THE SYMBOLIST MOMENT

Reflections on Its Origins in Belgium

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Any consideration of the sources of both Belgian Symbolism and the reception of Symbolism in Belgium requires a broad outlook that extends beyond the immediate end-of-century timeframe.[1] At the same time, though, the task of the present is to determine its own relationship to the past. If Symbolism developed in Belgium at the turn of the 1880s, it was, nevertheless, more than just the outcome of interconnections arising between European artistic circles[2] sharing a similar sensibility and asking similar questions: it was also the continuation of a tradition originating with the "Flemish Primitives".

In order to get a sense of the links between present and past, it is necessary to begin with this background and to go back to the generational dimension characteristic of the "symbolist moment", as defined by Jean-Paul Bouillon.[3] This is especially true of Belgium, since the members of the younger generation that emerged in the early 1880s were grandsons of the architects of independence (1830). The intervening generation – that of the fathers – had overseen a remarkable economic boom that underpinned the fledging nation's success as demonstrated by the reign of Leopold II (1865–1909)[4] in terms both of urban development – not only Brussels, but also Ostend – and a policy of colonial expansion (fig. 2) that enabled the Belgian sovereign to match the imperialist policies of his English and French neighbours. For the generations of the sons and the grandsons, the foundations had thus already been laid by their fathers and grandfathers respectively. The social standing of the two younger generations was determined by a systematic doubt whose preferred means of reflection was poetry – which asked existential questions: What should we do? Who are we? Where are we going? What is the meaning of progress? What is our identity?[5]

This perplexity, though, did not in itself constitute an actual programme. Even the designation "Symbolism", which today appears to be a plain and simple historical fact, was the subject of fierce debate, given that the definition of the term depended on which centre of gravity – Paris or Brussels[6] – won the day and, as a consequence, which coterie of artists would prevail.

The subject in crisis

This generational component lies at the heart of the Symbolist project. Although implicit, it echoed the ongoing redefinition of the subject in its metaphysical, religious, political and social dimension. A movement largely conditioned by poetry as a model of thought – starting with Mallarmé – and by the theatre – through Maeterlinck – as a way of presenting a world within the world (pp. 236/37), Symbolism was above all the expression of a widespread reconfiguration of the values through which fin-de-siècle Europe described itself.[7]

The concept of the subject thus took on a broader meaning. It was neither simply an individual performing an act through which he defined himself, nor was it merely something to be represented. Henceforth, the object counted less in itself than as the result of a process undertaken by the person who defined himself through it, be he its creator or the one viewing it. Inextricably bound together, object and subject can be revealed only through a dialectic that underscores the relative, transitory nature of all reality. From now on, there could be no guarantees. The principle of permanence articulated by Renaissance humanism – on the one hand through history as the rationalisation of time and, on the other, through perspective as the rationalisation of space – cracked, receding before the perpetual uncertainty of a world perceived as representation, that is to say, essentially, as perception.

This extension of the notion of subject came about only through a crisis that was to become an obligatory rite of initiation for all those calling themselves "symbolists". The model for this experience was provided by Mallarmé,[8] both in the guise of the breakdown he went through in Tournon around 1864, which led him to consider the void as the fulcrum of his oeuvre, and, above and beyond the event itself, through the importance accorded philosophical reflection as material for the poetic act. With Mallarmé, the necessity for the artwork to be a form of autonomous thought becomes axiomatic.[9] Without the safety net of faith, it becomes the task of thought to redefine the human on the basis of something

Fig. 1 Fernand Khnopff
Days Gone By, 1905, photograph by Alexandre, heightened by Khnopff with pencil, coloured pencil and white on paper, transferred to cardboard, 21.8 × 28.3 cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Fig. 2 Fernand Khnopff
Frontispiece for the catalogue to the World's Fair in Brussels-Tervuren, Colonial Section: "Free State of the Congo. Chryselephantine Sculptures", 1897, coloured chalk on photograph on paper, 20.2 × 13.5 cm, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Cabinet des Estampes, Brussels

other than the growing uncertainties of rationality. The statement "I think, therefore I am" no longer satisfied this generation – one which, under the influence of British and, especially, German philosophy, assigned the function of asserting human existence to perception – and beyond that to sensation.

