

Rémi Pach

Symbolism in French literature

Abstract

To talk of Symbolism in French literature may be ambiguous, as two different categories of writers have been grouped under this generic term: the symbolists *stricto sensu*, such as Moréas or Viélé-Griffin, who were mostly minor poets, and some great figures of French literature. The aim of this article is to show that, although Symbolism as an *organized movement* did not produce any important contribution, the nineteenth century witnessed indeed the emergence of a new *trend*, common to several poets who were inclined to do away with the heritage of the classical school. These poets – of whom Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé are the most renowned, although they did not really associate with the symbolist school, created individualistic poetry of the foremost rank.

1. Introduction

Symbolism is a literary movement introduced in the second half of the 19th century. But whether a genuine symbolist school really existed, remains a problem. If we do not include in the symbolist movement the masters whom the so-called symbolists tried to rally to their cause, nor the many poets, playwrights and novelists who never called themselves symbolists but nevertheless were annexed by the symbolist, what remains today of symbolism is not much: some theoretical texts – such as Moréas' *manifesto* – scattered, most of them, in a number of short-lived journals (*petites revues*, as they came to be called), and some half-forgotten names, such as Moréas, Viélé-Griffin, Gustave Kahn, Stuart Merrill, Marie Krysinska, Edouard Dujardin, et cetera, who strike us as minor figures who cannot be compared to the great poets whom they tried to enrol in their cause.

2 The symbolists

The contradiction of French Symbolism is that, although the word implies a coherent theory, the individualistic character of the movement, as well as the shortcomings of the manifestos it produced, makes it difficult to comprehend. The theoretical texts with which the symbolists tried to give their movement a backbone are pretentious, flamboyant, puffed-up, pompous, almost illegible and rather ludicrous. They are inspired by a spirit of polemics and dispute and fail to make us understand what is meant by Symbolism in positive terms.

A few quotations will suffice. Jean Moréas, in his manifesto, maintains that:

Symbolism seeks to clothe the idea in a sensitive form which, nonetheless, would not be an end in itself but which, while serving to express the idea, at the same time would remain subject to it. The idea in its turn must not be allowed to appear deprived of its sumptuous robes of external analogies; for the essential character of symbolic art consists in never going so far as the conception of the idea in itself. Tangible appearances are destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideas . . . (Peyre, 1974:134.)

Concerning the symbol itself, Viélé-Griffin wrote:

The symbol, which cannot have any existence except correlatively to the object of symbolisation, is the synthesis of a series that is hypothetically anterior to the latter; Symbolism, then, as an aesthetic doctrine, would entail in principle the symbolic realisation of a dream of art which synthesises settings and ideas. It is necessary to translate the self, an unconscious synthesis, into symbols which express this self in its harmonious consciousness.

As regards the form – and one must here remember the arguments that shook the symbolist chapel as regards the paternity of “free verse” – Moréas was just as slippery:

For the exact translation of its synthesis, Symbolism needs an archetypal and complex style, uncontaminated words, rigidly constructed phrases alternating with phrases marked by undulating lapses, meaningful pleonasm, mysterious ellipses and suspended anacoluthons (Peyre, 1974:134).

The above certainly lacks clarity, and the grotesque jargon that is used leaves the reader somewhat bewildered. But such is the prose that was used by the symbolists when they tried to define their aims. It has been noted that many of the early symbolists were actually foreigners,¹ and that their fascination for a new language could account for their style. However, as Henry Peyre (1976: 135) justly remarked: “They . . . were neither more nor less clear than the French, very few of whom deserve a reputation for manipulators of sober prose that they have made for themselves”.

