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book review of

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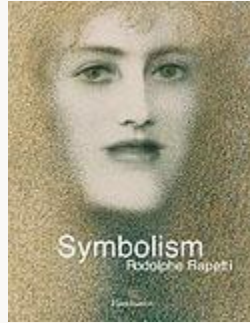
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Symbolism

Rodolphe Rapetti [Translated by Deke Dusinberre]

Paris: Editions Flammarion, 2005

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Rodolphe Rapetti's 2005 book, *Symbolism*, offers a fresh compendium on this complex, and often disjointed, aspect of late nineteenth-century art. By beginning with a working definition of symbolism as a counterpoint to naturalism, Rapetti positions his discussion within the historical context of an idealist philosophical current that encompassed not only the visual arts, but literature, music, and intellectual life [7]. This approach allows him to explore the visual arts as one facet of a kaleidoscopic idealist spirit that embraced Baudelaire's notion of correspondences at every level. He structures the book primarily as a thematic analysis of Symbolism's core ideas while simultaneously reminding the reader of the chronological position it holds as the inheritor of the Romantic tradition and the forebear of such twentieth-century movements as Surrealism. Equally important, Rapetti comments that "we should be careful not to exaggerate differences between movements that were reacting to one another," a welcome perception that the late nineteenth century, like most eras, was full of contradictory movements that promoted themselves as more distinctive than they might appear in retrospect [120].

Symbolism is organized into six major sections, five of which are investigations of particular themes. The first section, "Guiding Spirits," is the exception. Here Rapetti offers a brief examination of four artists whose work inspired the Symbolist generation: George Frederick Watts and the Pre-Raphaelites, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, and Arnold Böcklin. Each chapter not only introduces the artist in question, but also initiates the themes that will be addressed in later sections. The Pre-Raphaelite chapter, for example, includes a lengthy discussion of the relationship between painting and poetry, which will subsequently be analyzed in the section on "Satanism and Mockery". Similarly, Puvis de Chavannes's concern with history painting is referenced again in the section on "Myth and History". This strategy works particularly well in allowing the author to acknowledge the role of these 'guiding spirits' without pigeonholing them as Symbolists, or denying them significance as artists in their own right. Other issues, such as the role of William Morris and his design reform ideals, or Moreau's development of a private museum, offer tantalizing

glimpses of aesthetic and social issues that are not necessarily Symbolist, but which will affect the spirit of the time.

Having set the stage, Rapetti then turns to the first thematic section, "Subversive Idealism". The four chapters contained within this section deal with the philosophical idealism that provides the theoretical foundation for Symbolism. In "Strange Beauty", the author invokes the familiar literary influences of Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allen Poe on the work of Odilon Redon, thus establishing the context for the Symbolist's move away from naturalism and toward a fantastical world that "addresses the pattern of signs testifying to a higher reality"[67]. The perception of a "higher reality" underlying the mundane world has echoes of Neo-Platonism, but that's where the similarities end, as the second chapter, "Satanism and Mockery", makes quite clear. Symbolist idealism is both subversive and mocking, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the transformation of Venus from a goddess of love into an intoxicating embodiment of corruption and decadent pleasure. Drawing on sources in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* as well as the drawings of Félicien Rops, Rapetti points to the recurring theme of women as incarnations of evil [69]. The subversive nature of these images can be seen, for example, in Rops's photogravure series, *Sataniques*, of 1882, in which eroticism is based on violence against women. Rather than confront the troubling misogyny of these images, however, Rapetti quotes Baudelaire's poem, *Fusées*: "The unique and supreme pleasure of love resides in the certainty of doing *evil*. And man and woman know right from birth that in evil resides all pleasure" [75]. This is a less than satisfactory response to the overt sexual aggression of the imagery. Although such depictions certainly underscore the author's point about the subversive nature of Symbolist idealism, they deserve a far more critical examination than Rapetti offers.

Alternatively, there is the aggressive mockery of Alfred Jarry's ultimate *poire*, Père Ubu, ruler of a kingdom where chaos reigns, humor remains resolutely scatological, and nearly everyone can find reasons for both outrage and laughter. Ubu is both fool and bully, but the exaggeration that is the basis for this dark comedy speaks to the despair underlying the desire for ridicule and derision. Likewise, James Ensor's painting, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, 1888-89, repeats this theme of burlesque contempt for a world gone mad, albeit with a bitterness that is intensely personal. He skewers the falseness of contemporary society, the 'scientific' triumph of Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte*, 1886, and what he felt was the hypocrisy of his colleagues at Les XX in accepting a French aesthetic. The tiny background figure of Christ, lost in the swirls of thick paint, witnesses the masked revelers growing increasingly threatening—much like a scene from Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.