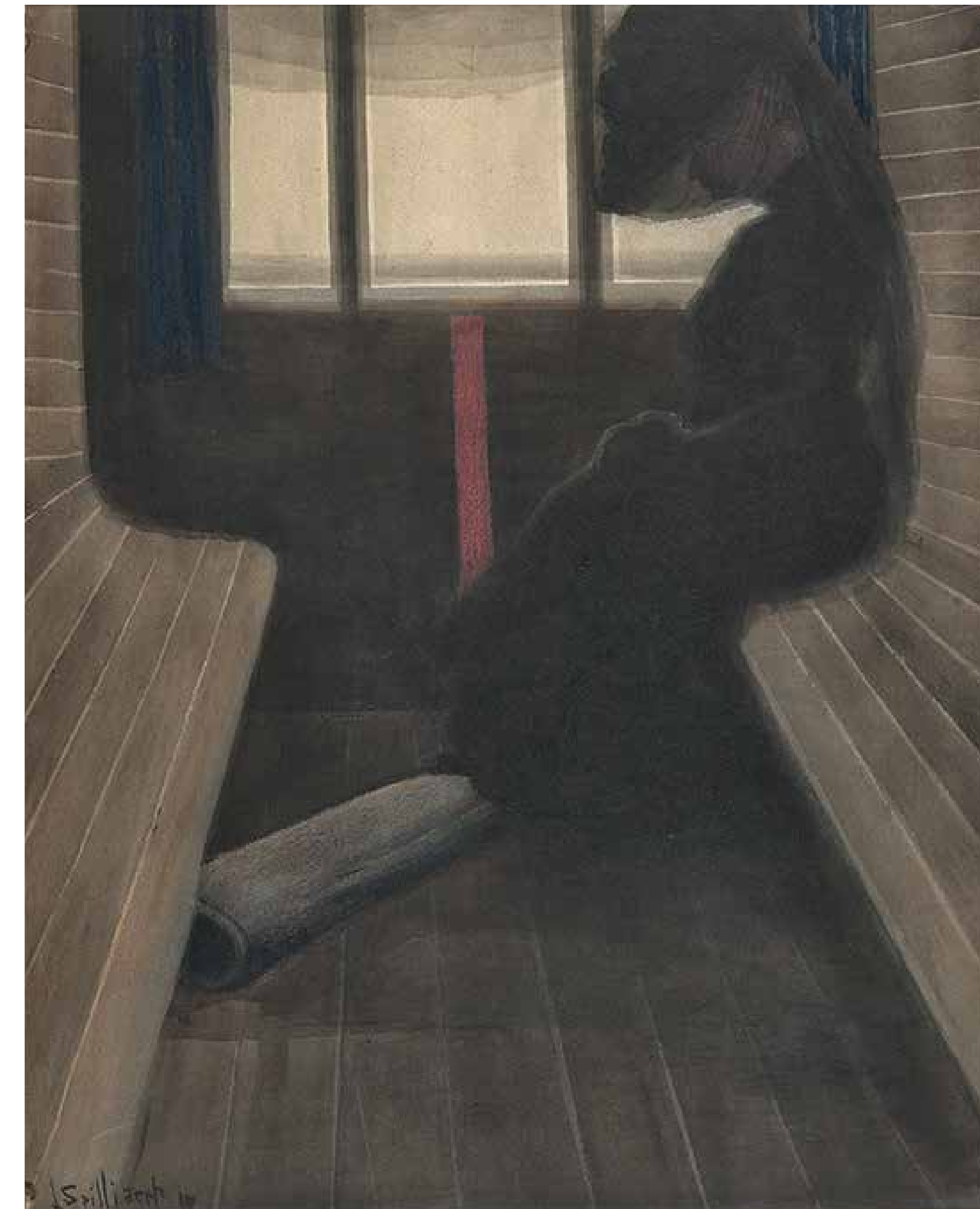
Hence – in the face of such doubts – a new interest in vision and, as a corollary of artistic production, in the ways it is to be transposed into representation. Depicting an object equates to defining it: in other terms, to enclosing it in an outline that would function as a word. Moreover, it must also be expressed in sensation, which, in revealing it, testifies to our own existence. Likewise, both the gesture of the artist – be it as faint as Khnopff's pencil caressing the paper – and the materiality of workmanship take centre stage: the texture of pastel exalted as powdery light (p. 309); charcoal as shadow made writing (p. 302); or ink as the quintessence of night (fig. 3). Overly associated with the quest for realism – be it academic or modernist – oil painting was not jettisoned, but now had to adapt to new conduits of expression. Under the influence of James McNeill Whistler (fig. 4), whose oeuvre permeated European painting in the early 1880s, oil could no longer be an excuse for lyrical brushwork, or, contrariwise, act as the vehicle for a mimetic rhetoric whose expression denies its materiality.[10] In the wake of the experience of photography – seen as a gradual epiphany of the chemical image, rather than as an instrument for instantaneous representation[11] – Whistler defined representation as a puff of breath settling on a pane of glass. The baroque gesturality through which James Ensor showed himself heir to Peter Paul Rubens is exemplified by saturated canvases that reveal a pantheistic impulse with respect to the world depicted; the photographic lucidity that links mimesis and the evaporation of craft is evidenced by an ethereal style that betrays the artist's presence in the most vaporous details. Thus, the subject in crisis morphs into a plenitude that fuses Symbolism with Impressionism. The world exists solely through notations of sensation, in a sensitivity to the ephemeral, in the fragility of all expression. To direct light that places the object at the epicentre of a normalised, rationalised space, the Symbolist painter preferred effects that impair its legibility, blur its outlines, dilute its materials so that it becomes unidentifiable. By way of fog effects and iridescent night pieces, the poetics of the instant dissolved the precepts of the idiom of precision.

