambiguous, unfathomable symbol” (*Tagebücher*, 2, 96; February 2, 1841).

The German discussion continued throughout the century, and becomes increasingly suspicious of the idealist interpretation of symbol. Friedrich Theodor Vischer's last paper, “Das Symbol” (1887) (in *Altes und Neues*, N. F., 1889) marks a temporary end as Vischer moves toward a psychological and empirical aesthetic while still clinging to the essence of the idealist interpretation. He analyzes the different meanings of the term sharply distinguishing it from myth. Symbolism in poetry is animism, anthropomorphism, inspired by the truth that the universe, nature and spirit must be one at their roots. It is an act of empathy which Vischer analyzes in purely psychological terms. A third use of symbol, as consciously contrived symbolism, as the poetic representation of what is universally significant and typical seems to Vischer dangerously near to allegory which with him and all the Germans is simply non-art.

Goethe's and Schelling's concept won out abroad. It penetrated to England mainly through S. T. Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle. Coleridge in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816) defines symbol “by a translucence of the special (= generic) in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.” While Coleridge often wavered in his use and sometimes thought of symbol only as synecdoche (“Here comes a sail” instead of “a ship”), symbol became the central concept of the young Thomas Carlyle in life and literature. Carlyle interpreted Goethe as a symbolist. Goethe has “an emblematic intellect,” “the figurativeness is in the very centre of his being” (*Essays*, Centenary edition, 1, 244; 2, 449). In *Sartor Resartus* (1831) a whole chapter called “Symbolism” develops a total view of art and life as symbolism. Carlyle influenced two great writers profoundly: Ruskin also developed a theory of symbolism in art, but tried to combine symbolism with= naturalism. “Symbolic” beauty for him surpasses but must not suppress “vital” beauty (*Modern Painters*, in *Works*, Library edition, 4, 144). Carlyle's friend and correspondent Ralph Waldo Emerson was then expounding a most extreme symbolist theory of poetry. “The whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.” Analogy is the key to the universe. Still, Emerson, differing from the tradition of Swedenborgian “correspondences” on which he drew, insists on the “accidency and fugacity” of the symbol. All symbols are “fluxional.” “In the transmission of the heavenly waters, every hose fits every hydrant,” says Emerson strikingly advocating the pervasiveness and shifting convertibility of symbolism, an “incessant metamorphosis” (*Complete Works*, Centenary edition, 1, 32; 3, 20, 34-35).

The symbolist conception also penetrated to France: there are echoes, in Madame de Staël who knew the Schlegels, in Alexandre Vinet, in Charles Magnin, and particularly in Pierre Leroux, an early utopian socialist. In a series of remarkable articles in the *Revue encyclopédique*, Vol. 52 (1831), Leroux exalted poetry as the language of symbols, as a system of correspondences, a network of “vibrations.” Elsewhere Leroux recognizes that in his sense “metaphor, symbol, myth are but different degrees of

allegory” and sees in symbol “an intermediary form between comparison and allegory properly speaking. It is truly an emblem, the metaphor of an idea” (in *Oeuvres* 1, 330-31). Thus the term shifts from a rhetorical category to an element in a mystical view of nature. Oddly enough another critic, Paulin Limayrac, concludes that “Symbolic poetry has no future in France, and socialism, by monopolizing the term, has dealt symbolism a hard blow.” (See “La poésie symboliste et socialiste” in *Revue des deux mondes*, N.S. 5 [1844], 669-82, trans. M. Gilman, in *The Idea of Poetry in France* [1954], p. 225.) But Limayrac's prophecy proved to be quite wrong. Baudelaire, in the fifties, espoused a theory of universal analogy and correspondences best known through his sonnet “Correspondances.” But this represented only an early occult stage of his thinking. His later aesthetics centers rather on creative imagination than on symbol. Symbol occurs interchangeably with allegory, cipher, hieroglyphic, and even emblem. Baudelaire, whatever his practice, thus cannot be called a symbolist. He died in 1867 almost twenty years before the movement which appealed to him as a forerunner. Also Stéphane Mallarmé's aesthetic does not center on the symbol. He aims rather at the creation of a special poetic language which would evoke and suggest as if by magic, the central mystery, the Idea, Silence, Nothingness. Art is both abstract and obscure. Art must “evoke, in a deliberate shadow, the object which is silenced, be allusive, never direct.” The “symbol,” which Mallarmé uses sparingly, would be only one device to achieve this effect. Still, one sees how the whole tendency of aesthetic thinking in France was preparing for the acceptance of the term as a slogan.

