

SYMBOLISM AND POETRY IN THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN MONARCHY

To what extent is it legitimate to apply the term Symbolism to poetry written in Central Europe? In a short paper we cannot do more than formulate a few hypotheses which later on might be helpful for an analytic comparison of West-European Symbolism and some verse written in the countries of the Habsburg Empire.

At the very beginning we must accept some definition of the concept of symbol. Walter Benjamin seems to be a theoretician whose arguments can serve us with a useful starting point:

“Das Buhlen der romantischen Ästhetiker um glänzende und letztlich unverbindliche Erkenntnis eines Absoluten hat in den simpelsten kunsttheoretischen Debatten einen Symbolbegriff heimisch gemacht, der mit dem echten außer der Bezeichnung nichts gemein hat. (. . .) Selbst große Künstler, ungemene Theoretiker, wie Yeats, bleiben in der Annahme, Allegorie sei ein konventionelles Verhältnis zwischen einem bezeichnenden Bilde und seiner Bedeutung. (. . .) die Allegorie ist beides, Konvention und Ausdruck; und beide sind von Haus aus widerstreitend. (. . .) Die Allegorie des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts ist nicht Konvention des Ausdrucks, sondern Ausdruck der Konvention.”¹

Who had been the first to arrive at the new definition of symbol? Let us consider a few sources. Some of them are analyzed, others not even mentioned by Benjamin. I do not wish to make a representative list, my intention is rather to illustrate

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main, 1963) pp. 174, 178, 193–194.

shifts in meaning, in order to make it clear how slowly the new concept emerged:

“To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess.”²

“... an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, (...). On the other hand a symbol (...) is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal.”³

“Fable or Allegory are a totally distinct and inferior kind of Poetry. Vision or Imagination is a representation of what eternally exists, really and unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of Memory.”⁴

“Das Momentane, das Totale, das Unergründliche ihres Ursprungs, das Nothwendige (...). Jenes Erweckliche und zuweilen Erschütternde hängt mit einer andern Eigenschaft zusammen, mit der *Kürze*. (... Der) Unterschied zwischen symbolischer und allegorischer Darstellung (... :) Diese bedeutet bloß einen allgemeinen Begriff, oder eine Idee, die von ihr selbst verschieden ist; jene ist versinnlichte, verkörperte Idee selbst. Dort findet eine Stellvertretung statt (...). Hier ist dieser Begriff selbst in diese Körperwelt herabgestiegen, und im Bilde sehen wir ihn selbst und unmittelbar. (...) Es ist daher auch der Unterschied beider Arten in das Momentane zu setzen, dessen die Allegorie ermangelt (...). Dort ist momentane Totalität, hier ist Fortschritt in einer Reihe von Momenten. Daher auch die Allegorie, nicht aber das

² William Blake, Annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds' Discourses (c. 1808). In: Lorenz Eitner, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism, 1750—1850. Sources and Documents*. Vol. 1: *Enlightenment/Revolution* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1970) p. 121.

³ Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual* (1816). In: *The Portable Coleridge*. Ed., and with an Introduction, by I. A. Richards (New York, 1961²) p. 388.

⁴ Blake, M. S. Book concerning his picture of *The Last Judgement*, c. 1818. In: *English Romantic Poets*. Ed. with an Introduction and Notes by Patrick Rafroidi (Paris, 1969) p. 25.

