

According to Moréas, 'symbolist poets were turning away from external reality and towards the Idea concealed behind concrete phenomena'. Critically assess the statement with reference to Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine (two poems of each author).

Introduction

In his *Symbolist Manifesto* of 1886, Jean Moréas sought to set out the principles of symbolism in contradistinction to those of naturalism.¹ Rather than focusing on representing the natural world with surface-level verisimilitude, symbolism, he reasoned, ought to represent the idea *behind* concrete phenomena. As Neginsky has observed, this does not imply aiming at the ideal forms from which concrete objects supposedly derive, but rather 'to clothe the Idea in a perceptible form'.² However, permitting Moréas the first and last word on what Symbolism comprises or aims towards arguably overlooks alternative perspectives on representation across a complex and varied movement. This essay examines the works of three influential 'Symbolist' figures: Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine. Through incorporating analysis of two poems on behalf of each poet, the essay demonstrates how each artist grappled differently with the relationship between external trappings and inner Ideas.

Baudelaire

Whilst Baudelaire's work precedes Moréas' declaration of Symbolism's tenets, his situation as a clear influence upon the early movement is widely accepted among scholars.³ In contrast to materialist readings of epistemology as narrowly empirical in its rationale, Baudelaire presents the sensory world as pointing towards meanings that exist at an abstract or metaphysical level. In keeping with Neginsky's remarks about 'clothing' Ideas, Baudelaire uses the concrete realities of modern life to point towards these higher truths rather than presenting them as abstracted or purely conceptual phenomena.

In '*Correspondances*' from *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire articulates a manifesto of his own that aligns strongly with Moréas' Symbolist framework. The poem presents nature as 'une forêt de symboles / Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers' ('a forest of symbols / that regard him with familiar eyes'), reflecting the relationships between physical objects and referents recognised by the individual:

Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent,
Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent.
[Perfumes, colours, and sounds answer one another,
Like long echoes that mingle from afar.]⁴

These referents are not merely personal to the individual, or entirely subjective, but rather the reference to 'nature' implies a hidden harmony behind the natural world. The empirical world is thus symbolic of an underlying metaphysical structure that supervenes upon it.

¹ J. Moréas, 'The Symbolist Manifesto', *Le Figaro* (18 Sep. 1886), pp. 1-2.

² R. Neginsky, *Symbolism: Its Origins and Its Consequences* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010), p. 557.

³ H. Chisholm, 'Baudelaire, Charles Pierre', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 3, 11th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), pp. 536-7.

⁴ C. Baudelaire, '*Correspondances*', in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Auguste Poulet-Malassis, 1857).

A further example of this dualistic nature – comprised of the physical and the symbolic referent – may be found in *L'Albatros*, where the poet describes a majestic albatross being captured by sailors and dragged below deck: 'Ses grandes ailes blanches l'empêchent de marcher' ('His great white wings prevent him from walking').⁵ The albatross here symbolises the poet, who soars when in the imaginative realm (the sky) but is awkward and constricted when forced to live in the earthly realm (the deck). This suggests that dealing only with the material *without* the Idea is inimical to the purpose or function of poetry – a sentiment echoing Moréas' own philosophy.

Mallarmé

Whilst Baudelaire seeks to find symbolism in the material world, Mallarmé appears to seek to transcend it altogether. The opacity of Mallarmé's poetry appears to eschew clear descriptive accounts in favour of dwelling in a plane of Ideas. This aim is reflected in the opening line to '*Brise marine*': 'La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres' ('The flesh is sad, alas! and I have read all the books').⁶ There is in this statement both a rejection of the material world (the flesh) and a lament that the intellectual world is not sufficient (the books). As compared with Baudelaire, the planes of sea and sky both restrict the poet as a bird, given that the sky itself always remains out of reach:

Fuir! là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres
D'être parmi l'écume inconnue et les cieux!
[To flee! far away to flee! I feel that birds are drunk
To be amidst unknown foam and skies!]⁷

The implication is that the poet always aims solely at the Idea but always falls short, never quite being able to depart the material/concrete world for the realm of pure Ideas.

Elsewhere, Mallarmé grapples with the insufficiency of pursuing the Idea itself. In '*L'Après-midi d'un faune*', the faun asks whether his disposition towards nymphs is real, given their own unreality: 'Ai-je aimé un rêve?' ('Have I loved a dream?').⁸ There is an implication here that an Idea not reflected in external reality does not truly exist – the attempt to transcend the external world is therefore fruitless or meaningless, and one ends up back at Moréas' more grounded position, where external reality refers to abstract or higher truths rather than serving to shackle the poet and prevent their access or realisation.

Verlaine

Verlaine's contribution to Symbolism is perhaps less overt, being more focused on evoking meaning through language, as summed up in his famous dictum: 'De la musique avant toute chose' ('Music before all else').⁹ In '*Clair de lune*', for example, Verlaine describes the soul as a 'chosen landscape where charming masks... pass'.¹⁰ Here, the soul is the real empirical world, with the body reduced to a mask for it, reflecting a dualism separating the body from the soul. In '*Chanson d'automne*', the

⁵ *idem.*, '*L'Albatros*', in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Auguste Poulet-Malassis, 1857).

⁶ S. Mallarmé, '*Brise Marine*', *Parnesse contemporain*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1866).

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *idem.*, '*L'Après-midi d'un faune*' (Paris: Alphonse Derenne, 1876).

⁹ P. Verlaine, '*Art poétique*', *Paris modern* (1882).

¹⁰ 'Votre âme est un paysage choisi / Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques'. *idem.*, '*Clair de lune*', in *Fêtes galantes* (Paris: Leon Vanier, 1869), pp. 5-6.

idea that the external world is merely atmosphere or a mask for the soul is repeated, likening autumn's winds to violins piercing the heart of the poet:

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon cœur
D'une langueur
Monotone.¹¹

The natural world is portrayed – much like music – to express or evoke emotions in a distinct aesthetic language of which all beings have a kind of implicit awareness. This moves beyond the 'Idea' to a less abstract and external and more nativist referent – but one that nevertheless is 'objective' in its universality.

Conclusion

There is some truth in Moréas' claim that the Symbolist poet attempts to go beyond the material and external towards the Idea, but this claim also simplifies and flattens the diversity of perspectives on show across the above poems. Baudelaire views external reality as pointing towards abstract truths, whereas Mallarmé views it as a veil that can never be fully lifted. Verlaine does not perceive external reality as something to be transcended but listened to and understood, focusing on how it conveys emotion through an implicit and universal aesthetic resonance. Moréas' account does not contradict these perspectives, being potentially inclusive of them, but it is also far from wholly exhaustive, rendering it an incomplete summation of the Symbolist movement.

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¹¹ *idem.*, 'Chanson d'automne', in *Poèmes saturniens* (Paris: 1866).