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Talk on Symbolism

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The Classicism of the 17th and 18th century was dominated by such literary figures as Racine, Moliere; Congreve and Swift. Their ideal was the ideal of objectivity. In the field of politics the preoccupation was with society as a whole. It was also the great period of the development of mathematical theory, the era of Newton and Descartes who influenced the thought of the times as much as the literary men. These were the years of rationalizations when the universe was regarded as a machine following the rules of logic and wound up by a sort of glorified clockmaker called God. This conception held in society too, in the court of Louis XIV where human nature was examined dispassionately to find the principle on which it worked. The American Constitution due to French influences and to the spirit of the times, regarded society as a planetary system, a well-regulated machine, that could be set up and regulated by a lucid and reasonable spirit. As one critic has said, "the theorems of the physicist were matched by the geometrical plays of Racine and the balanced couplets of Pope."

The Romantic movement which followed it was a reaction against these mechanistic ideas which had come out of the scientific discoveries. The fixed mechanical order left out too much, it did not correspond to actual experience. The Romantic had discovered aspects of life that could not be analysed on the assumptions of a mechanical world. Life, the universe, the spirit, were all more mysterious and less rational. Blake, the great English mystic, sang contemptuously: "The atoms of Democritus etc"

Chateaubriand, Musset, Wordsworth and Byron ask us to be interested in the individual by virtue of his intrinsic value, they champion the right of the person against the claims of society as a whole, against government, morals, conventions, academy, church. The Romantic is nearly always a rebel.
In championing the rights of the individual the poets looked further into their own souls and instead of a balanced set of principles they saw fantasy, confusion and conflict. Wordsworth and Blake affirmed the truth of this vision and concerned themselves with the individual sensibility. Byron accepted the machinelike universe but only as indifferent to man and then proceeded to defy it, concerned with the problem of the individual will. Thus the shift in emphasis in the literary viewpoint from the universe as a machine and society as an organization, to the individual soul. It amounts to a philosophical revolution. Because as Whitehead says, the idea of the universe as machine caused people to believe that man was something apart from nature, something introduced from the outside, and alien to all that he found. But the Romantic poet such as Wordsworth saw the world as an organism that includes everything from the inside: mountains, etc. The Romantic wiped out the dualism of outside nature and inside mind, between lakes and hills and say personal feelings. He saw that human feelings and inanimate objects are interdependent and develop together, that our traditional laws of cause and effect, our dualities of mind and matter or body and spirit, did not give us the true idea. He became a seer, he merged with his surroundings and furnished us with a new insight into nature. And a revolution in poetic imagery became a revolution in metaphysics.

But it was time for the pendulum to swing back again and the spread of Darwin's theory of evolution brought the mechanistic ideas back again. This time they came on the wings of the natural rather than the physical sciences. And the concept of man was a heroic figure climbing toward heaven, shrank to that of a weak helpless animal who was entirely in the hands of the forces of his environment. This form of classicism was known as naturalism and one of its chief exponents was Zola the French novelist to
whom writing a novel was like performing a laboratory experiment. That is you put your characters in a specific environment inoculated them with a virus of heredity, turned on the heat and described what happened. Man was no longer something outside the machine, he was simply the accidental result of a date that heredity had with environment.

It is a mistake to think that any of these movements are so neatly defined and limited as this. The movement of Naturalism did not rise directly from the evolutionary theory. Already the objectivity and precision of the old classicism had been creeping in as a check against the sentimentality and looseness that marked the old age of Romanticism. But this reaction was characterized by the kind of scientific thinking which corresponded to that of biological science. For example the Parnassian group of poets in France - Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, - considered poetry sufficient if it described as accurately and objectively as possible historical incidents or natural phenomena. They followed the first two of the three rules of science, to observe, to describe, and to classify. In England Browning and Tennyson were interested and concerned with the doctrines of evolution. In fact most of the Victorian novelists moved slowly in Zola’s direction without knowing it. And in the works of Flaubert and Ibsen we have the highest development of Naturalism.