Symbol, den Mythos unter sich begreift (. . .), dessen Wesen das fortschreitende Epos am vollkommensten ausspricht."⁵

“Es ist ein großer Unterschied, ob der Dichter zum Allgemeinen das Besondere sucht oder im Besondern das Allgemeine schaut. Aus jener Art entsteht Allegorie, wo das Besondere nur als Beispiel, als Exempel des Allgemeinen gilt; die letztere aber ist eigentlich die Natur der Poesie, sie spricht ein Besonderes aus, ohne an's Allgemeine zu denken oder darauf hinzuweisen. (. . .) Das ist die wahre Symbolik, wo das Besondere das Allgemeinere repräsentiert, nicht als Traum und Schatten, sondern als lebendig- Augenblickliche Offenbarung des Unerforschlichen. (. . .) Die Allegorie verwandelt die Erscheinung in einen Begriff, den Begriff in ein Bild, doch so, daß der Begriff im Bilde immer noch begränzt und vollständig zu halten und zu haben und an demselben auszusprechen ist. (. . .) Die Symbolik verwandelt die Erscheinung in Idee, die Idee in ein Bild, und so, daß die Idee im Bild immer unendlich wirksam und unerreichbar bleibt und, selbst in allen Sprachen ausgesprochen, doch unaussprechlich bliebe.”⁶

For Winckelmann allegory and symbol were still synonymous. In the perspective of *Sturm und Drang* verse, allegory appeared either as the product of Classicism and was regarded as vulnerable to the reproach of excessive rationality or as a residue of a static, theological interpretation of the universe. For the Romantics allegory became the mere repetition of a previous sign, a dead metaphor with a definite meaning that could be known from tradition, whereas symbol was an implicit metaphor with an indefinite meaning that can never be exhausted.

It can be safely maintained that this distinction was bound up with the emergence of a philosophy of language developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt. The poetic implications of his theory of linguistic relativity were two-fold:

(a) The relation of the signifier to the signified underwent a transformation. “Was erreicht der Dichter? Nicht eine bloße Kenntnis. Er gelangt in das Verhältnis des Wortes zum Ding. Dieses Verhältnis aber ist nicht eine Beziehung zwischen dem

⁵ Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*. 1. Theil (Leipzig—Darmstadt, 1819²) pp. 64, 59ff, 70f.

⁶ Goethe, *Maximen* Nos. 279, 314, 1112, 1113.

Ding auf der einen und dem Wort auf der anderen Seite. Das Wort selber ist das Verhältnis, das jeweils in sich das Ding so einbehält, daß es ein Ding "ist".⁷

(b) The idea of a *Muttersprache* speaking for us gave rise to a cult of impersonality. "Daß er der Dichter ist, bleibt unwichtig".⁸

Both these doctrines could be taken as consequences of important changes outside literature, particularly in science. In *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit. Vierter Band: Von Hegel's Tode bis zum Gegenwart*, 1832–1932 (first published in 1950), Cassirer has shown that Goethe's idea of symbolic representation originated from his biological thought, and it is no accident that Coleridge identified symbol with organic, and allegory with inorganic, i. e. purely mechanical form.

For about a century this interpretation of symbol served as a stylistic ideal for important poets. We do not wish to retrace its itinerary. Suffice it to say that Nerval took it over from the German Romantics, Poe drew chiefly upon Coleridge, and the sources of Baudelaire were Nerval, Coleridge, and De Quincey. It would be a gross simplification to assume that Symbolism emerged as the result of a step by step continuity: in Goethe's terminology *Les chats* (1847) could be taken as an example of *symbolische Darstellung*, whereas *L'albatros* (1859) is devoid of *Dauer im Wechsel*, for two reasons: the meaning of the metaphor is explained in the poem, and it can be identified also on the basis of intertextuality, a possible reference to earlier texts, perhaps even *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* among them.

As is well known, the cult of the constitutive symbol came rather late in French poetry – even the late Hugo is full of illustrative metaphors, in the sense of the definition given by August Wilhelm Schlegel: »Allegorie ist die Personifikation

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen, 1959) pp. 169–170.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 17.

eines Begriffes".⁹ Still, within a few decades some French poets went much further than any of their German, English, or American predecessors. Having lost faith in religion, Mallarmé aimed at an ultimate secularization of the symbol, which had been a necessary precondition of the indeterminacy of meaning.

