

The Language of French symbolism

Maryann Budokickh, Ph.D.

Department of French Philology

Institute of Philology

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

Ukraine

ABSTRACT

This article is dedicated to the study of artistic symbols in the poetry of French symbolism of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, viewed from the linguopoetic perspective. French symbolism is a literary and artistic movement that was formed at the end of the 19th century; its essence is seen in how representatives conveyed their feelings and thoughts in the form of artistic symbols that have numerous variations and are therefore open to various subjective interpretations. The classification of all artistic symbols in the poetry of French symbolism into traditional and individual symbols is proposed. The thesis singles out eight groups of traditional symbols. The processes of symbolization and verbalization of the artistic symbols on different levels of language are analyzed.

Keywords: French symbolism, artistic symbol, artistic image, linguopoetics, symbolization.

Introduction

French symbolism is a literary and artistic direction that occurred within romanticism and the decadence of the mid-nineteenth century. The main point of this trend is that its representatives conveyed their feelings, experiences and thoughts in the form of artistic symbols, the main features of which are suggestibility, figurativeness, musicality, creative intuition, spiritual accent and singularity. The official birth of symbolism was in 1886, when a new manifest of symbolism appeared (written by Jean Moreas). Nevertheless, the basic principles of the aesthetics of symbolism were developed by Charles Baudelaire long before its official appearance. The main representatives of symbolism are Paul Verlaine, Stephane Mallarme, Jean Moreas, Remy de Gourmont, Gustave Kahn, Saint-Pol Roux et Rene Ghil. An innovative and ambiguous system of values, developed by poets, was taken from the symbolist's perception of life, where the artists describe their sense of reality with the help of symbols. That is why the poets were called Symbolists, though they refused to adhere to any certain direction or school, so their aesthetics have remained vague and unclear.

An artistic symbol is the highest level of an artistic image that is characterized by generalized meaning, ambiguity, semantic depth, reproducibility, the ability to gain

additional meanings, connection with a certain cultural code. The ambiguity of symbol is in its demonstrative irrationality, semantic uncertainty and the possibility to a number of subjective associations. An artistic symbol as the highest level of an artistic image in a poetic text has a complex structure and presents some denotative and connotative issues. Some meanings are fixed in the dictionaries, while some occasional connotations can be determined only by the context, which sometimes prompts the meaning of the symbol or makes it even more unclear and confusing.

For example, in the poem of Paul Verlaine “Chanson d’automne”, the denotation “l’automne”, and there are also a lot of connotations: “la tristesse”, “la mélancolie”, “la solitude”:

Les sanglots longs

Des violons

De l’automne

Blessent mon cœur

D’une langueur Monotone” (Paul Verlaine. «Chanson d’automne»).

The creative work of French Symbolists is characterised by usage of two basic types of symbols — traditional symbols and individual symbols. Traditional symbols are those that are of ancient origin, function for a long historical time and are repeated in various texts of different epochs and authors. In the work of the French Symbolists eight groups of traditional symbols dominate: Biblical symbols (ange, néant, paradis), symbols of nature (brouillard, fleur, forêt), archetype symbols (air, eau, feu, terre), symbols of art (cygne, livre, muse), symbols of time (crépuscule, nuit, soir), symbols of feelings (cœur, coquillage), symbols-numbers (deux, trois, sept) and symbols of objects (éventail, montre, roue). The dominance of these groups indicates the willingness of poets to depict some important things. So we can single out four important topics for poets: religion, nature, time and feelings. The correlation of symbols results in three combined groups: religion — nature; nature — feelings; art — time. For example, a symbol bird is a widespread symbol of spirit and soul, the divine manifestation in the ancient world, which has its importance in the Christian tradition. However, this symbol has different meanings depending on the country and its culture.

Thus, for Ukrainians, the bird is a symbol of well-being, happiness and love for the home land; for Russians — loyalty, for the Chinese — longevity and good luck; for Hindus — intelligence; for the Japanese — creativity, and so on. Individual symbols reveal the extraordinary style of the writing of French Symbolists. They use symbols in allegorical contexts to convey varying interpretations. Every French poet has his own set of visual techniques that serve to reproduce his thoughts and experiences. In the poetry of French symbolists there are 20 dominant symbols: automne, azur, brouillard, chemin, ciel, cœur, cygne, éventail, fenêtre, fleur, hiver, lac, laurier, livre, mer, nuit, ombre, or, soir, ville. The symbol bird is related to images of heaven, eternity and freedom. Every poet chooses his own bird to symbolize his attempt to resolve his conflict with the philistine world. Some examples are: Charles Baudelaire — albatross, Alfred de Musse — pelican, Stéphane Mallarmé — swan, Paul Verlaine — sea gull.