This accounts for the pronounced taste for references that emancipated the artist from the humanist logic bequeathed by the Renaissance: a return to the "primitives" (fig. 5)[12] – understood as a reversion to the art forms of a late Gothic style exempt from the prescriptions of "modern" humanism – or a fascination with the "savage" or for cultural expressions from faraway lands, such as Japanese art, which, above and beyond its vogue, paved the way for novel artistic methods.[13]

In Belgium, this "taste for the primitive" was coupled with a regionalist strain that sought to overturn the dominance of the Parisian art scene and undermine the Belgian propensity to ape it. Antoine Wiertz (p. 276), who had died in 1865, was to prove key to these efforts, not only by his perpetuating in Belgium a vein of sensibility the Germanic world terms "post-romantic" – more to highlight the continuity between fins de siècle than a true affiliation – but also by constantly embedding metaphysical reflection in political current events marked by the succession of liberal revolutions that inflamed Europe between 1830 and 1848.

Spreading through the continent, Symbolist culture therefore constituted an opportunity for reassessment essential to the understanding of an extended subject, which,

Fig. 3 Léon Spilliaert
Woman in the Train, 1908, ink, chalk and gouache on paper, 51.8 × 41.5 cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels



if it outstripped the individual, cannot account for the totality of an object located beyond consciousness. The subject is predicated both on content in a sort of reduction to a quintessence and on form, in that the latter designates an entity perceived as impenetrable. Thus, from Émile Verhaeren to Fernand Khnopff, from Léon Spilliaert to Maurice Maeterlinck, from Georges Rodenbach to George Minne, the crisis of the subject and the extension of the imaginary unfolded simultaneously. As the successor to Romanticism, Symbolism already served as a significant precursor to Surrealism as it emerged after the First World War (fig. 6).

