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SLOVAK REPUBLIC

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE of SCIENTIFIC PAPER  
AFASES 2012  
Brasov, 24-26 May 2012

## POETRY AND ART: RETHINKING SYMBOLISM AND IMPRESSIONISM ACCORDING TO SEMIOTIC INTERFERENCES

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**Abstract:** *The present paper analyzes symbolism and impressionism as well as the interferences between poetry and other arts. After highlighting the meaning of the term 'symbol', the focus is laid upon the symbolist movement and rhetoric rendering the multifarious semiotic interferences between arts, such as: music, painting, sculpture. Then the emphasis is placed on impressionism as well as on the connection between symbolism and impressionism as there is an almost perfect overlapping between the two theories, the impressionist and the symbolist one. A possible explanation of the close connection between the different artistic realms is the artists' united efforts to discover the essence of existence.*

**Keywords:** *symbolism, music, painting, impressionism, semiotics, interferences.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Originally, the word '*symbol*' - from the Greek '*symbolon*' – signified an object cut into two separate pieces, two halves or fragments made of metal, wood or ceramics. These parts were given to two people – pilgrims, a host and a guest, a lender and a borrower or simply two people who were bound to be separated for a long period of time. When putting together the two fragments, the owners would be able to recreate the links established prior to their parting.

In time, the semantic area of the term '*symbol*' has gained unexpected dimensions. The word has both concrete and figurative meanings. It may characterize a significant image, but also a conventional sign, and therefore, may mean different things to different people: an emblematic analogy, a

fragment of reality, a secret, a graphic sign, a means of measurement, an operation.

If we go deeper into the matter, we will certainly realize that linguists, semioticians, philosophers, anthropologists have given different definitions of the symbol. Nevertheless, in all cases, the word represents an object or an image, which is a substitute of another object or image.

The '*symbol*' we will refer to in this paper is a sign which necessarily carries spiritual energy by means of which the visual and the intuitive realms are connected.

The aim of this paper will, therefore, be to dwell on some significant interferences between different arts. To this purpose, we will choose as a motto a fragment from Ion Minulescu's poem *Într-un bazar sentimental*: 'Stofe vechi, o mandolină,/ Un Cezanne și doi Gauguin,/ Patru măști de bronz:/ Beethoven, Berlioz, Wagner, Chopin...?'

The poet thus creates an artistic universe in which painting, music, but also poetry and decorative arts coexist and influence each other. The limits between them are blurred, and disappear altogether, ultimately.

## 2. SYMBOLISM AND THE INTERFERENCES BETWEEN ARTS

**2.1 The symbolist movement.** The symbolist movement was born in France at the end of the nineteenth century and manifested itself as a reaction against positivism and, implicitly, didacticism as well as melodrama in poetry.

Symbolist poets are creators of a real cult of beauty and eternal seekers of pure poetry. The subject of symbolist poetry becomes mystery, restlessness, undefined feelings.

The poet is in a state of vague fervour and his work is the result of his communion with the universe. All the parts of a symbolist work of art are simultaneous, just like the harmonies produced by the instruments of an orchestra.

**2.2 The symbolist rhetoric.** The new symbolist rhetoric relies on the power of suggestion, but also on innovation in prosody in order to illustrate vague, fluid transient, musical states of spirit in the process of creation.

Suggestion becomes the fundamental element in the poet's efforts to recreate the world. Thus, symbolist poets create poetry on poetry and within poetry. The result is a coherent and autonomous creation characterized by a new interior rhythm.

Verlaine's verse 'De la musique avant toute chose' (*Art Poétique*) should be interpreted as a final break with the external world. In this way, poetry reduces itself to its own music, becomes poetry 'per se'. It constantly turns to itself, communicates itself.

**2.3 Symbolist poetry and music.** Symbolist poets, attracted by musical harmonies, manifest a strong tendency of musicalization of their poetry. Their precursor, Baudelaire, states that Wagner expresses in his music the real harmony of correspondences.

To Baudelaire, Wagner's music is a mixture of breath, darkness and light, wild

imagination. It is his music that makes the poet vibrate in accordance with his passions, his interior storms, and sometimes his despair: 'La musique souvent me prend comme une mer.' (*La musique*).

For E.A. Poe, another important precursor of symbolism, music is the art that comes closest to the 'supernal'. Israfel, in the poem bearing the same title, is an angelic musician, a spirit 'whose heart-strings are a lute' (*Israfel*).

Paul Verlaine speaks about a new kind of poetry by which confusing states of mind and feelings are rendered. If Mendelssohn composed *Lieder ohne Worte*, Verlaine created *Romances sans Paroles*, thus exploiting the sounds of words in order to create a vague emotional contour.

Likewise, a late symbolist poet, T.S. Eliot in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night* imitates the rhythms of music when describing the evolution of the spirit: 'Half-past three,/ The lamp sputtered,/ The lamp muttered in the dark;/ The lamp hummed.'