For lack of space I can refer only to one example of how Mallarmé tried to realize that infinite semantic regression. The sonnet I have in mind was composed between 1868 and 1887, and originally had the title *Sonnet allégorique de lui-même*, clearly indicating the French poet's own interpretation of the antithesis between allegory and symbol. The conventional signs of indeterminacy: "x" and "y" recur in the rhymes, and the impression of obscurity is heightened by a word in the second stanza:

" Ses pures ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx,
L'Angoisse, ce minuit, soutient, lampadophore,
Maint rêve vespéral brûlé par le Phénix
Que ne recueille pas de cinéraire amphore

Sur les crédences, au salon vide: nul ptyx,
Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore,
(Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s'honore)."

What is the meaning of "ptyx"? In a letter written to Lefébure, on 3 May 1868, the poet himself admits that the word "n'existe dans aucune langue"; and so it is quite clear that it has served the poet as a means for dissolving the message of the poem into possibilities of subjective interpretation.

It would be misleading to believe that Austrian and Hungarian Symbolism started under a French influence. Of the major poets I know only one, George who had a deeper knowledge of Mallarmé. It would not indeed be too far-fetched to maintain that two factors served as a driving force in the international history of Symbolism:

⁹ August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (Heidelberg, 1817) I pp. 153-154.

- (a) the misunderstanding of works written in a language of which the poet had only superficial knowledge of;
- (b) a reinterpretation of local traditions.

Let us firstly see how poets were able to discover what was in texts not perfectly understood. If we compare Baudelaire's and Mallarmé's translations of Poe with the original texts, we will find that the two French poets often interpret the American poet's explicit allegories as obscure symbols, partly because of their limited knowledge of English, partly because of their ignorance of the Protestant tradition Poe relied upon. At the beginning of the 20th century three leading Hungarian poets, Babits, Kosztolányi, and Tóth translated *The Raven* into Hungarian. Kosztolányi's analysis of his own version clearly indicates that he suspected some connexion between the refrain and the title of the poem, but under the influence of the French he tried to look for it on the level of symbols, and so even he missed the point that Poe related the two words not on the level of the signified, but on that of the signifier: "never" was an anagram of "raven". What is more, Babits attributed views to Poe which were not held by him.

The conclusion seems inescapable that a comparative study of translations could be of great use for the understanding of European literary history. Let us mention only one other example, Kosztolányi's version of Rimbaud's *Le dormeur du val*. As the Hungarian poet apparently had never read *Les Illuminations*, and considered Rimbaud to be a Symbolist poet creating new metaphors, it did not occur to him that for a native reader the title itself associated sleeping with death ("il dort — il meurt"). Thus, he destroyed the original meaning of the title by making it twice as long: *A Soldier Is Sleeping in a Valley* ("A völgyben egy katona alszik"). As a result, with a false key in his hands he completely misinterpreted the rest of the poem.

It should be emphasized that creative, fruitful misunderstanding cannot be considered specific of East- or Central European culture. Pound and Eliot largely ignored Mallarmé, and concentrated on Laforgue, who had obvious affiliations

with English traditions. For the same reason this poet had hardly any influence on poetic practice in Hungary, although Dezső Szabó, himself no verse writer wrote an interesting essay on him in 1911.

The first point inevitably leads to the second: the partial understanding of French Symbolism urged poets to reinterpret their own national heritage. George started a great cult of Hölderlin, and Dilthey brought a theoretical justification. He ended his book *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (1905) by saying that it had been that German poet who discovered the new mode of writing. By way of illustration he quoted *Hälfte des Lebens* (1802):

“Mit gelben Birnen hängen
Und voll mit wilden Rosen
Das Land in den See;
Ihr holden Schwäne,
Und trunken von Küssen
Tunkt ihr das Haupt
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.

Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo
Den Sonnenschein
Und Schatten der Erde?
Die Mauern stehn
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde
Klirren die Fahnen.”