"Us" and its dissipation

All in all, the dilemmas facing Belgian artists were not very different from the questions preoccupying the youth of England and France confronted by the ravages of unbridled capitalism and by the threat to humanity posed by a materialism both self-serving and philistine. Charles Baudelaire, who had died in 1867, was the dark star around which this sense of decadence overshadowing the conditions of progress revolved. With industrialisation came a modernist way of thinking wedded to technological progress, albeit one which fostered a divorce from nature that imprisoned people in sprawling cities and left the countryside reeling. In the nineteenth century, before the telephone, car and aeroplane, the railway was one of the first symptoms of this phenomenon. Apparently, for this generation – deprived of direction and lurching indulgently from crisis to crisis – the default position was to enter the law. Many protagonists completed or at least embarked on legal studies, as if the inequalities that beset the third generation could best be redressed in the ivory tower. Few, however, practised for any length of time. Since the law appeared at odds with both the world and society, the lawyer soon yielded to the writer, as if once the step had been taken and a vantage point gained, reality could be better described as it truly appeared and a society that had already been the staple diet of their fathers' era of naturalism be depicted more accurately. Once photography became the yardstick, description was no longer the issue.[14] The point was less to describe, and so denounce, than to reveal in order to lay the foundations for an inevitably different society. Observation thus went hand in hand with an idealism that led a number of these liberals of the modernist tradition to embrace socialism as a promoter of progress.[15] Like unloved offspring rejected by the dominant bourgeoisie to which they belonged, the future adepts of Symbolism were among the first to pay heed to the rumbles of social unrest audible in the Europe of triumphant industrialisation. In Belgium, the year 1886 proved pivotal. While the arguments over Symbolism continued[16] – its definition being largely determined by bromides such as escapism and "art for art's sake" ("l'art pour l'art"[17]) – the violent workers' revolts that broke out in the region of Liège, in the Borinage and among the fishermen of Ostend cast a harsh light on the social injustices on which the economic prosperity of a nation on the brink of becoming the second most powerful in the world were built. And so, striving to unveil the truth with coruscating words uttered solely for the good of humankind, the life of a Symbolist artist, like James Ensor's, came to resemble that of a Christ rejected of men (pp. 160/61).

Against the backdrop of an economic slump, a social consciousness combined – in French-speaking cultural zones – with the perception of society as having become decadent since the debacle at Sedan and the collapse of the Second Empire in 1870 resulted in a twofold attitude: the retreat into an ideal world of daydream rather than real life, or an urge to transform society through universal aestheticisation.

Beyond the cultural ambit of such a spiritual crisis – essentially the consequence of a model framed in Germany[18] by the heirs to the civilisation of Romanticism – the

Fig. 4 James McNeill Whistler
Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket, 1875, oil on canvas, 60.2 × 46.7 cm, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit

Fig. 5 Henri Leys
The Studio of Frans Floris, 1868, oil on panel, 75.5 × 106.5 cm, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Fig. 6 Paul Delvaux
Rosine, 1968, ink and watercolour on paper, 65 x 57 cm,
Ulla and Heiner Pietzsch Collection, Berlin

Fig. 7 Jean Delville
The Treasures of Satan, 1895, oil on canvas, 258 × 268 cm,
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

notion of the aforementioned ideal enjoyed a resurgence. By the end of the century, it was accompanied by a wave of religious conversions that formed a counterpart, as it were, to the metaphysical experience of crisis inaugurated by Mallarmé. Where doubt was ousted by the reassurance and authority of faith, art developed into spiritual expression, perceived by some as worthwhile in itself, while others might be influenced by theological conceptions opportunistically or for intellectual reasons.[19] The success of the occult writer Joséphin Péladan (p. 267) in Belgium was not merely a passing fad.[20] It grafted onto a sensibility, which at the same time was searching for roots in Flemish Primitive painting as an expression of a faith that was pure because it was primitive. Hostile to materialism, artists such as Jean Delville (fig. 7) and Constant Montald harboured a strong aversion to a Church rooted in the established order. Their ideas aimed at a broader form of religiosity in which the West would reconnect with the Orient, and in which Buddhism and Christianity would be enriched by alternative conceptions that enlarged our mystical sensibility: Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, theosophy and anthroposophy were all to blend into a theology that was both unconventional and subversive.