The term *symbolisme* as a designation of a group of poets was first proposed by Jean Moréas (pseudonym for Jean Diamantopoulos, 1856-1910). In 1885 he was disturbed by a journalistic attack on the decadents in which he was named together with Mallarmé. He protested: “The so-called decadents seek the pure Concept and the eternal Symbol in their art, before anything else.” With some contempt for the mania of critics for labels, he suggested the term *Symbolistes* to replace the inappropriate *décadents* (Michaud [1947], 2, 331). In 1886 Moréas started a review *Le Symboliste* which perished after four issues. On September 18, 1886, he published a manifesto of *Symbolisme* in *Figaro*. Moréas, however, soon deserted his own brain-child and founded another school he called *école romane*. On September 14, 1891, in another number of *Figaro* Moréas blandly announced that *symbolisme* was dead. Thus *symbolisme* was only an ephemeral name for a very small clique of French poets. The only person still remembered aside from Moréas is Gustave Kahn. It is easy to collect pronouncements by the main contemporary poets repudiating the term for themselves. Verlaine, in particular, was vehemently resentful of this *Allemandisme* and wrote even a little poem beginning *A bas le symbolisme mythe/ et termite* (*Invectives*, 1896). In a way which would need detailed tracing, the term, however, caught on in the later 1880's and early 1890's as a blanket name for recent developments in French poetry and its anticipations. Before Moréas' manifesto, Anatole Baju, in *Décadent* (April 10, 1886), spoke of Mallarmé as “the master who was the first to formulate the symbolic doctrine.” Two critics, Charles Morice, with *La littérature de tout à l'heure* (1889) and Téo-dor de Wyzéwa, born in Poland, first in the essay “Le Symbolisme de M. Mallarmé” (1887), seemed to have been the main agents, though Morice spoke rather of *synthèse* than of symbol, and Wyzéwa thought that “symbol” was only a pretext and explained Mallarmé's poetry purely by its analogy to music. As early as 1894 Saint Antoine (pseudonym for Henri Mazel) prophesied that “undoubtedly, symbolism will be the label under which our period will be classed in the history of French literature” (*L'Ermitage*, June 1894).

It is still a matter of debate in French literary history when this movement came to an end. It was revived several times expressly, e.g., in 1905 around a review *Vers et prose*. Its main critic, Robert de Souza, in a series of articles “Où nous en sommes” (also published separately, 1906) ridiculed the many attempts to bury symbolism as premature and proudly claimed that Gustave Kahn, Paul Verhaeren, Francis Vié-lé-Griffin, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Henri Régnier were then as active as ever. Valéry professed so complete an allegiance to the ideals of Mallarmé that it is difficult not to think of him as a

continuer of symbolism, though in 1938, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the symbolist manifesto, Valéry doubted the existence of symbolism and denied that there is a symbolist aesthetic (“Existence du symbolisme,” in *Pléiade* ed., [1957], I, 686-706). Marcel Proust in the posthumously published last volume of his great series, *Le temps retrouvé* (1926), formulated an explicitly symbolist aesthetic. But his own attitude to symbolist contemporaries was often ambiguous or negative. In 1896 Proust had written an essay condemning obscurity in poetry (in *Chroniques*). Proust admired Maeterlinck but disliked Charles Péguy and Paul Claudel. He even wrote a pastiche of Régner, a mock-solemn description of a head cold. When *Le temps retrouvé* (1926) was published and when a few years later (1933) Valéry Larbaud proclaimed Proust a symbolist (Preface to Eméric Figer, *L'esthétique de Marcel Proust*), symbolism had, at least in French poetry, definitely been replaced by surrealism.

