

# The Critic's Alchemy

A STUDY OF

THE INTRODUCTION OF FRENCH SYMBOLISM INTO ENGLAND

RUTH ZABRISKIE TEMPLE



COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESS  
New Haven, Connecticut

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## PREFACE

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*New York City*  
*September, 1951*

RUTH ZABRISKIE TEMPLE





## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	
<i>The Alchemy of the Word</i>	13
<b>PART ONE. <i>Matthew Arnold</i></b>	
I. THE STRAYED REVELLER	23
II. THE SECOND BEST	31
III. THE BETTER PART	49
<b>PART TWO. <i>Algernon Charles Swinburne</i></b>	
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
<b>PART THREE. <i>Arthur Symons</i></b>	
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
<b>PART FOUR. <i>Sir Edmund Gosse</i></b>	
I. UP THE LADDER	185
II. COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FOR THE GENERAL	193
III. ENAMEL AND GELATIN	205
IV. AN ATTENDANT LORD	219
<b>PART FIVE. <i>George Moore</i></b>	
I. AMICO MOORINI, BOSWELL OF THE NOUVELLE ATHENES	231
II. GEORGE MOORE, DISCIPLE	243
III. THE INTENT OF THE CRITIC	255

<b>IV. APPRAISAL</b>	<b>267</b>
<i>Notes</i>	273
<i>Bibliography</i>	304
<i>Appendix A "Voyage à Cythère"</i>	322
<i>Appendix B "Clair de lune"</i>	326
<i>Appendix C "Cortège"</i>	327
<i>Appendix D "Spleen"</i>	329
<i>Index</i>	331

<b>ILLUSTRATIONS</b>	<b>FACING PAGE</b>
"Mr. Matthew Arnold."	Max Beerbohm 48
Stéphane Mallarmé	J. A. M. Whistler 112
Arthur Symons	J.-E. Blanche 176
George Moore	Edouard Manet 232

# 原书缺页

原书缺页

原书缺页

原书缺页



## 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-

finer, and best described by the fragmentary professions of Romantics—the renaissance 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'?"<sup>1</sup> 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. . . .<sup>2</sup>

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."<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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-