Anatole France commented on Moréas’ manifesto with common sense and some humour: “The only thing I can understand is that the symbolist poet is

1. Jean Moréas himself was a Greek (Yannis Papadiamantopoulos was his real name), and Viélé-Griffin was American.

forbidden to describe anything or name anything, which should result in profound obscurity". And, addressing the author: "Yes, my dear monsieur Jean Moréas, you have wonderful secrets, your verses will be superb, but nobody will understand a thing" (Etiemble, 1980:621). In any case, one is forced to notice that literary critics have often been at a loss when trying to define Symbolism in a clearer manner than the symbolists themselves. As early as 1892, in *La Plume*, Adolphe Retté remarked: "Should the so-called symbolist poets be interviewed separately, it is likely that the number of definitions (of Symbolism) would be equal to the number of questioned persons". And he added: "We consider the word *symbolism* as a mere label that designates the idealistic poets of our generation. It is an easy word, and nothing more than that. Paul Valéry (Etiemble, 1980:621) gave an aesthetic and rather personal definition of the movement:

What was called symbolism can be summed up very simply as the intention, common to several families of poets – who, by the way, were enemies – to take back from music what was their own.

Perhaps Rémy de Gourmont did not say much when he wrote that Symbolism was the expression of individualism in art,² but came nearer to the truth by stressing the indebtedness of the symbolists to Baudelaire:

All of today's literature, and especially the symbolist literature, is Baudelairian, not in its technical form, but in its internal and spiritual form.

By emphasising the influence of Baudelaire, he was putting the symbolists in their right place, as followers of the great poet.

It might therefore be necessary to distinguish between the symbolist school – which comprises minor poets of mediocre importance – and Symbolism itself, which would then be neither a school nor an organised movement, but a tendency, a trend in French literature, an inspiration common to several poets inclined to do away with the classical heritage. This approach to the problem might be more logical and fruitful. It suggests that an overly strict classification of poets into schools and groups, practical though it might appear, could actually hinder rather than help our understanding of poetry. And that it is by investigating the legacy of the great poets whom the self-labelled symbolists claimed as their masters – Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Mallarmé – rather than by deciphering the stuffy symbolist manifestos, that one should try to comprehend what this attempt at freeing poetry really was and really meant.

3. Baudelaire

It has often been noted that Baudelaire is a link between tradition and modernity, between classicism and what Rémy de Gourmont called "tenden-

2. Can there be a *collective art*? Is not every artist an individualist?

cies towards what is new, strange, even bizarre” (Peyre, 1974:135). His classicism resides in his absolute certainty that the poet must impose upon himself a very strong discipline.

For Baudelaire, no art is possible without hard work. The poet’s imagination and inspiration are not a “gift of the gods”, or some mysterious faculty. They cannot exist without intelligence and must be consciously and painstakingly shepherded:

I have been saying for quite a long time that the poet is sovereignly intelligent, that he is intelligence *par excellence*, and that imagination is the most scientific of all faculties. (Peyre, 1974:45.)

It was not by the classical side of Baudelaire but by his modernity that Rimbaud – who described his form as “petty” – was attracted, and certainly also by the symbolist theme that the material world is a mere facade veiling an ideal world of ideas and emotions. This theme appears in the famous sonnet called “Correspondances”:

Nature is a temple where living pillars
Sometimes utter obscure words.
Man passes there, through forests of symbols
Which observe him with familiar glances.
(Baudelaire, 1976(a):11)

But many other poems in *Les Fleurs de mal* illustrate this concept, which is the key to the aesthetics and to the poetics of Baudelaire. Idealism pervades his writings. Poetry must be “an exalted effort to reach superior beauty”. Hence his endeavours and exertions to reach an ideal world, far beyond our material and physical universe:

It is this instinctive knowledge of what is beautiful that makes us regard the earth and its pomps as an outline, a correspondence of Heaven. The unquenchable thirst for everything that is beyond and that life discloses is the very living proof of our immortality. It is at once by poetry and through poetry, by music and through music, that the soul takes a glimpse at the splendours that are situated beyond the grave . . . Therefore it can be said that the principle of poetry is simply and strictly the human aspiration towards a superior beauty, and the manifestation of this principle is a great enthusiasm, a rapture of the soul; this enthusiasm differs from passion, which is the intoxication of the soul, as well as from truth, which is the food of reason. (Baudelaire, 1976(b):113–114.)