André Barre's *Le symbolisme* (1911) and particularly Guy Michaud's *Message poétique du symbolisme* (1947) as well as many other books of French literary scholarship have with the hindsight of literary historians, traced the different phases of a vast French symbolist movement: the precursorship of Baudelaire who died in 1867, the second phase when Verlaine and Mallarmé were at the height of their power before the 1886 group, the third phase when the name became established, and then in the twentieth century what Michaud calls *Néo-symbolisme* represented by “La Jeune Parque” of Valéry and *L'annonce faite à la Marie* of Claudel, both dating from 1915. It is a coherent and convincing conception which needs to be extended to prose writers and dramatists: to Huysmans after *Au rebours* (1884), to the early Gide, to Proust in part and among dramatists at least to Maeterlinck who with his plays *L'intruse* and *Les aveugles* (1890) and *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892) assured a limited penetration of symbolism on the stage. Knowledge of the French movement and admiration for it soon spread to the other European countries. We must, however, distinguish between reporting on French events (and even the enthusiasm reflected by translations) and a genuine assimilation of the French movement by another literature. This process varies considerably from country to country; and the variation needs to be explained by the different traditions which the French importation confronted.

In English, George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888) and his *Impressions and Opinions* (1891) gave sketchy and often poorly informed accounts of Verlaine, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Jules Laforgue. Mallarmé's poetry is dismissed as “aberrations of a refined mind” and symbolism is oddly defined as “saying the opposite of what you mean.” The three essays on Mallarmé by Edmund Gosse, all dating from 1893, are hardly more perceptive. After the poet's death, Gosse turned sharply against him. “Now that he is no longer here the truth must be said about Mallarmé. He was hardly a poet.” Even Arthur Symons, whose book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), made the decisive breakthrough for England and Ireland, was very lukewarm at first. While praising Verlaine (in *Academy*, 1891) he referred to the “brainsick little school of *Symbolistes*” and “the noisy little school of *Décadents*” and in later articles on Mallarmé he complained of “jargon and meaningless riddles.” But then he turned around, and produced the entirely favorable *Symbolist Movement*. It should not, however, be overrated as literary criticism or history. It is a rather lame impressionistic account of Nerval, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarmé, Huysmans, and Maeterlinck with emphasis on Verlaine. There is no chapter on Baudelaire. But most importantly the book was dedicated to W. B. Yeats proclaiming him “the chief representative of that movement in our country.” The edition of Blake, which Yeats had prepared with Edwin Ellis in 1893, was introduced by an essay on “The Necessity of Symbolism,” and the essay “The Symbolism of Poetry” (1900) was Yeats's full statement of his symbolist creed. Symons' dedication to Yeats shows an awareness of symbolism as a truly international movement: “In Germany,” Symons says, exaggerating greatly, “it seems to be permeating the whole of literature, its spirit is that which is deepest in Ibsen, it has absorbed the one new force in Italy, Gabriele D'Annunzio, I am told of a group of symbolists in Russian literature,

there is another in Dutch literature, in Portugal it has a little school of its own under Eugenio de Castro. I even saw some faint stirrings that way in Spain.”

