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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

~~Turning from Reality to the Idea? Symbolist Poets and Moréas' Claim~~

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 ~~define a movement distinct from both~~ the natural world ~~naturalists' obsession~~ with surface-level verisimilitude, symbolism, he reasoned, ought to represent the idea *behind* concrete phenomena. As Neginsky has observed, this does ~~reality and the Parnassians' emphasis on formal polish. Symbolism, he declared, was a poetry of evocation, suggestion, and Idea: "The goal of poetry is~~ not imply aiming at the ideal forms from which concrete objects supposedly derive, ~~to describe external reality~~ 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~~form." Symbolist poets, in his view, turned away from the material world toward the hidden truths it concealed. While compelling, this statement risks oversimplifying~~ a complex and varied movement. This essay examines~~Examining~~ the works~~work~~ of three influential 'Symbolist'~~central~~ 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 ~~both the accuracy and the limitations of Moréas' claim. Each poet grapples~~differently with the relationship between external trappings~~reality~~ and inner Ideas.

~~Idea:~~**Baudelaire** ~~transforms vivid sensory detail into symbolic allegory, Mallarmé dissolves the material world into abstraction, and Verlaine infuses external landscapes with emotional music.~~

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 a 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*'

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[1] J. Moreas, '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.

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~~Baudelaire: The Sensuous Gateway to the Idea~~

~~Although Baudelaire predates the formal birth of Symbolism, his work is crucial to its foundations. His poems often treat the sensory world not as an end in itself but as a coded system pointing toward higher truths. At the same time, his poetry never entirely abandons the material: the concrete, sometimes sordid details of modern life remain indispensable.~~

~~In~~ *"Correspondances"* from Les Fleurs du mal, Baudelaire articulates~~sets out~~ a ~~poetic~~ manifesto of his own that aligns strongly with~~seems almost tailor-made for~~ Moréas' Symbolist framework. The poem presents nature as ~~"~~une forêt de symboles / Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers' ('~~familiers"[1]~~ ("a forest of symbols / that regard him with familiar eyes'), reflecting the relationships between physical objects and referents recognised by the individual~~eyes"). Sights, sounds, and scents intermingle, producing synaesthetic correspondences~~:

"Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent,
Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent.
[.~~"[2]~~
(~~"~~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~~This is precisely Moréas' Idea—behind the sensory world lies~~ a hidden harmony behind the natural world. The empirical world is thus symbolic of an underlying ~~,~~ a metaphysical structure that supervenes upon it~~to which poetry grants access~~.

A further example of this dualistic nature – comprised of the physical and the symbolic referent – may be found ~~The same dynamic appears~~ in ~~"~~L'Albatros, where the poet describes a majestic albatross being captured by sailors and dragged below~~." The poem begins with a realistic scene~~:

~~"Souvent, pour s'amuser, les hommes d'équipage~~
~~Prennent des albatros, vastes oiseaux des mers."[3]~~
~~("Often, to amuse themselves, the crew~~
~~Catch albatrosses, vast birds of the seas.")~~

~~The clumsy bird, mocked on the ship's~~ deck: '—"Ses grandes ailes blanches l'empêchent de marcher' ('~~marcher"[4]~~ ("His great white wings prevent him from walking').[5] The albatross here symbolises~~walking") becomes a symbol of~~ the poet, who soars when~~majestic~~ in the imaginative realm (the sky)~~flight~~ but is awkward and constricted when forced to live on the~~in~~ earthly realm (the deck). This suggests that dealing only~~life~~:

~~"Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher."[5]~~
~~("His giant wings hinder him from walking.")~~

~~Here, the "Idea" of poetic alienation is inseparable from a vivid physical image.~~

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[4] C. Baudelaire, '*Correspondances',* in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Auguste Poulet-Malassis, 1857).
[5] *idem., 'L'Albatros',* in *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Auguste Poulet-Malassis, 1857).