As has been said before, these movements did not follow each other in any such orderly fashion. One set of ideas and methods is never superseded by another, but rather it is assimilated by it. For while Madame Bovary is an objective criticism of a case of Romantic personality, Flaubert’s prose hears, sees and feels with the sensitiveness of Romantic poetry and yet is disciplined by the machine-like technique of Naturalism.
And Ibsen was resolving all his life the conflict of the Romantic conception of one's duty to himself with that of his duty to society. But Naturalism finally laced itself too tightly into its technique. Readers grew a little weary of objective case studies. One French writer called another a "sonorous hardware man". The objective point of view was cramping the imagination and literature swung back toward the romantic pole with a movement known as Symbolism.

The movement started in France for the French are much more concerned with matters of technique than we are. They always want to know what they are doing and why they are doing it. Furthermore their rules of prosody have always been more rigid and logical than those of the English speaking writers. The things that Shakespeare and the Elizabethans did without theorizing, the medley of images, mixed metaphors, combination of passion and wit, of grand and prosaic manners, of material with spiritual—the norm of English poetry—were great innovations to the French. Strangely enough Edgar Allan Poe was one of the saints of Symbolism. Baudelaire found him a brother-in-poetry and introduced his writings to the French. It was Poe's critical work which laid down the first principles for the Symbolists, though later his literary technique became almost as important to the movement.

The symbolism of this swing to ultra-romanticism was not symbolism as we ordinarily think of it. The kind we know is conventional and fixed, such as the Cross for Christianity, the anchor for hope, the flag for the country etc. But the symbols of Symbolism were chosen arbitrarily by the poet himself to stand for his own specific ideas, in fact to act as a disguise for those ideas.

The poetry of Kubla Khan and Poe's poetry approach the Symbolist ideal in at least their musical expression and in their suggestiveness and indefiniteness.
Mallarmé the high priest of Symbolism used to light up his cigarette and say that he liked to put a little smoke between himself and the world. One of the very early French Symbolists was a poor fellow named Gérard de Nerval who suffered from fits of insanity and he habitually confused his feelings with the reality around him. He believed - as some modern philosophers do - that what we see about us is involved in some intimate fashion with what goes on in our minds. He outdoes Wordsworth with his "souls of lonely places" and "presences of nature in the sky."
Poe's use of the confusion of sense impression follows along here very nicely and fits into the Symbolist creed, his hearing the dark or seeing sounds, reminds one of the later extravaganzas of Rimbaud who knew the colors of the vowels. One of the principal aims of Symbolism was to approach the indefiniteness of music. This by confusing the imaginary world with the real and the perceptions of the different senses.

Later Mallarmé when he began to hold his Tuesday afternoon receptions to which came so many painters and writers, Oscar Wilde, James Whistler, André Gide, Paul Claudel (late ambassador to the U.S.) W.B.Yeats, said that he wanted "to give a sense more pure to the words of the tribe!" What he meant by this purer sense was a purer sense of the individual's sensations and emotions. And so pure did the sense become that sometimes the poet made poetry out of his private concerns that was intelligible to no one else. This was the swing of Symbolism away from mechanistic interpretation and a social conception of man to an intensely personal concern with the individual and his thoughts and feelings.

One of the aims of the Symbolist poet is to suggest rather than to state things. I quote from Edmund Wilson: Every feeling or sensation we have, every moment of consciousness, is different from every other; and it is, in consequence, impossible to render our sensations as we actually experience them through the
ordinary
conventional and universal language of literature. Each poet has
his unique personality; each of his moments has its special tone,
its special combination of elements. And it is the poet's task
to find, to invent, the special language which will alone be
capable of expressing his personality and feelings. Such a language
must make use of symbols: what is so special, so fleeting and so
vague cannot be conveyed by direct statement or description but
only by a succession of words, of images, which will serve to sug gest
it to the reader. The Symbolists themselves, full of the
idea of producing with poetry effects like those of music,
tended to think of these images as possessing an abstract value
like musical notes and chords. But the words of our speech are
not musical notation and what the symbols of Symbolism really
were, were metaphors detached from their subjects - for one
cannot, beyond a certain point, in poetry merely enjoy color and
sound for their own sake: one has to guess what the images are
applied to. And Symbolism may be defined as an attempt by carefully
studied means - a complicated association of ideas represented by a
medley of metaphors - to communicate unique personal feelings.