Symons should have added the United States. Or could he in 1899? There were intelligent and sympathetic reports of the French movement very early. T. S. Perry wrote on “The Latest Literary Fashion in France” in *The Cosmopolitan* (1892), T. Child on “Literary Paris—The New Poetry” in *Harper's* (1896), and Aline Gorren on “The French Symbolists” in *Scribner's* (13 [1893], 337-52). The almost forgotten Vance Thompson, who fresh from Paris, edited the oddly named review *M'lle New York*, wrote several perceptive essays, mainly on Mallarmé in 1895 (reprinted in *French Portraits* in 1900) which convey some accurate information on his theories and even attempt with some success some explication of his poetry. But only James Huneker became the main importer of recent French literature into the United States. In 1896 he defended the French symbolists against the slurs in Max Nordau's *Entartung* and began to write a long series of articles on Maeterlinck, Laforgue, and many others not bothering to conceal his dependence on his French master, Remy de Gourmont to whom he dedicated his book of essays, *Visionaries* (1905). But the actual impact of French symbolist poetry on American writing was greatly delayed. René Taupin in his *L'influence du symbolisme français sur la poésie américaine* (1929) traced some echoes in forgotten American versifiers of the turn of the century but only two Americans living then in England, Ezra Pound around 1908 and T. S. Eliot around 1914, reflect the French influence in significant poetry. More recently and in retrospect one hears of a symbolist period in American literature: Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens are its main poets; Henry James, Faulkner, and O'Neill, in very different ways and in different stages of their career, show marked affinities with its techniques and outlook. Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* (1931) was apparently the very first book which definitely conceived of symbolism as an international movement and singled out Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Valéry, and Proust as outstanding examples of a movement which, he believed, had come to an end at the time of his writing. Wilson's sources were the writings of Huneker, whom he admired greatly, and the instruction in French literature he received at Princeton from Christian Gauss. But the insight into the unity and continuity of the international movement and the selection of the great names was his own. We might only wonder about the inclusion of Gertrude Stein.

In the United States, Wilson's reasonable and moderate plea for an international movement was soon displaced by attempts to make the whole of the American literary tradition symbolist. F. O. Matthiessen's *The American Renaissance* (1941) is based on the distinction introduced by Goethe. Allegory appears as inferior to symbol: Hawthorne inferior to Melville. But in Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1956) the distinction between modern symbolism and the use of symbols by romantic authors is completely obliterated. Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, and Whitman appear as pure symbolists *avant la lettre*, and their ancestry is traced back to the Puritans who, paradoxically, appear as incomplete, frustrated symbolists. It can be objected that the old Puritans were sharply inimical to images and symbols and that there is a gulf between the religious conception of signs of God's Providence and the aesthetic use of symbols in the novels of Hawthorne and Melville and even in the Platonizing aesthetics of Emerson.

The symbolist conception of American literature is still prevalent today. It owes its dominance to the attempt to exalt the great American writers to mythmakers and providers of a substitute religion. James Baird in *Ishmael* (1956) puts it strikingly: Melville is “the supreme example of the artistic creator engaged in the act of making new symbols to replace the 'lost' symbols of Protestant Christianity.” A very active trend in American criticism expanded symbolist interpretation to all types and periods of literature. The impact of ideas from the Cambridge anthropologists and from Carl Jung is obvious. In the study of medieval texts, a renewed interest in the fourfold levels of meaning in Dante's “Letter to Can

Grande” has persuaded a whole group of American scholars led by D. W. Robertson, to interpret Chaucer, the *Pearl* poet, and Langland in these terms. The symbolist interpretation reaches heights of ingenuity in the writing of Northrop Frye who began with a book on Blake and, in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), conceived of the whole of literature as a self-enclosed system of symbols and myths, “existing in its own universe, no longer a commentary on life or reality, but containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships.” In this grandiose conception all distinctions between periods and styles are abolished: “the literary universe is a universe in which everything is potentially identical with everything else.” The old distinctions between myth, symbol, and allegory disappear. One of Frye's followers, Angus Fletcher, in his book on *Allegory* (1964), exalts allegory as the central procedure of art, absorbing symbolism.

The story of the spread of symbolism is very different in other countries. The effect in Italy was ostensibly rather small. Soffici's pamphlet on Rimbaud, in 1911, is usually considered the beginning of the French symbolist influence, but there was an early propagandist for Mallarmé, Vittorio Pica, who was heavily dependent on French sources, particularly Téodor de Wyzéwa. His articles, in the *Gazetta letteraria* (1885-86), on the French poets do not use the term; but in 1896 he replaced “decadent” and “Byzantine” by “symbolist.” The poets around Ungaretti and Montale spoke rather of *ermetismo*. In a book by Mario Luzi, *L'idea simbolista* (1959), Pascoli, Dino Campana, and Arturo Onofri are called symbolist poets.

