The Critic's Alchemy A STUDY OF

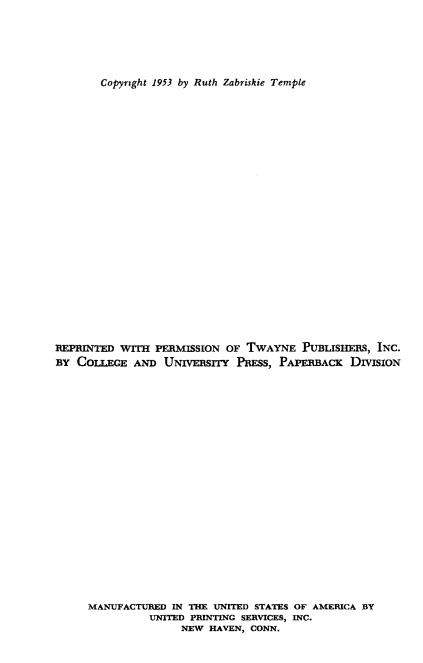
THE INTRODUCTION OF FRENCH SYMBOLISM INTO ENGLAND

RUTH ZABRISKIE TEMPLE



COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven, Connecticut



The Critic's Alchemy A STUDY OF

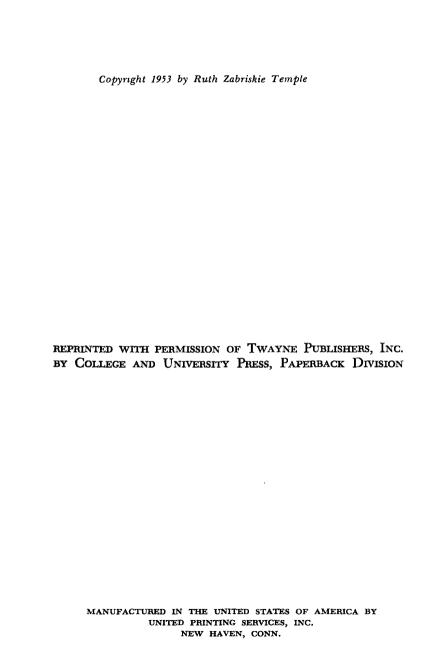
THE INTRODUCTION OF FRENCH SYMBOLISM INTO ENGLAND

RUTH ZABRISKIE TEMPLE



COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven, Connecticut



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their kind permission to quote from books to which they control the rights, I am indebted to these persons and publishers:

to Samuel C. Chew for Swinburne (Boston, Little Brown, 1929);

to George Dillon and to Brandt and Brandt for Baudelaire, Flowers of Evil, translated by George Dillon and Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York, Harper and Brothers, [c. 1936]);

to William Heinemann Limited for Edmund Gosse, Books on the Table (London, Heinemann, 1921), French Profiles (London, Heinemann, 1905), Leaves and Fruit (London, Heinemann, 1927), Questions at Issue (London, Heinemann, 1893); A. C. Swinburne, Complete Works, Bonchurch Edition (London, Heinemann, 1926), Essays and Studies (London, Chatto and Windus, 1875); Arthur Symons, Knave of Hearts (London, Heinemann, 1913), Poems (London, Heinemann, 1902), Silhouettes (London, Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892), The Symbolist Movement in Literature (London, Heinemann, 1899 and 1908), Baudelaire, Prose and Poetry, translated by Symons (New York, Boni, 1926);

to John Lane The Bodley Head Limited for John Gray, Silverpoints (London, Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1893);

to The Macmillan Company of New York for Matthew Arnold, The Letters of Matthew Arnold, edited by G. W. E. Russell (New York, Macmillan, 1896), On the Study of Celtic Literature (New York, Macmillan, 1913), Mixed Essays (New York, Macmillan, 1904);

to C. D. Medley, literary executor, for the works of George Moore;

to New Directions (333 Sixth Avenue, New York City) for Stéphane Mallarmé: Poems, translated by Roger Fry (copyright 1951 by New Directions);

to Charles Scribner's Sons for George Santayana, *Poems* (New York, Scribner's Sons, 1923);

to Mrs. W. B. Yeats, to A. P. Watt and Son and to The Macmillan Company of New York for Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London, Macmillan, 1927).