And quote
I have traced the history and development of Symbolism briefly and tried to show its relationship to the literary movements that preceded it. I have done this because it was the major literary influence of our times. It has not touched the native American literary tradition, or what I call the native American tradition of Philip Freneau, Emerson, Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and finally Frost and Sandburg. But it has opened up new channels of method and technique and the American writers who still look to Europe for styles of writing have sailed some pretty important boats down the stream. Of course it makes a neat circle to have the Symbolist ideas return to the United States from which it was sent abroad by Edgar Allan Poe in the last part of the 19th century. One of its most noted practitioners in France was an American, Stuart Merrill, who wrote in the French language and was a disciple of Mallarme. The French have to be given credit for making a system of it, the English and American writers took what they wanted of it and adapted it to their own style and method.

It would be interesting to trace the similarities in the methods of the Symbolists and the scientists, particularly the psychologists of the present. Freud and Adler in their studies of the subconscious and of dreams have been fishing in the same waters as their fellow fisherman the poets. They both, for example, use the associational method in working out their ideas instead of the more common logic of cause and effect. One Symbolist writer even went so far as to say that there was no such logic as that of cause and effect, that it was a false assumption, he said the only way of apprehending truth was thru the association of Symbols. He didn't see of course that he was simply substituting one system of order for another. Then the work of the modern physicists in trying to reduce matter to its simplest elements, the atom splitters,
and the discoveries of Eddington and Jeans, have certain valid parallels with the Symbolist endeavors to split off from the personality all the common human characteristics, all the obvious components of personality and to show as the reality only what was unique and individual. In other words they tried to make poetry out of their separateness rather than out of their universality. A movement like this is bound to accumulate its share of screw balls and crackpots and the Symbolist movement certainly had them. One of the most cockeyed of its minor groups was the Dadaists who tried to develop an anti-literary movement in literature. I don't know much about them except that they were the negation of artistic endeavor. They specialized in the irrational and exhibitionism. One of their boasted achievements was a free art exhibit held in a public urinal. At a meeting of Dada there speaker read a newspaper out loud but he could not be heard because an electric was ringing all the time. This was to prove that what he said was of no importance. Surrealism is another bloom on the Symbolist plant but you've all seen reproductions of the pictures Dali had at the New York World's Fair so I won't need to explain that.