While symbolism, at least as a definite school or movement, was absent in Italy, it is central in the history of Spanish poetry. The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío initiated it after his short stay in Paris in 1892. He wrote poems under the symbolist influence and addressed, for instance, a fervent hymn to Verlaine. The influence of French symbolist poetry changed completely the oratorical or popular style of Spanish lyrical poetry. The closeness of Guillén to Mallarmé and Valéry seems too obvious to deny and the Uruguayan poet Julio Herrera y Reissig (1873-1909) is clearly in the symbolist tradition, often in the most obscure manner. Still, the Spanish critics favor the term *modernismo* which is used sometimes so inclusively that it covers all modern Spanish poetry and even the so-called “generation of 1898,” the prose writers Azorín, Baroja, and Unamuno, whose associations with symbolism were quite tenuous. “Symbolism” can apply only to one trend in modern Spanish literature as the romantic popular tradition was stronger there than elsewhere. García Lorca's poetry can serve as the best known example of the peculiar Spanish synthesis of the folksy and the symbolical, the gypsy song and myth. Still, the continuity from Darío to Jiménez, Antonio Machado, Alberti, and then to Guillén seems evident. Jorge Guillén in his Harvard lectures, *Language and Poetry* (1961), finds “no label convincing.” “A period look,” he argues, does not signify a “group style.” In Spain there were, he thinks, fewer “isms” than elsewhere and the break with the past was far less abrupt. He reflects that “any name seeking to give unity to a historical period is the invention of posterity” (p. 214). But while eschewing the term “symbolism” he characterizes himself and his contemporaries well enough by expounding their common creed: their belief in the marriage of Idea and music, in short, their belief in the ideal of Mallarmé. Following a vague suggestion made by Remy de Gourmont the rediscovery of Góngora by Ortega y Gasset, Gerardo Diego, Dámaso Alonso, and Alfonso Reyes around 1927 fits into the picture: they couple Góngora and Mallarmé as the two poets who in the history of all poetry have gone furthest in the search for absolute poetry, for the quintessence of the poetic.

In Germany, the spread of symbolism was far less complete than Symons assumed in 1899. Stefan George had come to Paris in 1889, had visited Mallarmé and met many poets, but after his return to Germany he deliberately avoided the term “symbolism” for himself and his circle. He translated a selection from Baudelaire (1891) and smaller samples from Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Régnier in *Zeitgenössische Dichter* (1905), but his own poetry does not show very close parallels to the French

masters. Oddly enough, the poems of Vielé-Griffin seem to have left the most clearly discernible traces on George's own writings—see B. Böschenstein in *Euphorion*, **58** (1964). As early as 1892 one of George's adherents, Carl August Klein, protested in George's periodical, *Blätter für die Kunst*, against the view of George's dependence on the French. Wagner, Nietzsche, Böcklin, and Klinger, he says, show that there is an indigenous opposition to naturalism in Germany as everywhere in the West. George himself spoke later of the French poets as his “former allies” and in Gundolf's authoritative book on George (1920), the French influence is minimized if not completely denied. Among the theorists of the George circle Friedrich Gundolf had the strongest symbolist leanings: *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (1911) and *Goethe* (1916) are based on the distinction of symbol-allegory with symbol always the higher term. Still, the term symbolism did not catch on in Germany as a name for any specific poetic group, though Hofmannsthal, e.g., in “Das Gespräch über Gedichte” (1903), proclaimed the symbol the one element necessary in poetry. Later, the influence of Rimbaud—apparently largely in German translation—on Georg Trakl has been demonstrated with certainty by H. Lindenberger in *Comparative Literature*, **10** (1953), 21-35. But if we examine German books on twentieth-century literature “symbolism” seems rarely used. A section so called in Willi Duwe's *Die Dichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, published in 1936, lists Hofmannsthal, Dauthendey, Calé, Rilke, and George, while E. H. Lüth's *Literatur als Geschichte (Deutsche Dichtung von 1885 bis 1947)*, published in 1947, treats the same poets under the label “Neuroromantik und Impressionismus.” A later section “Parasymbolismus” deals with Musil 343 and Broch. German literary scholarship has not been converted to the term, though Wolfgang Kayser's article “Der europäische Symbolismus” (1953; included in *Die Vortragsreise*, Bern, 1958), had pleaded for a wide concept in which he included D'Annunzio, Yeats, Valéry, Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Faulkner besides the French poets.