If we compare this poem with Storm's outstanding success *Die Stadt* (1852), we cannot help granting that George had some justification in reinterpreting some German poems on the basis of Symbolist ideals. The impression these two poems give one is neither descriptive nor purely allegorical, they present landscapes of the soul, it is the lyric self which realizes its existence and destiny through nature. Provided we accept that in the first half of his career (up to let us say 1900, although *Der Teppich des Lebens* 1899 can be taken as showing signs of his later style) George's artistic development pointed from allego-

rism to Symbolism, it seems likely that in his mature poems he drew upon his own reappraisal of the past of the German lyric as much as upon Mallarmé. While in *Der Herr der Insel* (1894) he still recalled the allegorical tradition underlying *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *L'Albatros*, in the first poem of *Nach der Lese* (1895) he had recourse to the German tradition of creating a correspondence between vision and state of mind:

“Komm in den totgesagten park und schau:
 Der schimmer ferner lächelnder gestade.
 Der reinen wolken unverhofftes blau
 Erhellte die weiher und die bunten pfade.
 Dort nimm das tiefe gelb · das weiche grau
 Von birken und von buchs · der wind ist lau ·
 Die späten rosen welkten noch nicht ganz ·
 Erlese küsse sie und flicht den kranz ·
 Vergiss auch diese letzten astern nicht.
 Den purpur um die ranken wilder reben
 Und auch was übrig blieb von grünen leben
 Verwinde leicht im herbstlichen gesicht.”

Here the poet attempted a synthesis of the outside world and the lyric self, following the lead of a few Romantic and Post-Romantic German poets. This happened at a time when even the French became aware that Symbolism had been anticipated by some German Romantics, thanks to Maeterlinck who both translated and commented upon the work of Novalis.

Hungarian Symbolism presents many similarities with its Austrian counterpart. Of the more important representatives of the *Nyugat* movement only one, Árpád Tóth translated Mallarmé, and even his attention was drawn to *Les fenêtres*, an early poem written in 1863 and published in *Le Parnasse contemporain* in 1866. The style of this text is still allegorical. What is more, it has been proved that the poem is based upon a work of Sainte-Beuve, itself an imitation, as its title (*Sonnet, imité de Bowles*) clearly shows. The original English poem, a sonnet starting with the line *As one who long by wasting sickness worn* and written by William Lisle Bowles (1762–1850) is without doubt still a late Classicist sonnet. In sum: Tóth turned

to a derivative poem which showed no sign of Mallarmé's mature style. As to Ady, so far as I know, he has never read Mallarmé. Babits did write about him, but only rather late, in *A History of European Literature* (Az európai irodalom története, 1934), and even there he mentioned none of his works, gave a very general and rather superficial characterization of his artistic aims, and devoted much less space to his appraisal than to that of Swinburne. Contrary to a widely held view, it seems probable that the Symbolism of some of the poems of Ady and Babits written in the second half of the first and the first half of the second decade of our century were inspired mainly by a reformulation of the canon of earlier Hungarian verse writing. This is especially clear in the case of Babits who in 1904 composed a dissertation *Arany, az arisztokrata*. (Arany as an Aristocrat). The title itself indicates that Babits modelled his Arany after the Symbolist ideal of an alienated artist impersonated by Mallarmé and George. Babits together with his friend Kosztolányi replaced the view of Arany as an epic poet of Classicist affiliations current at the time with that of a subjective lyricist foreshadowing Symbolist writing. Babits' first collection, *Levelek Irisz koszorújából*, 1909 (Leaves from the Wreath of Iris) reveals an obsession with circularity, a *Leitmotif* in both periods of Arany as a lyrical poet, the 1850's and the late 70's. To mention but one example, *Az örök folyosó* (The Eternal Corridor), a poem written by Babits in 1906, follows the structure of Arany's *Az örök zsidó*, 1860 (The Eternal Jew) except that the earlier, post-Romantic poet ironically hinted at death as an end to circularity at the close of his poem. The young Babits made explicit what had been implicit in Arany's sense of being, and in this phase of his artistic development the same Nietzsche convinced him of the preposterousness of any kind of teleology who might also have contributed to Mallarmé's loss of faith. Indeed it is not hard to see that Continental Symbolism could be distinguished from its Anglo-American counterpart on the basis of its strong attraction to Nietzsche's myth of eternal Recurrence. From Hofmannsthal's *Ballade des*