Also, Paul Verlaine in his poem “Je ne sais pour- quoi” uses this symbol:
Mouette à l’essor mélancolique,
Elle suit la vague, ma pensée,
À tous les vents du ciel balancée,
Et biaisant quand la marée oblique,
Mouette à l’essor mélancolique” (Paul Verlaine. «Je ne sais pourquoi»).

The basic technique of French symbolism is a contextual mixing of multi-level artistic means. Lexical and stylistic features indicate the original creative manner of French Symbolists that consists in the free operating of tropes, figures and other stylistic techniques. Among the most widespread tropes we can single out are metaphor and comparison. In their poetry, comparison, allusion, euphemism, hyperbole, irony, litotes, and rhetorical questions dominate. For example, in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, such tropes as metaphor and comparison are of a great importance: *De l’éternel azur la sereine ironie Accable, belle indolemment comme les fleurs, Le poète impuissant qui maudit son génie À travers un désert stérile de Douleurs* (S. Mallarmé. «L’azur»). The poets used various phonetic tools that enhance the expressiveness of poems and their emotional and aesthetic impact: the use of rhyme and rhythm, the usage of different figures of speech (alliteration, assonance). Symbolists focused on creating a special rhythm of poetry that has very expressive, figurative and symbolic functions, that is why in their poetry an unusual accent and atypical syntactic constructions dominate.

Alliteration and assonance are the dominant techniques redundant in the poetry of most French Symbolist. For example, S. Mallarmé uses an alliteration of the sound [r]: “Et toi, sors des étangs léthéens et ramasse En t’en venant la vase et les pâles roseaux, Cher Ennui, pour boucher d’une main jamais lasse Les grands trous bleus que font méchamment les oiseaux” (Stéphane Mallarmé. «L’azur»). A graphic feature of the French Symbolist poetry is the writing of some key words with a capital letter, in bold or italic, change of size of a letter. In order to express some emotions and feelings the poets often use dashes, pauses, ellipsis, exclamations and questions [4]. The lack of punctuation and graphic imagery is an important feature of the poetry of most Symbolists. Poets refused the classical form of verse and chose a “vers libre”. For example, Saint Paul Roux in the poem “Le paon” does not use rhyme at all, but thanks to adroit selections of words and rhythm, the poetry is melodic and harmonic:

Le long de cet escalier sans fin comme l’échelle d’Ezéchiel, s’épanouit un
Paon dont la queue triomphale étale un essaim d’yeux fabuleux; le
splendide oiseaux, néanmoins, pêche par le sarment de sa démarche et par
le verbe dérisoire que le lézard de son col fiche ainsi qu’une écharde en
l’éparse harmonie” (Saint-Pol-Roux. «Le paon»).

The means of syntax are diverse and contradictory at the same time. On the one hand, the poets admix the syntax so the poem becomes really incomprehensible, on the other hand, they also use simple structures. Syntax figures that dominate in the poetry are anacoluthon, prolepsis and syntactic repetitions. The poetry of French symbolism is

characterized by the use of the first person singular pronoun. Additionally, negative constructions utilize great expressiveness. Je ne regrette rien, ni des lauriers superbes L'honneur qui m'était dû, Ni cet heureux plaisir, fait de fruits et de gerbes, Comme un vin répandu (J. Moréas. «Je ne regrette rien»). To express some important emotions the poets used an exclamation and question points. Thus, the exclamation point can be used to indicate a personal and emotional attitude of the poet towards the message (call to action, irony, anger, etc): Majestueux Néant des choses abolies! Sépulcre des Grandeurs et linceul des Folies! Gouffre vorace! Mer insondable! Lac noir! Oubliette creusée au ventre du manoir! (Stanislas de Guaita. "L'Oubli"). In conclusion, the French symbolism is an important literary movement in the World's history.

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