The Symbolist movement paved the way for such prominent American writers as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Robinson Jeffers. Pound and Eliot rather early shook the native dust off their feet and went to kneel before their European idols. Jeffers has withdrawn almost entirely into a life of symbol out there in his stone tower on the rocky California coast. And it is this withdrawal from the life of their times, this escape into the life of an imagined heroic past, that shows them branded with the mark of the beast.
I haven't anything particularly new to say about these poets so will be as brief as possible. Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis but as soon as he was able he began his taken by journey back over the road his ancestors. He was educated at Harvard, later at the Sorbonne in France, and finally in England at Oxford. As someone said he was middle aged and he has been getting older ever since. In a way he represents the Puritan theocratic tradition gone to seed. He has retreated and retreated trying to find a secure position from which to observe his life times. In his poetry he is a master at describing the very subtle shades of thoughts and feelings of people who like himself are frustrated by their existence. No one that I know is his equal in a pitiless detailed analysis of a social stratum that is disintegrating. In method he borrows both traditions and bits of actual poetry from the past to weld them by means of descriptive association into his poems. His major work, the Waste Land, is a cross word puzzle of literary references, in fact the pages of explanatory notes almost equal the pages of poetry. With truly admirable ambition he patterned the poem on the Grail legend which is one of the variation of the solar myth. In structure he attempted to follow Dante's method in the Divine Comedy and write on several levels, that is to tell several stories at the same time. But symbolic method which he used served to obscure the meaning from most readers, and it seems to me that the poem as a whole does not fulfill his intentions. It resolves nothing, it gets thru to no fundamental reality, the meaning of the symbols seems not to go deeper than that of allegory. I think it is entirely successful, obscurity and all, in conveying a feeling of futility and frustration. But it is the author's feeling and not the futility of society which comes thru and that is what he did not mean to show. I'll read a paragraph of this assembly line job and pick out some of the parts which go to make it up.
Robinson Jeffers was born in 1887 in Pittsburgh, Pa. But he was educated mostly in California, I think he took a forestry degree there and worked with the state forestry department. However, after he decided to be a poet he retired to Carmel where, with the help of his wife and a stone tower, he has built up the cult of Jeffers. He has often been called the modern follower of Walt Whitman but it is a very superficial resemblance. Whitman was concerned with love and humanity, Jeffers with death. Whitman's vision took in the whole country, Jeffers peers thinly out over the Pacific. Only their style seems comparable, the long flowing line, the rounded phrase, like the words of the prophets in the Old Testament. No, Jeffers belongs distinctly to the Symbolist movement in spite of the apparent contradiction of his style. The cultivation of isolation, the concentration on the unique essence of the personality, the return to the past for themes and tradition, are in the best Symbolist manner. Briefly thesis Jeffers is that the country having been settled and the frontier gone, the tide of migration has reached the west coast and turned back on itself in confusion. He has gone to the old Greek literature for his themes of incest, murder and bestiality to represent this inversion of America. Since we have nowhere to go, we are turning in upon ourselves, I think this is in a general way what his characters symbolize. But he borrowed a method from the Greeks and forgot to borrow their insight. His symbols seem to exist for themselves alone and not to represent some deeper feeling of unity, or of consciousness of his place in infinity or of reconciling the claims of matter and spirit in a symbol that includes them both. His taste is for the exotic and barbarous, he has tried to take the pattern of dead civilization and force the United States to fit. I think he has written some fine poems, but he is in a European tradition and subject to
the currents of that tradition.

Well, what happened to the Symbolist movement anyway? Mostly it ran itself into unintelligibility and confusion. Poets like Yeats abandoned it because they could see it petering out into pretty thin air. Some of the lesser poets imitating Eliot wrote about futility until they believed in it themselves and then they quit writing because there is no use in doing something you believe to be futile. Eliot has kept on retreating until he finally back into the lap of the Catholic church where he sits in present grandeur, a Royalist in politics, a Conservative in literature, and a Catholic in religion - and it's not the Roman Catholic church either, it is some very high-church branch of the Anglican faith. Where he is roosting, there in his stone tower fitting together desperate animistic imagery.