äusseren lebens (1896) to *Esti kérdés* (An Evening Question), a poem which Babits wrote probably in 1909, a long series of poems could be mentioned in which the poets tried to cope with the idea of infinite regression. No such interest can be traced in the work of West-European or American poets, with the possible exception of the Irish Yeats.

To be sure, in Austrian and Hungarian literature it is almost impossible to isolate Symbolist phenomena of style from *Jugendstil* or *Sezession*. In the personifications of the seasons, in Hofmannsthal's *Vorfrühling* (1892) or Ady's *Párizsban járt az ősz*, 1907 (Autumn Has Visited Paris), for example, the decorative element is as important as the basic metaphor: attributive elements play a predominant part in building up the whole structure. But in this case it would be wide of the truth to call the intertwining of the two trends a specificity of Central European culture. Yeats, too, was very much indebted to the Pre-Raphaelites. The difference lies rather in the direction of later development: Babits slowly moved from *Sezession* to Expressionism, the abundance of decorative adjectives in *Messze... messze...*, 1907 (Far Away) is replaced by the verbal and exclamatory style of *Húsvét előtt*, 1916 (Before Easter), whereas Yeats remained more faithful to Symbolist ideals, as Valéry did.

And now to sum up. What tentative conclusions can be drawn from this sketchy outline?

1. French Symbolism in the strict sense of the word had very little direct influence. Ady knew French culture mainly through "Léda" (Adél Brüll), Yeats through Maud Gonnet. Whatever information they had, whether their French was excellent, good, or negligible, as with George, Babits, and Yeats, respectively, the foreign example helped them mainly to revalue the work written by the preceding generations in their own countries. George turned to Hölderlin, Babits brought strikingly new interpretations of Vörösmarty and Arany, Yeats applied the Symbolist doctrine to Blake's work.

2. All this does not amount to saying that we cannot speak

of an international Symbolism in the sense of common interests. Irrespective of any influence, all the Symbolists displayed an attraction to the ideal of organic form proclaimed by the most daring Romantics. We can go even further and assume that their activity was also marked by an effect of the antimaterialistic tenets developed by the opponents of rationalistic or empiricist philosophers of the Enlightenment: Villiers de l'Isle Adam's posthumously published and produced play, *Axel* (1890) is as much impregnated with the Occult considerations of the Rosicrucians as Yeats's collection of verse, *The Rose* (1983) or George's *Der siebente Ring* (1907). Two poems in the first volume of Babits are called *Theosophikus énekek*, 1906–7 (Theosophic Songs), and Maeterlinck's books on similar kinds of mystic thought are well known.

3. A distinguishing feature of Central European literatures can be that, with the poets starting their careers in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Symbolism was no more than a phase in their artistic development: the George of the Maximin poems is a much more didactic poet, or at least the dreamer has been replaced by a visionary, "Wenn alle blindheit schlug: er einzig seher", as *Der dichter in zeiten der wirren* (1928) proclaims, a prophet who sees no gap between *Sein und Sollen*, activity and contemplation; during the war Ady developed a style showing traits which I would call Expressionistic; from the twenties Babits turned his back upon the Romantic distinction drawn between allegory and symbol, and as a Catholic artist formulated his hypothesis that a proper symbol should refer to the authoritative context of a public religion. Symbolism and *Jónás könyve*, 1940 (The Book of Jonah) are poles apart: for the later Babits subjective vision had lost its magic power and was replaced by public genealogy, the international tradition of Classical Antiquity and Latin Middle Ages as foremost values. In other words, secularization and self-conscious artificiality have been devalued, and allegory has regained its aesthetic validity.