The last two chapters in this section concentrate on the stylistic and philosophical break between Symbolism and naturalism. "Tradition and Stylistic Vocabulary" focuses on the conservative elements, both artistic and political, among some of the Symbolist painters. Joséphin Péladin and his Ordre de la Rose-Croix exemplify one aspect of this group; they not only admired the medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but also "attributed the decadence of style to the disappearance of guilds and the loss of the compositional and technical secrets that guilds had sustained"[89]. In Péladin's view, art had become secular as a result of government collusion with the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, a deadly alliance arising from the materialist philosophy of naturalism placed at the service of the state. In his Salons de la Rose-Croix, held in Paris between 1892 and 1897, Péladin imposed ideological criteria,

based on subject matter, that would allow artists to avoid the aesthetic contamination of naturalism; in other words, anything other than Catholic, mystical, mythic or visionary subjects were not welcome. It might be noted here that in attempting to protect a Symbolist ideal by limiting subject matter, Péladin utilized the inherently political tool of censorship, thus becoming an agent of the very repression he despised in his perceived association of naturalism with the Third Republic.

Other artists eschewed the posing of Péladin's organization for a more sincere exploration of traditional Romantic locales. Emile Bernard, for one, made the requisite Pre-Raphaelite pilgrimage to Italy, but then continued on to the Middle East, where he eventually settled in Cairo for ten years. The influence of the earlier Romantic generation of Delacroix and Ingres, to name only the most famous, are obvious in his choice of subject matter, but Bernard's curiously detached painting, *After the Bath*, 1908, suggests neither sexual languor nor active enjoyment of the female form. Instead, his portrayal of three nude women intertwined in an idealized and unspecified landscape seems to exist in an emotionally isolated realm. Although the composition is reminiscent of Puvis de Chavannes's cool mythological images, the expressive content is blank, leaving the viewer wondering why the artist painted this image in the first place. Was there a private meaning that is simply not available to the viewer as is occasionally the case in Symbolist art? Or was it a reflection of the emptiness of a Symbolist ideal, now drained of content in an exhausted culture on the brink of world war? Rapetti will suggest some of these questions—and point to the need for further investigation—in his "Conclusion" [300-304].

The final chapter in this first section, "Idealism," emphasizes the Symbolist rejection of "both spontaneous Impressionism and impersonal naturalism" in favor of subjective experience. For Symbolist artists, there was no point in chasing the illusion of objective knowledge. Rather, they advocated immersion in the world of ideas and subjective perception. Painting was not *able* to represent reality and to attempt such a futile task was to participate in the charade of naturalism. As Rapetti notes, however, they never saw the flaw in the argument: "In seeking to paint the idea, Symbolists overlooked the main thing—painting itself" [102].

The third thematic section, "Symbolism in Its Day", contributes an excellent overview of "Inventing Symbolism" in the first chapter as well as a thorough examination of "Cloisonnism" in the second chapter. Paul Gauguin, Emile Bernard and the Pont-Aven group are all well represented, and the historical trajectory of Symbolist development is outlined clearly. However, it is the third and fourth chapters in the section that expand our scope of understanding. "Symbolism, Neo-Impressionism, Divisionism" begins predictably enough with Seurat and Signac's innovations, but then moves into a study of Italian Divisionism, which first appeared at the 1891 Brera Triennial in Milan. Rapetti acknowledges that "there would seem to be no direct link between the French Neo-Impressionists and the Italian Divisionists, although the latter referred to the same scientific texts as the French" [129]. He speculates that Vittore Grubicy, a well-traveled artist, dealer and critic, was probably responsible for introducing optical theories into Italian art, after having learned of them on a trip to Holland [130]. It is particularly intriguing to note that Italian Divisionism separates into two thematic categories; one that focuses on the political subjects in a naturalistic style, and the other emphasizing a dream-like mysticism tinged with Catholicism. Works by Giovanni Segantini such as *Love at the Source of Life*, 1895, illustrate