Baudelaire has a very high conception of the rôle of the artist and of his nature. But the very nature of the poet makes him, in the society of men, a non-adapted and non-adaptable being. He is rejected and looked down upon with disdain and scorn. In fact, he does not belong to the world. He is from elsewhere, forced to dwell in a universe which he does not regard as his own. Isolation and unhappiness are the consequences of his exile. This is what the poem “L’Albatros”, with its transparent symbolism, expresses magnificently:

The poet is like the prince of the skies,
Who haunts the tempest and laughs at the bowman.

Exiled on earth among the jeers,
His giant wings prevent him from walking.
(Baudelaire, 1976(a):9.)

Sorrow and anguish, in many of Baudelaire's later poems, quite understandably take the upper hand. Beyond the wall of reality there is no longer an ideal world of peace and harmony but hell itself. It is a new correspondence, caused by a darker vision of things and accrued pessimism:

Skies torn like strands,
In you my pride contemplates itself;
Your large mourning clouds
Are the hearses of my dreams,
And your lights are the reflection
Of Hell, where my heart feels well.
(Baudelaire, 1976(a):78.)

The complexity of Baudelaire's poetry has intrigued many a reader. The *Fleurs de mal* poems are the reflection of the many different facets of a soul which seeks freedom from a painful prison. But Baudelaire's contradictions are only apparent. P. Quennell (1954:46–47) asserts that:

For such a traveller there is no end, no justificatory conclusion to his labours. Conclusions are reached by compromise; the problem he has attacked was of its very nature insoluble. Though the path he had been following – with so much difficulty, with so many hesitations – had seemed to lead him to one of those doubtful places where there are footsteps and conflicting wheel-marks but no clear assurance of the road, it was the same path that a little later his successors and disciples resumed; the direction in which Charles Baudelaire first guided our interest is a direction from which a modern poet, however unwilling or incompetent, finds it impossible to turn aside.

4. Paul Verlaine

The *Fleurs de mal* had a great influence on Paul Verlaine, who belongs to the subsequent generation and whom Barbey d'Aureville, for some strange reason, called “a puritan Baudelaire”. Like Baudelaire, Verlaine tries to convey ideas and feelings instead of describing them, and he reaches his aim by using symbols and correspondences. But unlike Baudelaire, he neither discovers nor creates another world – hell or paradise – beyond the facade of reality. And when hell or heaven appears in his poems (usually in the mystical ones – not always the best in his vast and very uneven oeuvre), they have little or no symbolic value:

Immaculate Mary, essential love,
Logic of congenial and animated faith,
By loving you, what good deeds could I dodge?
By loving you with unique love, Door of Heaven?
(Verlaine, 1962:266.)

Verlaine's poetry is more intimate, personal and subtle than Baudelaire's.

Francois Coppée, on Verlaine's grave, expressed with clarity and accuracy what its character was:

(He) has created a poetry which belongs to him alone, a poetry whose inspiration is both naïve and subtle, full of nuances, which evokes the most delicate vibrations of the nerves, the most fugitive feelings of the heart. (Galliot, 1969:4.)

But, more than for his *petite musique*, it is for breaking what Moréas called "the cruel bonds of versification" (Etiemble, 1980:621) that Verlaine was enlisted in the symbolists' ranks. His *Art poétique*, which he wrote while serving a sentence in jail after he shot Rimbaud, his lover, was acclaimed by the young symbolist poets as a masterpiece. They hoisted it like a flag of their movement. And it was indeed something very original to write in those days when the influence of classicism in poetry had not yet released its grip. Verlaine recommends to consider the musical quality of the poem as a priority: "Music above all", and advocates, for its harmonic qualities, the use of the *vers impair*, a verse composed of an uneven number of syllables. He then attacks the parnassian and classical schools by advocating a sort of foggy technique, in which the straightforward, simple, precise word should *not* be given priority. Wit and rhetorics also come under attack, as is the rhyme, "a cheap trinket" created by a "deaf child" or some "mad Negro".