Against this background, drawing – in its original understanding as *cosa mentale* – thus took precedence over the other components of art.[21] Unsympathetic to the sensuality of Impressionism and its developments in Expressionism, the intention of these idealist Symbolists was to construct a new humanism without borders or boundaries, and predicated on drawing as a cognitive act. In analyses whose horizons lay in the long term, the sole function afforded the present was pedagogical as – like the iconic figure of Prometheus – they blazed a trail for the humanity of the future.

At the polar opposite of this temporal contraction into the Ideal, other currents developed that aimed to place art at the core of society. Profoundly influenced by, among other things, the doctrine of Arts and Crafts as instituted by William Morris, these artists embarked on a critique of an industrial society that was centred on productivity and on the criterion of quantity, opposing it with an economic and social project that would put beauty back at the heart of the city.[22] The aim was to develop an aesthetics of everyday life in step with progress seen as consubstantial with modernity.[23] Through the Beautiful, the principle of quality would be instilled into the norms of industry and transform humanity. Art for all was an expression of the industrialisation of creation and, at the same time, a revaluation of production through the action of art. The notion of quality would thus offset that of quantity through forms that were both functional *and* stylish. This line of thinking, which by 1893 lay behind the replacement of Les XX (Les Vingt) by La Libre Esthétique,[24] defines art nouveau in equal measure as an expression of the progress desired for society as a whole and as an adaptation of the return to an idealised Middle Ages during which humanity produced solely to attain happiness and to live in harmony with others and in symbiosis with nature.[25] As informed by Symbolism, such ideas were to redraw the contours of everyday life and lay the foundations of what, in the twentieth century, became design. In this regard, the artistic activities of Henry van de Velde (p. 48, fig. 4) both in Belgium and Germany would be decisive. Shifting from easel painting to architecture, van de Velde was able to realise an ambition determined by the Symbolist culture from which he had sprung.

The move from solitary hothouse to the crystalline store devoted to the transparency of merchandise emerged from a complex, deeply individual approach that never ceased to conceive of humanity as a whole. A culture of crisis, it largely resulted from the legacy of the Enlightenment and from the critical debates it engendered in the

nineteenth century. It was a culture of crisis experienced concurrently in the undergrowth of the unconscious – a continent that science was just starting to explore – and in the meanders of a society prey to tensions and to violent revolutionary impulses.[26] A culture of crisis imbued with idealism and fantasy, with sensuality and intellectualism. A culture of crisis, which, if it signalled the final flourish of humanism,[27] also sowed the seeds of the postmodern condition. A culture of crisis whose relevance remains undiminished to this day.