In Russia we find the strongest self-styled “symbolist” group of poets. The close links with Paris at that time may help to explain their appearance, or possibly also the strong consciousness of a tradition of symbolism in the Russian Church and in some of the orthodox thinkers of the immediate past. Vladimir Solovëv was regarded as a precursor. In 1892 Zinaida Vengerova wrote a sympathetic account of the French symbolists for *Vestnik Evropy* while in the following year Max Nordau's *Entartung* caused a sensation for its satirical account of recent French poetry which had repercussions on Tolstoy's *What is Art?* (1898). Valery Bryusov emerged as the leading symbolist poet: he translated Maeterlinck's *L'intruse* and wrote a poem “Iz Rimbaud” as early as 1892. In 1894 he published two little volumes entitled *Russkie simvolisty*. That year Bryusov wrote poems with titles such as “In the manner of Stéphane Mallarmé” (though these were not published till 1935) and brought out a translation of Verlaine's *Romances sans paroles*. Bryusov had later contacts with René Ghil, Mallarmé's pupil, and derived from him the idea of “instrumentation” or “orchestration” in poetry which was to play a great role in the theories of the Russian formalists (*Lettres de René Ghil*, Paris, 1935). In the meantime Dimitri Merezhkovsky had, in 1893, published a manifesto: “On the causes of the decline and the new trends of contemporary Russian literature,” which recommended symbolism, though Merezhkovsky appealed to the Germans as models, to Goethe and the romantics rather than to the French.

Merezhkovsky's pamphlet foreshadows the split in the Russian symbolist movement. The younger men, Alexander Blok and Vyacheslav Ivanov as well as Bely, drew apart from Bryusov and Balmont. Blok in an early diary (1901-02) condemned Bryusov as decadent and opposed his Parisian symbolism with his own Russian variety, rooted in the poetry of Tyutchev, Fet, Polonsky, and Solovëv (*Literaturnoe Nasledstvo*, **27-28** [1937], 302). Vyacheslav Ivanov in 1910, shared Blok's view. The French influence seemed to him “unreasonable in an adolescent way and, in fact, not very fertile,” while his own symbolism appealed to Russian nationalism and to the general mystical tradition (*Apollon*, **8** [1910], 13). Later Bely was to add occultism, Rudolf Steiner and his “anthroposophy.” The group of poets who called themselves “Acmeists” (Gumilëv, Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam) was a direct outgrowth of

symbolism. The mere fact that they appealed to the early symbolist Innokenty Annensky shows the continuity with symbolism in spite of their distaste for the occult and their emphasis on what they thought of as classical clarity. Symbolism dominates Russian poetry between about 1892 and 1914. Then futurism emerged as a slogan and the Russian formalists attacked the whole concept of poetry as imagery.

If we glance at the other Slavic countries we are struck by the diversity of their reactions. Poland was early informed about the French movement, and Polish poetry was influenced by the French symbolist movement but the term *Mlada Polska* ("Young Poland") was preferred. In Wilhelm Feldmann's *Współczesna literatura polska* ("Contemporary Polish Literature," 1905) contemporary poetry is discussed as "decadentism" but Wyspiański (a symbolist if ever there was one) appears under the chapter heading: "On the heights of romanticism." All the histories of Polish literature speak of "Modernism," "Decadentism," "Idealism," and "Neo-romanticism" and occasionally call a poet such as Miriam (Zenon Przesmycki) a symbolist but they never seem to use the term as a general name for a period in Polish literature.

In Czech literature the situation was more like that in Russia: Březina, Sova, and Hlaváček were called symbolists and the idea of a school or at least a group of Czech symbolist poets is firmly established. The term *Moderna* (possibly because of the periodical, *Moderní Revue* founded in 1894) is definitely associated with decadentism, *fin de siècle*, a group represented by Arnošt Procházka. A hymnical, optimistic, and even chiliastic poet such as Otokar Březina cannot and could not be classed with them. The great critic F. X. Šalda wrote of the "school of symbolists" as early as 1891, calling Verlaine, Villiers, and Mallarmé its masters, but denied that there is a school of symbolists with dogmas, codices, and manifestoes. His very first important article "Synthetism in the new art" (*Literární Listy*, 1892) expounded the aesthetics of Morice and Hennequin for the benefit of the Czechs, then still mainly dependent on German models.