Verlaine's bold stand on versification seemed shocking to many of his contemporaries. Many contemporaries, including Sainte-Beuve, who appreciated his genius, declared that they could not adhere to some of his innovations. Others, like Théodore de Banville, were quite enthusiastic. By shaking and dismantling the traditional verse in order to make it express more, Verlaine did what Baudelaire had not wanted or had not been able to do.

Although Verlaine's popularity and prestige among the symbolists were mainly due to his *Art poétique*, he was later to repudiate it – or, at least, to shade the most revolutionary counsels that it contained: "Do not take my *Art poétique* too literally; it is only a song, after all . . ." (Verlaine, 1962:1074). The extreme liberties that the young poets were taking *vis-à-vis* traditional prosody certainly frightened him. He was also too much of an individualist to accept without protest being enrolled as a member of the new fashionable sect.

And Marcel Barlow (1982:67) wrote:

To his young colleagues who, towards the end of his life, accused him of being too moderate, too illogical in the fight for the conquest of the free verse, Verlaine answered in substance that the rhyme . . . is a necessary evil, even an indispensable one, in a language as unstressed as French is.

Verlaine was still conservative and orthodox enough to sense that poetry and verse were inseparable. He eventually made fun of the extravagances of Moréas and René Ghil until the very ones who had made him a king,

condemned him with one of the most terrific insults that they could find: he was a *parnassian*.

5. Paul Rimbaud

Arthur Rimbaud would have been most surprised to be called a symbolist. He undoubtedly was a convinced and ardent individualist and would have disliked nothing more than to belong to a school or a group of whatever sort.

In order to understand Rimbaud, one must realise that he wanted to be – and actually succeeded in being – *different*. In his eyes, the poet is a seer, a prophet, different from other men, superior to them, penetrating into the very nature of things. His poetical *credo* is very limpidly expressed in a letter that he (Rimbaud, 1954:270–271) wrote to his friend Paul Demeny in May 1871 (Rimbaud, 1954:270–271).

I say that one must be a voyant, make oneself clairvoyant. The poet makes himself clairvoyant by a long, immense and deliberate disordering of all his senses. Every form of love, suffering, madness. He searches for himself, he exhausts every poison upon himself, to retain only their quintessences. An unspeakable torture in which he needs superhuman faith and strength, in which he becomes above all others the supreme sufferer, the supreme damned soul and the supreme sage. For he has reached the unknown. Because he has cultivated his soul, rich already, more than anyone else. He reaches the unknown and even if, demented, he runs the risk of losing the understanding of his visions, he has seen them. Let him die in his leap through unheard of and unnameable things; other horrible workers shall come. They shall begin from the horizons where the other has disappeared.

The main quality of the poet is to be a voyant. And this is the criterion he uses to value his predecessors (Rimbaud, 1954:271–273):

The first romantics were *voyants* without realising it really . . . Lamartine is sometimes a voyant, but strangled by old forms. Hugo is too much of a pig-head, but there is a lot of *seen* in his later books. “Les Misérables” is a true poem. Musset is fourteen times detestable to us – suffering generations beset with visions – whom his angel laziness has insulted. Oh! the sickly stories and proverbs! Oh! *Les Nuits*, oh! *Rolla*, oh! *Namouna*, oh! *La Coupe*! All French – that is, hateful to the last degree. French, not Parisian. Another product of that odious genius which inspired Rabelais, Voltaire, La Fontaine, commented by monsieur Taine (. . .).