this Symbolist vein; the application of paint would easily pass muster in a French Divisionist exhibition, but the subject matter is unmistakably mystical and subjective. Similarly, Gaetano Previati's paintings exist in a highly charged atmosphere illuminated by a sense of despair over the fate of humanity. The large 1890 painting, *Maternity*, seems at first to be an almost abstract depiction of motherhood until the viewer realizes that the seated woman at the center is cradling a child beneath an apple tree which echoes the shape of a cross. Traditional iconography merges here with Symbolist imagery to present a contemporary meditation on motherhood and sacrifice. Rapetti observes all too briefly that this tendency "was still apparent in later manifestations of Divisionism, for example in the early work of Giacomo Balla" [130]. Obviously, Balla's work is beyond the scope of this book, but the author's suggestion about possible links between Symbolism and Futurism certainly deserve more investigation.

The last chapter in this section, "Symbolism, Decadence, Naturalism" provides an analysis of the relationship between Symbolism and naturalism. Although this is well-traveled ground at this point in the book, Rapetti delves deeper into an examination of the similarities and differences between these two aesthetic positions. He concedes that the distinction between Symbolism and naturalism can be very hard to maintain, observing that disgust with the vulgarity of society, and the degradation imposed by the industrialization of Europe, were crucial to both factions, as was a misogynistic perspective on the role of women [133]. In particular, he illustrates his case with paintings by Félix Vallotton (*Summer*, 1892-93) and Georges de Feure (*Damned Women*, 1896), arguing that these images "neither depicted the modern world nor transformed it into myth. At the very most, they expressed its malaise" [142]. Incongruities of scale, color, and form made these images obscure in meaning and, again, subversive because of their irrationality.

The fourth section of the book is a more formal analysis of Symbolist art. Beginning with a brief overview of the art historical literature on Symbolism, Rapetti expresses the opinion that the early scholarship on the subject was too narrow, but that in more recent years, it has become overly broad [145]. He then proposes some specific definitions for Symbolism, all of which are anchored in the conception of a "subjective gaze". Concomitant with this is the rejection of all realism precisely *because* it embraces the depiction of appearances as genuine, while the Symbolist understanding of reality is that it is separate and distinct from the material surfaces of the world. In turn, this perspective leads to an aversion to the depiction of time, whether it is the Impressionist desire for capturing a specific moment or the Academic's yen for freezing a historical scene on the canvas. The Symbolist artist prefers the open-ended quality of the unfinished work—which ironically reunites him with that most Impressionist of forms, the plein-air painting. Finally, Rapetti reiterates the profound influence of Baudelaire's doctrine of correspondences, articulated in Symbolist terms as synaesthesia based on flattened space, non-objective color, and the use of line to achieve the abstract harmony of music.

In the next chapter, "Dematerialization and Abstraction", the author broadens his scope to include a discussion of technical innovations and experiments. Gauguin's forays into woodcuts and ceramic sculpture, while familiar territory, are nonetheless articulated here as part of the movement towards abstraction and intuitive construction. More importantly, Rapetti demonstrates that other artists were likewise fascinated by technical research. Pierre

Roche, a sculptor and engraver, invented a technique that he called gypsography in which a relief plate in plaster is combined with color lithography to create a somewhat eerie bas-relief image such as *Venus*, 1915 [154]. Fernand Khnopff's retouched photographs of his own drawings pose even more complex questions about authorship and reproductions. Rapetti utilizes Khnopff's *Red Lips*, 1897, as an example of the dematerialization that occurs when the evidence of the artist's hand almost disappears in the photographic reproduction of an original drawing. Even the artist's retouching of the lips fails to bring the image back to life, leaving instead a ghostly presence that emerges from the background and wavers uncertainly in the two-dimensional space of the photograph.

This chapter concludes with an analysis of the expressive value of line in Symbolism. Again, this is well-known material, but the choice of illustrations makes it more remarkable than might be expected. Aubrey Beardsley and Henry van de Velde are included of course, but there is also an uncanny pastel on canvas by the Dutch Symbolist, Christopher Karel Henri de Nerée Tot Babberich, titled *Black Swans*, 1901. Part fairy-tale and part horror story, the power of this image springs from the linear conjunction of disembodied humans and black swans. Like so many Symbolist images, it evokes fascination and repulsion simultaneously. Equally powerful is the 1895 elegiac painting, *Automnal* by the Belgian Symbolist, Emile Fabry, in which a group of somber figures are inextricably connected through the curvilinear lines of their outstretched arms. By including some of these less recognized images, Rapetti expands our understanding of the field and demonstrates the international scope of Symbolism.