I wish to thank the Metropolitan Museum in New York City for its kind permission to reproduce the Manet portrait of George Moore and the Trustees of the Tate Gallery in London for their kind permission to reproduce the Blanche portrait of Arthur Symons. I wish especially to thank Sir Max Beerbohm for his gracious permission to reproduce his drawing of Matthew Arnold.



PREFACE

It is a pleasure to pay a long-standing debt of gratitude to Ernest Hunter Wright for generous and helpful counsel during many years, and to Emery Neff for his sustained and patient guidance of this book and of an earlier, as it were, preliminary essay, on Aldous Huxley and French literature. I am grateful to William York Tindall and Justin O'Brien, with whom I discussed the persons and books in the following pages and who out of the fullness of their knowledge of forces in modern British and French literature have preserved me from certain egregious errors. I am indebted to Lionel Trilling and George Parks for valuable criticism on an early draft of the manuscript, and to Susanne Nobbe for useful suggestions on the all but final version.

I am glad to have this opportunity to thank earlier teachers who, although they do not know it, helped to shape this book: Jeannette Marks, whose superb course in modern British poetry first provoked my interest in this period; Erika von Erhardt, who painstakingly guided my first steps in comparative literature; and Margaret Gilman, whose learned seminar in Baudelaire was the efficient cause of this study. To my friend Dorothy Walsh, I am indebted for criticism—that of a professional philosopher—of more than one draft of the manuscript. And I wish to thank for their generous help in the reading of proof and the typing of manuscript, my friends and former colleagues: Helen Corsa, Gertrude King Hoey, Geneva Sayre and Elinor Ware.

Without the facilities so kindly put at my disposition by the librarians of Wells College and Russell Sage College during several summers I should have been even longer at this task. And it could not, of course, have been done at all without the opportunity to use the rich resources of the British Museum, the Bibliothèque Nationale, the New York Public Library and the

library of Columbia University. To the authorities of all these I

wish to record my thanks.

Finally, I wish to express a deep and lasting gratitude to my mother, whose patient forbearance and practical help through many years have facilitated my work, and to my father, who early and always encouraged me in the study and the love of humane letters.

New York City September, 1951 RUTH ZABRISKIE TEMPLE



CONTENTS

Preface	
The Alchemy of the Word	13
PART ONE. Matthew Arnold	
I. THE STRAYED REVELLER	23
II. THE SECOND BEST	31
III. THE BETTER PART	49
PART TWO. Algernon Charles Swinburne	
I. NOTES OF AN IMPORTANT POET ON IMPORTANT POETS	77
II. SWEET SINGERS OF AN ELDER DAY	93
III. THE NOBLE ART OF PRAISING	99
IV. POETE IMPRESSIONNISTE	109
PART THREE. Arthur Symons	
I. IN THAT YOUNG PARIS WHERE I LIVED AT EASE	121
II. TOWARD A VERBAL ALCHEMY	127
III. THE CRITIC AS TRANSLATOR	135
IV. THE SYMBOLIST MOVEMENT	153
V. LA FORME BANALE DE L'ORIGINALITE	175
PART FOUR. Sir Edmund Gosse	
I. UP THE LADDER	185
II. COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FOR THE GENERAL	193
III. ENAMEL AND GELATIN	205
IV. AN ATTENDANT LORD	219
PART FIVE. George Moore	
I. AMICO MOORINI, BOSWELL OF THE NOUVELLE ATHENES	231
II. GEORGE MOORE, DISCIPLE	243
III. THE INTENT OF THE CRITIC	255

	267
	273
	304
Cythère"	322
	326
	327
	329
	331
	FACING PAGE
Max Beerbohm	48
J. A. M. Whistler	112
JE. Blanche	176
Edouard Manet	232
	J. A. M. Whistler JE. Blanche

THE ALCHEMY OF THE WORD

". . . the art for art theory may or may not give us better art; it will assuredly give us better criticism and better appreciation."

George Saintsbury (1875)

". . . the business of the literary critic is exclusively with an esthetic criticism."