That road that American poetry travelled for a while has become only a path. Except for the old fascist Ezra Pound, over there in Italy, who still lugs his interminable cantos up and down this path, I can think of no important American poet who is still travelling it. And there is substantial evidence to show that poetry in the United States is turning back in the main direction of travel. One of the first significant indications that we had was the poetry of Hart Crane. Here we get back into genuine American endeavor again. I'll admit that the evidence at first sight is not quite so reassuring as I have made out. Crane at the first reading is sometimes devilishly obscure, his manner looks little different on the surface than that of those doctors of dream, the Symbolists. But as soon as we penetrate a little into his poetry the difference becomes at once apparent. In his images and symbols, in his beliefs in poetry, Crane has gone back to the insight symbol as an expression of the forces and powers that men live by. He has abandoned Symbolism in the purely literary sense
of the word, and he has searched for the images that have some fundamental meaning in the life of man. His definition of poetry is the eternal articulation of man and I think that it is broad enough to fit this country. Crane even went farther than his predecessors, he went as far as all the accumulated wisdom before him had gone. I do not mean that literally, I mean only that he literally made the attempt, and failed as of course he could not help but do. But whether it was due to some break down of faith or some conviction of the inability of the Christian religion to cope with the times - and he had no background for paganism - Crane did not use the familiar story of the solar myth for his poetry and for his imagery. He tried to make a new myth. Imagine the colossal nerve of the man in trying to do by himself what only centuries of human forces had done before him. But he planned it out carefully and as his chief symbol he used Brooklyn bridge from which the poem took its title, The Bridge. Thru the conception of a bridge as a connecting link, as a span across a gulf or chasm to unite the elements separated by it, he hoped to create the union of heaven and earth, the flesh and the spirit, and to weld into one vision the diversities of America. It is a fine poem, one that I am sure will become an integral part of our literature. But Crane felt he had not achieved his purpose, perhaps he hadn't resolved the personal conflicts that were forever tearing him apart. Anyway the sense of his failure so oppressed him that one fine summer night he walked off the stern of the ship which was taking him from Havana to New York and disappeared into the Gulf stream. I want to read you part of a letter he sent to Otto Kahn when he was planning the Bridge:
The contemporary verse that amounts to anything has pretty largely swung back into the main American tradition. The poets have wakened out of the vague dream world of symbolism with sharp yelps of pain and surprise. They have stumbled out of their ivory towers to find a wilderness of social and economic weeds growing up around them. They were for the most part playing at a game anyway. It was a literary style that belongs as much to Europe as the counter-revolutionary spirit of nazism and the only American who did important work showing its influence were the everish expatriates like Pound and Eliot who still look for the ghosts that they think hang around the great traditions of the past.

No, the present day poetry in our country takes nourishment right out of the native soil. It has gone back to direct statement, to the device of catalogues of things which Whitman used so much, to various kinds of repetition that serve as a sort of chorus. Some of the poets call it the documentary method, this naming of things, this classification of objects of sense. They are hungry again for the concrete image and the experience with their immediate world. What is new in these poems is the tone, the awareness of social dislocation. Here again the poet is the seer looking into the heart of reality to see things as they really are. In this verse for the first time in American literature we get the snarl and the curse of the disenfranchised, the bitter tears of the disfranchised, the resentment of the human spirit toward being made a machine, toward counting as nothing but a unit in an assembly line. And all the while the poet's accusing finger is levelled at us, his fellow Americans, and he chants in a low rapid voice his list of indictments. Listen to this characteristic poem by Kenneth Rexing. It is not pleasant, it is not soothing, it does not pose some unique flowering of personality in an ingenious riddle.
No, it is harsh and violent, it is sardonic whenever the tempo drops to a prose level. By implication it keeps warning us of the repressed violence of which it is only a symbol, a true symbol, an insight symbol. I don't say it is good poetry, I know a lot of it is no better than a sort of lyric propaganda. But I do say that we had better listen to it. That a poet is, after all, something of a seer and a prophet. And he is calling our attention in an unmistakable manner to the evils and the dangers of our civilization. No calling of names, no red-baiting or heresy hunting, will stop his voice nor, as Omar Khayam said, wash out a word of it. Here is Vearing's poem, it is called Dirge. I want you to notice that there is no sense of futility in it, no incapacity to decide, no delicate balancing of boredoms. Neither does it have the images of negation and denial which I call the death-images which appear in so much of the contemporary English verse. No, this is the hard tone of an angry man who has been pushed around and who can and is going to do something about. Something of the same tone that Philip Freneau used in his poems during the Revolutionary period 169 years ago. I want to read you a sample of recent poetry that has this social consciousness. Since we have had, at least I have, pretty heavy going part of the time. I'm going to read from one of the lighter poets. This is I See What I Paint by E.B. White, who by the way says that writing light verse is very heavy work indeed, that he gets just as exhausted as the major poets.
Unreal City

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
I had not death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: Stetson!

You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,

Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!

You! hypocrite lecteur!