The unevenness of the penetration of both the influence of the French movement and notably of the acceptance of the term raises the question whether we can account for these differences in causal terms. It sounds heretical or obscurantist in this age of scientific explanation to ascribe much to chance, to chance contacts, and personal predilections. Why was the term so immensely successful in France, in the United States and in Russia, less so in England and Spain and hardly at all in Italy and Germany? In Germany there was even the tradition from Goethe and Schelling to F. T. Vischer of the continuous debate about symbol. One can think of all kinds of explanations: a deliberate decision by the poets to move away from the French developments, or the success of the terms *Die Moderne* and *Neuromantik*. Still, the very number of such explanations suggests that the variables are so great in number that we cannot account for these divergencies in any systematic manner.

Finally, if we discuss the exact contents of the term "symbolism" in literary history, we must distinguish among four concentric circles defining its scope. At its narrowest "symbolism" refers to the French group which called itself so in 1886. Its theory was rather rudimentary. These poets mainly wanted poetry to be nonrhetorical, i.e., they asked for a break with the tradition of Hugo and the Parnassiens. They wanted words not merely to state but to suggest; they wanted to use metaphors, allegories, and symbols not only as decorations but as organizing principles of their poems; they wanted their verse to be "musical," in practice to stop using the oratorical cadences of the French alexandrine and, in some cases, to break completely with rhyme. Free verse—whose invention is usually ascribed to Gustave Kahn—was possibly the most enduring achievement which has survived all vicissitudes of style. Kahn himself summed up the doctrine simply as "antinaturalism, antiprosaism in poetry, a search



for freedom in the efforts in art, in reaction against the regimentation of the *Parnasse* and the naturalists” (*La société nouvelle*, April 1894).

“Symbolism” in a wider sense refers to the broad movement in France from Nerval and Baudelaire to Claudel and Valéry. We can characterize it by saying that in symbolist poetry the image becomes “thing.” The relation of tenor and vehicle in the metaphor is reversed. The utterance is divorced from the situation: time and place, history and society are played down. The inner world, *la durée*, in the Bergsonian sense, is represented or often merely hinted at as “it,” the thing or the person hidden. The grammatical predicate has become the subject. Clearly such poetry can easily be justified by an occult view of the world. But this is not necessary: it might simply imply a feeling for analogy, for a web of correspondences, a rhetoric of metamorphoses in which everything reflects everything else. Hence the great role of synaesthesia, which, though rooted in physiological facts, and found all over the history of poetry, became at that time merely a stylistic device, a mannerism to be easily imitated and transmitted. On the third wider circle of abstraction the term can be applied to the whole period roughly between 1885 and 1914. “Symbolism” can be seen as an international movement which radiated originally from France but produced great writers and great poetry also elsewhere. In English, Yeats and Eliot; in the United States, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane; in Germany, George, Rilke, and Hofmannsthal; in Russia, Blok, Ivanov, and Bely; in Spain and South America, Darío, Machado, and Guillén. If we, as we should, extend the meaning of symbolism to prose, we can see it clearly in the late Henry James, in Joyce, the later Thomas Mann, in Proust, in the early Gide, in Faulkner and D. H. Lawrence, and if we add the drama we recognize it in the later stages of Ibsen, and in Strindberg, Hauptmann, and O’Neill. There is symbolist criticism of distinction: an aesthetics in Mallarmé and Valéry, a looser creed in Remy de Gourmont, in Eliot, and in Yeats and there is a flourishing school of symbolist interpretation particularly in the United States.