1 The present essay is a reappraisal of sorts of the study I published fifteen years ago entitled *Le Symbolisme en Belgique*, Brussels 2005 (2nd edn 2010). In that volume, readers will find documents supporting the arguments advanced here.
2 See the contributions by Inga Rossi-Schrimpf and Maja Brodrecht in this catalogue, pp. 80–89 and 102–11.
3 Jean-Paul Bouillon, "Le Moment symboliste", in *La Revue de l'Art*,(1992), no. 96 (*Le Symbolisme*), pp. 5–8.
4 Philippe Roberts-Jones (ed.), *Bruxelles. Fin de siècle*, Paris 1994.
5 Michel Biron, *La Modernité belge. Littérature et société*, Brussels 1994.
6 *Paris-Bruxelles. Bruxelles-Paris, réalisme, impressionnisme, symbolisme et Art nouveau. Les relations artistiques entre la France et la Belgique 1848-1914*, exh. cat. Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris/Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, Paris 1997; Marc Quaghebeur and Nicole Savy (eds.), *France – Belgique (1848–1914). Affinités – ambiguïtés* (papers from the symposium held 7–9 May 1996), Brussels 1997.
7 Pierre José, *L'Univers symboliste. Fin de siècle et décadence*, Paris 1991.
8 I am referring here to chapter 8 of my book *Fernand Khnopff*, Brussels 2018.
9 Jean-Pierre Richard, *L'univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, Paris 1961.
10 See J. H. Townsend, "Whistler's Oil Painting Material", in *The Burlington Magazine* 136 (October 1994), no. 1099, pp. 690–95; Stephen Hackney, "Colour and Tone in Whistler's 'Nocturnes' and 'Harmonies', 1871–1872", in ibid: pp. 695–99. With regard to Whistler's palette, see Carrie Haslett, *Discussing the Ineffable: Color in the Paintings of James McNeill Whistler*, PhD dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, 1999.
11 Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians. Photography and the Culture of Realism*, Ithaca/London 1996, p. 69.
12 See the contribution by Johan De Smet in this catalogue, pp. 68–77.
13 Takagi Yoko, *Japonisme in Fin de Siècle Art in Belgium*, Antwerp 2001.
14 See Alain d'Hooge (ed.), *Autour du Symbolisme. Photographie et peinture au XIXe siècle*, Brussels 2004.
15 Paul Aron, *Les écrivains belges et le socialisme (1880–1913), L'expérience de l'art social: d'Edmond Picard à Émile Verhaeren*, Brussels 1985; "Le symbolisme belge et la tentation de l'art social: une logique littéraire de l'engagement politique", in *Les Lettres romanes* 40 (1986), p. 316.
16 See the contribution by Hans Körner in this catalogue, pp. 34–41.
17 Robert Gilsoul, *La Théorie de l'art pour l'art chez les écrivains belges*, Brussels 1936.
18 M. Christian Berg, "Le lorgnon de Schopenhauer. Les symbolistes belges et les impostures du reel", in *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Études françaises* (May 1982), no. 34, pp. 119–35.
19 *Splendeurs de l'Idéal. Rops, Khnopff, Delville et leur temps*, exh. cat. Musée de l'art wallon, Liège 1996.
20 Robert Pincus-Witten, *Occult Symbolism in France. Joséphin Péladan and the Salon de la Rose-Croix*, New York/London 1976; Christophe Beaufils, *Joséphin Péladan. Essai sur une maladie du lyrisme*, Grenoble 1993.
21 Francine Claire Legrand, Robert De Smet, Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque et al., *Le symbolisme dans le dessin belge*, Brussels 1979 (1991); *Aspecten van het symbolisme, Tekeningen en pastels*, ed. Sabine Taevernier, exh. cat. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp 1985; *Fin de siècle. Dessins, pastels et gravures belges de 1885 à 1905*, exh. cat. Galerie CGER, Brussels 1991.
22 Laurence Brogniez, *Préraphaélisme et Symbolisme. Peinture littéraire et image poétique*, Paris 2003.
23 Yolande Oostens-Wittamer, *L'Affiche belge 1892–1914*, exh. cat. Bibliothèque royale Albert Ier, Brussels 1975.
24 *Les Vingt en de avant-garde in België. Prenten, tekeningen en boeken ca. 1890*, ed. Stephen H. Goddard, exh. cat. Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, Antwerp 1992; *Les XX et La Libre Esthétique. Cent ans après*, ed. Gisèle Ollinger-Zinque, exh. cat. Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels 1993. See also the contribution by Jane Block in this catalogue, pp. 44–53.
25 *Horta. Naissance et dépassement de l'Art nouveau*, ed. Françoise Aubry, exh. cat. Palais des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels 1996.
26 See the contribution by Ralph Gleis in this catalogue, pp. 18–31.
27 This is the angst-ridden vision proposed by Jean Clair in *Lost Paradise: Symbolist Europe*, Montreal 1996.