Following this examination of line is a chapter on "A Synthesis of Arts" which highlights the importance of synaesthesia in the Symbolist philosophy, and expands on the concept of artists crossing the traditional boundaries between painting, sculpture, decorative arts, and commercial or industrial art. This leads very logically to the following chapter, "Decorative Art" which is here defined as a "pictorial aesthetic linked to architectural space" [181]. A detail of Gustave Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze*, 1899-1907, for the Vienna Secession Building is beautifully reproduced in color here, as are several of Ferdinand Hodler's large murals such as *Tired of Life I*, 1892. Wonderful as these are, however, the most intriguing aspect of this chapter is the discussion of the revival of religious fresco painting under the auspices of Desiderius Lenz, a Benedictine priest based in Beuron on the upper Danube. Father Lenz, who had met the Nazarene painter Friedrich Overbeck in Rome in 1862, subsequently established a monastic workshop in Beuron specifically for the purpose of providing decorative artwork for all Benedictine facilities. One of those projects was the chapel of the Abbey of St. Gabriel in Prague, where Father Lenz implemented a "religious *gesamtkunstwerk*" in 1895. The fresco of *Saint Ludmilla*, 1897, illustrated in the text, suggests not only that religious fresco painting was alive and well in the Benedictine order, but that the monastic workshop at Beuron was training artists in a sophisticated contemporary aesthetic. The mysticism of Symbolism is married here to a Catholicism that partakes of the somewhat uneasy spirit of the time.

"Moment and Duration", the last chapter in this section, opens with a fascinating discussion of Moreau's transformation of his home into private museum for his paintings. For Rapetti, it is Moreau's juxtaposition of small-scale sketches with large, often unfinished, paintings that provides another dimension of Symbolist idealization. The incomplete nature of these

late paintings—and more importantly, Moreau's awareness that the paintings would never be completed—reinforces the Symbolist preference for the unfinished artwork. "A similar obsession with incompleteness pursued Munch in his *Frieze of Life*—the cycle was characterized by continuous re-workings as new versions replaced paintings that were sold and new compositions were steadily added to the series" [200]. No discussion of temporality in the late nineteenth century would be complete without referencing the work of Claude Monet and August Rodin, both of whom were experimenting in the 1890s with fragmentary forms and serial imagery. While this material is now legendary, it is particularly refreshing to find it included in the context of Symbolism, not as a tangential factor, but as yet another aspect of a multifaceted aesthetic.

The subject of "Myth and History" forms the core of the fifth section of *Symbolism*. The title of this section is somewhat deceptive in that much of the material focuses on the development of national identities through the reclamation of traditional legends and myths. The work of Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela, for example, draws on traditional Finnish metaphors as well as the tales from the *Kalevala* to express grief about cultural repression in *Broken Pine*, 1906. Polish artist Jacek Malczewski uses a comparable strategy in *Melancholia*, 1894, where a century of national chaos is shown in a swirl of floating bodies flanked by an isolated woman staring out the window on the right, and the figure of the artist himself recording the confusion on the left. These paintings, although mystical in presentation, are also directly linked to contemporary political realities albeit not to specific incidents. The following chapters in this section deal with "Mythic Spaces" and "Landscape," both of which analyze the transformation of classical imagery in a post-industrial world. As Rapetti notes, Symbolism had been anti-classical from the outset: "This was the period when the myth of Arcadia finally died" [209]. Landscapes became increasingly empty, abstract and personal in the wake of industrialization and technological development. In fact, the "geographic expansion of Symbolism followed a line of economic development," cultivating "a space as alien as possible to the new alliance of politics and economics, which it perceived as a threat" [232]. Landscapes by Eugène Carrière (*Landscape*, c.1898), Jens Ferdinand Willumsen (*Mountains in the Sun*, 1902) and Romolo Romani (*Image*, 1905) testify to the validity of this observation. In all of these paintings, topography becomes abstract, often flat, and increasingly meditative. The trajectory of landscape painting from Neo-classical idylls at the beginning of the century to content-resistant abstractions at the end of the century does indeed suggest that industrialization deracinated people profoundly from their native soil.