The second romantics are good voyants: Théophile Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, Théodore de Banville. But since to inspect the invisible and to hear the unheard is something else than to take up the spirit of dead things, Baudelaire is the first voyant, the king of poets, a real god. But even he lived in too artistic a *milieu* and his much-praised form is petty. Inventions of things unknown demand new forms.

This sincere and lucid explanation of the principles that guide Rimbaud, throw a clear light on a poetry which might otherwise seem very obscure. Rimbaud’s poetry may very well appear as an illustration of these principles, in which we can discern in the first place the influence of Baudelaire, and also the exaltation of a man who has neither the will nor the time to wait.

In any case, Rimbaud's poetry is an attempt at creating a new world, and his aim is comparable to Baudelaire's. He is probably also indebted to Verlaine for his linguistic audacity, and his impassioned attempt at creating what he himself called a new language:

This language will be from the soul to the soul, summing up everything: perfumes, sounds, colours. Thought attracting thought and hauling it. The poet would define the quantity of unknown appearing in his time in the universal soul. He would give more than the formula of his thoughts, than the comment of his march towards progress. Enormity becoming the norm, absorbed by everyone, he would be indeed a multiplier of progress! (Rimbaud, 1954:271–272.)

Rimbaud tried to go further than Verlaine and Baudelaire in his attempt at making poetry free from the authority of classicism. "Let us demand new things – ideas and forms – from the poet". But his attempt was a failure, of which he gives a symbolic account in *Une Saison en enfer* (Rimbaud, 1954: 243):

I tried to invent new flowers, new stars, new flesh, new tongues, I thought I had acquired supernatural powers. Well, I must bury my imagination and my memories. A beautiful glory of artist and romancer flies away.

I, I who called myself magus or angel, excused from all morality, I am brought back to earth; with a duty to discover and a bitter reality to embrace. Peasant!

Was I mistaken? Could charity, for me, be the sister of death?

Anyway I will ask forgiveness for feeding myself on lies. And let's go!

6. Paul Mallarmé

Of all the poets who made use of a symbolic system to such an extent that it became the centre and the soul of their poetry, Mallarmé certainly was the most conscious one. Far from the impulsive and impatient genius of Rimbaud, he patiently defined the laws that governed his poetry and conceived methods which he systematically – one could almost say, *scientifically*-applied. Paul Valéry recounted what the discovery of Mallarmé and Rimbaud meant to him:

I was as if intellectually overcome by the so sudden appearance on my spiritual horizon of these two extraordinary phenomena. I vaguely compare Mallarmé and Rimbaud to wizards of different species; the one creating who knows what symbolic calculus, the other having discovered I do not know what unprecedented radiations. (Rincé, 1983: 108.)

As early as 1862, Mallarmé had published in the journal *L'Artiste* a very critical text called "Hérésies artistiques" in which he attacked *l'art pour tous*. This "art for all" was vilified and severely condemned as a heresy. Democracy could not exist in the kingdom of art. Poetry must first of all intrigue, even rebuke, the reader, and conceal itself behind a veil of mystery. It must be directed to the man of the art, not to the man in the street. On the necessity of mystery in poetry, Mallarmé was to remain adamant throughout his life:

The parnassians take the thing as a whole and show it, thereby missing the mystery. They withhold from keen minds the delightful pleasure of believing that they are creating. To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which is made of *guessing* little by little. To *suggest* it, there is the dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery that constitutes the symbol; to evoke an object little by little in order to show a state of mind or, inversely, to choose an object and bring forth from it a state of mind, through a series of decipherings.³ Poetry consisting in creating, one must grasp certain states within the human soul, gleams of a so absolute purity that, well sung and well illuminated, this gives form, in fact, to mankind's own precious jewels; in that there is symbol, there is creation, and the word poetry here possesses its meaning. It is, in short, the only human creation possible. (Peyre, 1974:118–119.)