John Crowe Ransom (1941)

FRENCH POETRY HAS NOT been generally liked in England. Greek and Latin poetry have been extolled, German and Italian poetry have had their warm admirers, but for a variety of reasons and for many centuries English critics have deplored the poetry of their neighbors across the Channel. To the ordinary Englishman, from the Renaissance on, the alexandrine has seemed monotonous, the French language too weak for poetic intensity, French metaphors so abstract as to convict French poets of inadequate imagination. The chorus of denunciation reached its height with the Romantics. Then Hazlitt, inventing a monologue for Coleridge, makes the great talker say: "French poetry is just like chopped off logic; nothing comes of it. . . . It is all patchwork, all sharp points and angles, all superficial." This is what both Coleridge and Hazlitt believed about French poetry. Yet Symbolism, the great movement in modern poetry, had its origin in France. And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.

For Symbolism exalts just that concept of the poem which the English critic and poet have thought peculiarly their own. Symbolism is not easy to define—no easier than Romanticism, of which, indeed, it is the child. As Romanticism, being complex, multitudinous, even contradictory, is better described than de-

fined, and best described by the fragmentary professions of Romantics-the renascence of Wonder, Strangeness allied to beauty-so Symbolism yields something of its essence in the phrases of its practitioners: evocative sorcery, suggestive magic, pure poetry, the alchemy of the word. Fundamental to its aesthetic is the notion of an alchemical or magic transformation. The commonplace materials of the ordinary world-the objects of sensory experience—are transmuted in the poet's vision, for the poet is the "parfait magicien ès lettres," and language itself, the vehicle of everyday communication, takes on as the poet's medium a new dimension, becomes opaque, is translated into incantation, "those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms which are the embodiment of the imagination. ..." Thus, Yeats tells us, the poet makes the word his instrument, and by the poet's word the world itself is transformed. "Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself, for does not 'the eye altering alter all'." So the poem is a miracle, and Valéry, who calls it that, explains:

And when I say *miraculous* I use the word in the sense we give to it when we think of the spells and wonders of ancient magic. It should never be forgotten that the poetic form has been enlisted, down the ages, in the service of enchantment. Those who gave themselves up to the strange activities of magic must have believed in the power of the word. . . .²

Baudelaire in the mid-nineteenth century was the first master of these mysteries. After him, adopting and modifying his theory and sometimes evolving more hermetic techniques, came Verlaine, Rimbaud, Laforgue, and Mallarmé. These were the poets of the French Decadence. In France of the twentieth century they have their great disciples, Claudel and Valéry, and so inescapable has been their influence that it was possible in a recent survey of French poetry for the author to group all the living poets as derivatives of either Rimbaud or Mallarmé. Moreover—and here is the novelty—their names are well known in England and even on "the cloudy and poetical side of the Channel" they have their devotees. "With Baudelaire," writes Valéry, "French poetry at length passes beyond our frontiers.

It is read throughout the world; it takes its place as the characteristic poetry of modernity; it encourages imitation, it enriches countless minds."³

To discover how and when this transformation came about in England we must turn to a period in English letters unhonored though by no means unsung, the Decadence. It has been fashionable to convict this period of futility and triviality, to dismiss it as the producer of nothing more distinguished than the Tragic Generation. The fashionable estimate is, I think, in need of re-examination. We have come to take for granted much that the Tragic Generation did for us, and, forgetting our indebtedness, we patronize our creditors. The British symbolist poets, however, have not been unmindful of their debt. Yeats tells us that he wrote down the memories he has called The Trembling of the Veil "... that young men to whom recent events are often more obscure than those long past, may learn what debts they owe and to what creditor." Notable among his own creditors is Arthur Symons. During the years when both young men lived in the Temple, Yeats, who had less French than Symons, came to know Mallarmé's poems and aesthetic theory through conversations with his friend, just then absorbed in the materials of his book The Symbolist Movement in Literature. And to this crucial book T. S. Eliot also has professed indebtedness.

I myself owe Mr. Symons a great debt. But for reading his book I should not, in the year 1908, have heard of Laforgue and Rimbaud; I should probably not have begun to read Verlaine, and but for reading Verlaine, I should not have heard of Corbière. So the Symons book is one of those which have affected the course of my life.*

This is an admirable execution of literary justice. But the tale is not complete.

"Good art," Ezra Pound says, "cannot possibly be palatable all at once." If the Decadence helped to shape the genius of the two greatest modern British poets, it also helped to prepare their audience. And this it did by in some sense domesticating French symbolist poetry in England. In the nineties, literary England enjoyed a visitation of what Baudelaire called the divine grace of cosmopolitanism. Verlaine and Mallarmé pub-