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~~Mallarmé: The Pursuit of Pure Idea~~

~~If Baudelaire uses reality as a gateway, Mallarmé often seeks to transcend it entirely. Of the three poets, he comes closest to Moréas' formulation. Mallarmé's poems are famously opaque, prioritizing suggestion and musicality over straightforward description.~~

~~*"Brise marine"* opens~~ with the material *without* the Idea is inimical to the purpose or function of poetry – a sentiment echoing Moréas' own philosophy.~~famous lament:~~

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 bird, given that the sky itself always remains out of reach:

~~"La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres."⁶~~
~~("The flesh is sad, alas! and I have read all the books.")~~

~~The speaker yearns to flee:~~

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

The implication~~sea voyage~~ is that the poet always aims solely at the Idea but always falls short, never quite being able to depart the material/concrete world~~concretely realized: ships, sails, and oceans remain metaphors~~ for the realm~~Idea~~ of pure Ideas~~escape, not descriptions of reality~~.

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.

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[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).

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Similarly, ~~*"L'Après-midi d'un faune"* dissolves concrete events into suggestion. The faun recalls:~~

~~"Ces nymphes, je les veux perpétuer."[8]~~
~~("These nymphs, I would perpetuate them.")~~

~~Yet he immediately doubts:~~

~~"Ai-je aimé un rêve?"[9]~~
~~("Have I loved a dream?")~~

~~The poem leaves us suspended between dream and reality; the external is effaced, leaving only the Idea of longing and imagination.~~

Verlaine~~: Music and Mood~~

Verlaine's contribution to Symbolism is perhaps less overt, being more focused on evoking meaning through language, as summed up in his famous dictim: '~~subtler. His famous dictum — "~~De la musique avant toute chose' ('~~chose"[10]~~ "Music before all else').[9] ~~else")~~ ~~shows his orientation: evocation through sound and rhythm.~~

In '~~"~~Clair de *lune*', for example, Verlaine describes the~~*lune"*~~ from *Fêtes galantes,* the poet ~~writes:~~

~~"Votre âme est un paysage choisi~~
~~Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques."[11]~~
("Your soul ~~as~~is a 'chosen landscape where
~~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 idea that~~and bergamasks pass.")~~

~~The poem ends with melancholy:~~

~~"Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune,~~
~~Au calme clair de lune triste et beau."[12]~~
~~("And their song mingles with the moonlight,~~
~~The calm moonlight, sad and beautiful.")~~

~~Here,~~ the external world is merely~~dissolved into~~ atmosphere or a mask for~~:~~ the soul~~"Idea"~~ is repeated, likening autumn's winds to violins piercing~~not~~ the heart of~~moon itself but~~ the poet:~~mood it awakens.~~

~~In *"Chanson d'automne,"* the mood is sorrow:~~

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[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 *Fetes galantes* (Paris: Leon Vanier, 1869), pp. 5-6.

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> "Les sanglots longs
> Des violons
> De l'automne
> Blessent mon cœur
> D'une langueur
> Monotone.[11]."[13]
> ("The long sobs
> Of the violins
> Of autumn
> Wound my heart
> With a languor
> Monotonous.")

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.

Nature is transmuted into rhythm and music, evoking the "Idea" of grief.

Critical Assessment

Placed side by side, these three poets complicate Moréas' sweeping statement.

- **Baudelaire**: Uses the material world as a symbolic gateway; Moréas' claim fits only partially.
- **Mallarmé**: Most fully exemplifies the turn toward Idea, making reality vanish into abstraction.
- **Verlaine**: Evokes mood through musical language, aligning with Moréas though without metaphysical ambitions.

Symbolism emerges less as a rejection of reality than a reconfiguration of it. Baudelaire makes reality symbolic; Verlaine makes it musical; Mallarmé makes it vanish into pure Idea.

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

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

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of them, but it is also far from wholly exhaustive, rendering it an incomplete summation of the Symbolist movement.

Bibliography

Jean Moréas' claim illuminates a central ambition of Symbolism but risks flattening its diversity. For Baudelaire, reality is indispensable; for Mallarmé, it is a veil to be transcended; for Verlaine, it is dissolved into music. The richness of Symbolist poetry lies not in abandoning external reality but in transforming it into a gateway to inner truth, atmosphere, or dream.

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4. Ibid., p. 6.
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9. Ibid., p. 72.

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13. Verlaine, P. *'Clair de lune',* in *Fetes galantes* (Paris: Leon Vanier, 1869), pp. 5-6*Romances sans paroles*, p. 15.

English translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

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