In brief, for Mallarmé, poetry is an art of creation based on mystery. His symbolism appears as a theorised hermetism. Every word is a symbol which generates other symbols. Instead of naming an object, he tries to make its presence felt or to make the reader feel the emptiness caused by its absence, so much so that symbols eventually acquire their own independent life, and any attempt at translating these symbols is doomed to fail, as in this *Sonnet du Cygne*, the meaning of which has been and still is a much debated question even among French critics.

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui
 Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d'aile ivre
 Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le qivre
 Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!

Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui
 Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre
 Pour n'avoir pas chanté la région où vivre
 Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui.

Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
 Par l'espace infligée à l'oiseau qui le nie,
 Mais non l'horreur du sol où le plumage est pris.

Fantôme qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
 Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris
 Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le Cygne.
 (Mallarmé, 1970:67–68.)

This is the triumph of the *poésie pure*, which is also, according to D. Rincé (1983: 114), a *poésie de l'absence pure*, a totally abstract and disembodied poetry whose life is totally independent of the existence of its creator. Such a glacial perfection, such a striking originality, such an ambitious hermetism inveigled the young symbolists into attempting similar experiences, but also attracted the attention of major poets such as Paul Valéry, Paul Claudel and André Gide. If Baudelaire was a link between classicism and modernity, Mallarmé appears as a bond between the 19th and the 20th centuries.

3. On a similar topic, one cannot help comparing the clarity of Mallarmé's prose to Moréas' understandable verbiage.

7. Conclusion

Looking back, one can wonder what such different poets as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé actually have in common. An attraction to mystery, without any doubt, and a taste for symbols; the ideal of a pure and better world situated beyond the wall of our rugged reality; an exalted conception of the rôle of the poet, replacing the Hugolian model of the poet who “must walk ahead of the peoples and show them the way”. This is certainly not enough to form a school. Is not poetry in itself an aspiration towards something new or unknown – good or evil? Is it possible to conceive a poetry that would not make use of symbols? Those among the *troubadours* who were adepts of the *trobar clus* knew it very well and created a medieval symbolist poetry without calling themselves symbolists. Verlaine with his *chanson grise où l'indécis au précis se joint* did nothing more than to proclaim some precepts that had already been applied by many true poets, who knew that poetry appeals to one's imagination rather than to one's intelligence.

The arbitrary classification of poets into schools and movements may appeal to a logical, cartesian mind, but cannot account for the gradual evolution of poetic language through the centuries. This is particularly true of Symbolism, and it is interesting to note that neither Baudelaire nor Verlaine, Rimbaud or Mallarmé ever really associated with the symbolists. Others tried to make them the torch-bearers of a sect from which they actually stood aloof. Their contributions, like all great contributions, were individual ones. Art lives on art, not on theory.

Bibliography

- Barlow, M. 1982. *Poésies*, Verlaine. Paris: Hatier.
Baudelaire, C. 1976(a). *Oeuvres complètes*. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard.
Baudelaire, C. 1976(b). *Oeuvres complètes*. Vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard.
Chadwick, C. 1962. *Mallarmé, sa pensée dans la poésie*. Paris: Librairie José Corti.
Durry, M.-J. 1972. Preface to: *Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du mal*. Paris: Librairie générale française.
Etiemble, J. 1980. Symbolisme. In: *Encyclopaedia Universalis*. Paris: E.U.
Galliot, M. 1969. *Paul Verlaine, poèmes choisis*. Paris: Didier.
Mallarmé, S. 1970. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard.
Peyre, H. 1974. *La littérature symboliste*. Paris: P.U.F.
Peyre, H. 1974. *Qu'est-ce que le symbolisme?* Paris: P.U.F.
Quennell, P. 1954. *Baudelaire and the symbolists*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.
Rimbaud, A. 1954. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard.
Rincé, D. 1983. *La poésie française du XIXe siècle*. Paris: P.U.F.
Verlaine, P. 1962. *Oeuvres poétiques complètes*. Paris: Gallimard.

Potchefstroom University for C.H.E.