For Rainer Maria Rilke, music is part of our heart, the essence of our being. In his poem *An die Musik*, the poet considers music as: 'Die Sprache wo Sprachen enden. Die Zeit, Die senkrecht steht auf der Richtung vergehender Herzen.'

By its unifying force, music becomes for Rilke the breath of statues and the silence of paintings.

The symbolist movement is also closely linked to the music of Franck, Debussy and d'Indy. In the preface of his volume of poems entitled *Poèmes*, Gustave Kahn strongly states that music makes it possible for the poet to perceive a poetic form which is at the same time fluid and more precise.

Musical instruments become real characters in the works of the symbolist poets. The elegant piano, the mysterious organ, the magical flute, the delicate harp, the proud guitar – all reoccur almost obsessively in their verse: 'Le piano qui baise une main frêle/ Luit dans le soir rose et gris vaguement...'  
(Verlaine: *Romances sans Paroles*).

Similarly, in *Chanson d'Automne* by Verlaine, the violins have human feelings: 'Les sanglots longs/ Des violins/ De



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l'automne/ Blessent mon coeur/ D'une  
langueur/ Monotone.'

#### 2.4 Symbolist poetry and painting.

Painting seems to be even closer to symbolist poets. Baudelaire, who aspires to give his work the power of expression characteristic to visual arts, considers Delacroix and Manet to be his models, his idols.

To Delacroix, nature is just a dictionary which helps the artist create. The same idea is expressed by Baudelaire in his poem *Correspondances*: 'La nature est un temple ou de vivants piliers/ Laisseront parfois sortir de confuses paroles,/ L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles/ Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.'

In his turn, Baudelaire creates in *Les Fêtes Gallantes* illustrative descriptions of Watteau's paintings, an album of 'painted' poems. Thus, Watteau's world is a landscape of fantasy, which helps the poet escape the present.

Also, Rilke's admiration for Cézanne's work is very well-known. He believed that Cézanne's paintings were not painted, but they simply and purely exist, make themselves present.

Under the influence of a sculptor, Rodin, and that of a painter, Cézanne, Rilke works as an authentic plastic artist, creating his marvellous *Ding-Gedichte*.

In the same vein, Mallarmé considered Whistler's work as being undoubtedly eternal, a means to glorify beauty, the mysterious, the miracle. The same Mallarmé dedicates some exquisite pages in his volume *Quelques Médailles et Portraits en Pied* to the impressionist painter Berthe Morisot.

Maybe the best known poem by the Romanian poet Petică, *Fecioara în Alb* is another illustration of the idea that modern symbolism has its origins in the Pre-Raphaelite

movement in England – the artistic current, which manifested itself in the nineteenth century and rediscovered the mythical and symbolical simplicity of the Italian painting before Rafael.

### 3. IMPRESSIONISM AND THE INTERFERENCES BETWEEN ARTS

The impressionist equivalent or the symbolist poetic creed, published in *Le Figaro* in 1886, is without any doubt *Impression. Sunrise* by Monet, which was first shown at the official exhibition on 15 April 1874 (le Salon des Refusés).

There is an almost perfect overlapping between the two theories, the impressionist and the symbolist one. The first verse of Verlaine's poem *Art Poétique* sums up the 'impression' created by Monet's painting: the music of nuances, the harmonious dialogue between sky and water.

Likewise, Verlaine's 'Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air' is re-echoed in the painting. The free verse in the symbolist poem is doubled by the reflection of light on the sky and in the water, rendered by a multitude of coloured lines.

Furthermore, the verses 'Rien de plus que la chanson grise/ Ou l'Indecis au Précis se joint' are the counterpart of the grey-greenish, grey-bluish tones in the painting, in contrast to the orange of the solar disc and its reflection in the water. 'De beaux yeux derrière des voiles' should be the essence behind the haze of the morning, which the observer might have a glimpse of.

'Car nous voulons la Nuance encore/ Pas la Couleur, rien que la Nuance.' Maybe these verses best express the connection between symbolism and impressionism. Although these are the words of a poet, Paul

Verlaine, they clearly illustrate a basic principle of the impressionist painting: the dilution and juxtaposition of colours, thus obtaining a visual mixture of nuances. Both in poetry and in painting this is the only way in which the vague, the evanescent, the impression, the dream can be materialized. In Monet's painting the nuances of grey, green, blue intermingle, flow into one another. Nothing dares destroy this equilibrium.

'Fuis de plus loin la Pointe assassine.'  
This means that precise contours, lines, drawing would only create artificiality in painting. In poetry, on the other hand, precision, even violence, will never be able to express the Absolute. Monet's *Impression*, like Verlaine's *Absolut* do not have a clear-cut contour. Everything is volume and essence created by the use of proper nuances and words.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper does not claim to have said all about this vast and very interesting topic. It may only be considered as the tip of the iceberg.

Further research will certainly reveal more relevant issues regarding interferences between arts, no matter how different they might seem. A possible explanation of the close connection between the different artistic realms is the artists' united efforts to discover the essence of existence.

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