The final section of *Symbolism*, "Enamored of Instability, Wary of Rationality," addresses the underlying embrace of irrationality that characterizes this aesthetic. Beginning with a chapter on "Hysteria: A New Expressive Repertoire" and concluding with "The Absent Artist: Discovering the Art of the Mentally Ill" Rapetti explores the 'new' psychological and neurological terrain of the subconscious as a platform for emerging forms of expression. In the chapter on hysteria, he acknowledges the misogynistic quality so prevalent in Symbolist art, but again offers little in the way of analysis. In discussing Gustave Klimt's *Judith I*, 1901, for example, he notes that the painting "stresses a violent vision of sexuality and a male fear of desire," but then abandons any further exploration of the topic [259]. Given the dominance of this type of imagery, and the emotional intensity attached to it, the reader

can only wonder why Rapetti so consistently avoids any substantive discussion of such a central feature of Symbolist art.

He presents a much more convincing analysis in the following chapters on "The Subconscious and New Expressions of Ego" as well as a thoughtful explication of Strindberg's landscapes in "Chaos and Choice". The book concludes with a chapter on the art of the mentally ill in which the author returns to Symbolism's philosophical idealism as an expression of the fundamental human impulse to create a record of being. "This notion was not only the final major incarnation of Symbolist idealism, which held that art was basically the translation of an idea, it also heralded Symbolism's demise in so far as it dissociated the foundation of artistic activity from any rational construction. A definition of art based on the notion of beauty, already nuanced by Baudelairean concepts that pushed it toward strangeness, finally lost all validity" [299].

Rapetti wraps up with a "Conclusion" chapter that begins with a review of the art historical position of Symbolism in the century since its emergence. "Art historians were still uneasy with Symbolism in the mid-twentieth century, long after the movement had died. Despite the fact that it had spawned no dearth of utopias inspired by anarchist ideas, Symbolism appeared suspiciously passé from the politico-aesthetic perspective that many historians brought to bear on the later nineteenth century when they automatically associated artistic avant-garde with social progress. The spirit that had attended the birth of Symbolism was never able to evolve into a broader attitude. Hence its posterity was unable to offer a sufficiently powerful antidote to twentieth-century ideologies" [300]. Rapetti goes on to suggest that the fascist political ideologies of figures associated with Symbolism—Gabriel D'Annunzio for one—undoubtedly contributed to the perception of the movement as being inherently conservative and therefore, problematic. However, he also recognizes that Symbolism's preference for inaction and escape into the world of imagination left it vulnerable to this charge. More importantly, he strives to begin a reassessment of the profound influence of Symbolism on twentieth-century, avant-garde art. Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* would not be possible without Symbolist idealism, nor would the philosophical ideologies of Mondrian and Malevich. As Rapetti persuasively demonstrates, Symbolism's "idealist wellsprings fed multiple streams that would irrigate various landscapes" [303].

Like all ambitious endeavors, *Symbolism* attempts an extraordinary task. Rodolphe Rapetti has undertaken to provide a solid working definition of Symbolism, and to deepen our understanding of both the scope and meaning of the movement. He has spent far more time explaining the philosophical foundations than most art historians do, and the result is indeed a more coherent picture of the Symbolist ideal. Equally refreshing is his willingness to move beyond the rivalries imposed by the artists themselves, and occasionally by art historians who tried to pigeonhole individual artists into preconceived ideas of what constitutes an Impressionist or a Naturalist or an Academic. However, the disquieting lack of comment on the depiction of women in Symbolist imagery is a matter of concern. Although this material has been analyzed in other sources, it is an odd and disturbing oversight in a book that purports to be a comprehensive study of the topic.

Another puzzling aspect of this beautifully produced publication is the surprisingly poor quality of the proofreading. Typographical errors abound, especially in the first half of the book; it seems to improve in the second half, making the reader wonder if perhaps there was a staff change at the midway point. Similarly, the translation might be better. There are many awkward sentences that appear to have been translated literally from the French without consideration for how they would read in English. Unfortunately, this occasionally creates disjointed ideas that the reader must then restructure based on the surrounding text—a task that many will not be willing to attempt. It is always something of a mystery as to why a publisher, especially one as well respected as Flammarion, would countenance slapdash production values in a book that is so clearly intended to embody the highest standards of graphic design and scholarship.

Nevertheless, *Symbolism* is well worth reading. It clarifies a subject that can seem painfully complex; and it establishes the international breadth of Symbolism within the philosophical context of idealism, and as a counterpoint to naturalism. In addition, it presents a rich array of images, artists and ideas that encourage thoughtful evaluation of Symbolism's accomplishments and disappointments. It belongs on your bookshelf.

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