Much of the French “new criticism” is frankly symbolist. Roland Barthes’ pamphlet, *Critique et vérité* (1966), pleads for a complete liberty of symbolist interpretation. Symbolism in this sense can be defended as rooted in the concepts of the period, as distinct in meaning and as clearly setting off the period from that preceding it, realism or naturalism. The difference between symbolism and romanticism is less certainly implied. Obviously there is a continuity with romanticism, and particularly German romanticism; also in France, as has been recently argued again by Werner Vordtriede in his *Novalis und die französischen Symbolisten* (1963). The direct contact of the French with the German romantics, however, came late and should not be overrated. Jean Thorel’s “Les romantiques allemandes et les symbolistes français” seems to have been the first to point out the relation (in *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, 1891). Maeterlinck’s article on Novalis (1894) and his little anthology (1896) came late in the movement. But Wagner of course mediated between the symbolists and German mythology though Mallarmé’s attitude, while admiring the music, was tinged with irony for Wagner’s subject-matter (*Oeuvres*, Pléiade ed., pp. 541-45). Early in the century, Heine, a *romantique défroqué* as he called himself, played the role of an intermediary (cf. Kurt Weinberg’s *Henri Heine: héraut du symbolisme français*, 1954). E. T. A. Hoffmann was widely translated into French and could supply occult motifs, a transcendental view of music, and the theory and practice of synaesthesia.

Possibly even more important were the indirect contacts through the English writers discussed: through Carlyle’s chapter on symbolism in *Sartor Resartus*, and his essay on Novalis; through Coleridge from whom, through another intermediary, Mrs. Crowe, Baudelaire drew his definition of “constructive imagination”; and through Emerson, who was translated by Edgar Quinet. There was also Edgar Allan Poe who drew on Coleridge and A. W. Schlegel, and seemed so closely to anticipate Baudelaire’s views that Baudelaire quoted him as if he were Poe himself, sometimes dropping all quotation marks.

The enormous influence of Poe on the French demonstrates, however, most clearly the difference between romanticism and symbolism. Poe is far from being a representative of the romantic world view or of its romantic aesthetics in which imagination is conceived as transforming nature. Poe has been aptly described as an “angel in a machine”: he combines a faith in technique and even technology, a distrust of inspiration, a rationalistic eighteenth-century mind with a vague occult belief in “supernal” beauty. The distrust of inspiration, an enmity to nature, is the crucial point which sets off symbolism from romanticism. Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry all share it; while Rilke, a symbolist in many of his procedures and views, appears as highly romantic in his reliance on moments of inspiration. For this reason the attempt to make Mallarmé a spiritual descendant of Novalis, as Vordtriede tried to do, must fail. Mallarmé, one might grant, aims at transcendence but it is an empty transcendence, whereas Novalis rapturously adores the unity of the mysterious universe. In short, the romantics were Rousseauists; the symbolists, beginning with Baudelaire, believe in the fall of man or, if they do not use the religious phraseology, know that man is limited and is not, as Novalis believed, the Messiah of nature. The end of the romantic period is clearly marked by the victory of positivism and scientism, which soon led to disillusionment and pessimism. Most symbolists were non-Christians, even atheists, although they tried to find a new religion in occultism or flirted with Oriental religions. They were pessimists who need not have read Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann, as Laforgue did, to succumb to the mood of decadence, *fin de siècle*, *Götterdämmerung*, or the death of God prophesied by Nietzsche.

Symbolism is also clearly set off from the new avant-garde movements after 1914, i.e., futurism, cubism, surrealism, expressionism, etc. There the faith in language has crumbled completely, while in Mallarmé and Valéry language preserves its cognitive and even magic power; Valéry's collection of poems is rightly called *Charmes*. Orpheus is the mythological hero of the poet: charming the animals, trees, and even stones. With more recent art the view of analogy disappears: Kafka has nothing of it. Post-symbolist art is abstract and allegorical rather than symbolic. The image, in surrealism, has no beyond: it wells, at most, from the subconscious of the individual.

Finally, there is the highest abstraction, the largest circle, the use of “symbolism” in all literature, of all ages. Here the term, broken loose from its historical moorings, lacks concrete content and remains merely the name for a phenomenon which is almost universal in all art.

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