

Late Symbolism in Hungarian and Austrian Literature

MIKLÓS SZABOLCSI

(ELTE XX. századi magyar irodalom tanszéke, Budapest, Pf. 107, H-1364)

1. In addition to late realism, the other determinative aspiration of the end of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century is what we might term *late Symbolism*. As is known, the French and Belgian Symbolist group itself was relatively shortlived. It operated between 1885 and 1895, as a loose friendly and artistic society. Its characteristic representatives at that time were Albert Samain, Henri Régner, Jean Moréas, or the father of free verse, Gustave Kahn, Teodor de Wyzewa, a follower of Wagner, and the first user of the interior monologue, Eduard Dujardin. But the earlier Paul Verlaine, A. Rimbaud, Tristan Corbière, or later André Gide as well could also be regarded as Symbolists in the wider sense, and they began to be regarded as such too. The irradiation of Symbolism, its real or imagined impact was deeper than that; and here I refer to the "third" Symbolism interpretation of R. Wellek's well-known study; it seems to have chimed in with the general feeling and attitude to life of the artists of the age. Its aesthetics and thought-world provided an opportunity and a pretext for the formulation of the artistic behaviour and world-image of the early part of the century. To quest, behind the surface of reality, for an abstract reality; to reveal its secret laws; to communicate with this reality, if possible, not in a rational, but in an intuitive manner; to place the dream at the centre, to live in a waking dream, as it were; — to discover the *signs* by which the hidden reality can be summarized and named; — to quest for, and, if need be, to create, such signs, rooted in the primal, the people, and history, — that is Symbolism's welcome armoury, possible of further development. And to wrap the work itself — mainly the poem — in some kind of veil, mystery and fragrance, to lend the poem a peculiar, blurred music, — to place it in the midst of a historical scenery, to embed it in a fabric of signs, — all that is an imitable, tempting and perfectible teaching. As for the artist himself, he becomes an eccentric, developing an extraordinary lifestyle, — in protest against the monotony and greyness of everyday life. Therefore, in what follows, we must, in fact, talk about this perfected, secondary late Symbolism, rather than the original Symbolism, if we are looking for a basis of comparison.

The resources of late Symbolism became particularly popular in the German-language literatures, primarily with Austrian writers. It is as though this poetic technique and style of vision are especially suited for evoking the surface and dark depths of the world, consisting of scenery and scenes, that the Vienna of the end of the century represented. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Leopold von Andrian-Werburg, then R. M. Rilke and later Georg Trakl signal this special attraction. Rainer Maria Rilke, of course, grows far beyond late Symbolism, and his poetry is a peculiarly powerful summary, possessed of the density of a sign, of the 20th-century artist's and intellectual's life. Yet, its departure and roots hold in themselves late Symbolism and the end of the century; the mysterious reality to be unravelled, the present, with its many roots, and the cult of impeccable beauty, detached from everyday life. At the same time, in creating his work, he quests for a simple and profound essence behind sensuous beauty, the glittering, rich surface and picturesque scenery of the world.

In the Latin American, as well as the East Central European, literatures Symbolism — principally in its more general form — played a veritably liberating role: it was an instrument in the battle against the religious-conservative world-picture and narrow national isolation. That is how it could happen that, on the one hand, it tended to ally itself with, and further the cause of, progressive, democratic, and indeed, socialist political aspirations; while, on the other hand, it became national, as it were, attaching itself to popular tradition. Actually, in the East Central European literatures, it is not correct to use the terms *late* realism and late Symbolism; for, in certain literatures of East Central Europe, we can observe the phenomenon of "simultaneous arrival"; that is to say, as they emerged later from church culture or because national Romanticism lasted longer, the waves of naturalism, Symbolism, late realism, and indeed of the early avant-garde coincided, so that they appeared simultaneously. In that case, as A. Flaker proposes, it may be justified to call this complex phenomenon *modernism*. Incidentally, modernism, as a universal world-literary period indicator, however many its advocates, cannot, in my opinion, be accepted; it is empty, devoid of contents.

In the East Central European literatures it was, indeed, the turn of the century that brought the first Symbolist breakthrough (in Russian and Czech literature, in the last decade of the 19th century; with Croatian and Slovenian Moderna, a decade later; with the Hungarian Ady and the two "Holnap" anthologies and the lonely figure of the Slovak Krasko, in the first two decades of the 20th century). In these literatures, that is the time from which we must date the supposedly final break with the old national school and the development of the modern artistic attitude, which is attended by a shouldering of the vital problems of the nation and the projection of the fears of individual existence into the nation, — by symbolistic means, instead of the earlier allegori-

cal ones. This complex East Central European modernity is a far-reaching and most powerful literary current generally creating a great public response and also having an impact on the political sphere.

Connected with all this is the national-historical essence — first and foremost, the new-type view of the condition of being a Slav, but also of “Hungarian-ness” and “Romanian-ness”: (e.g. the raising by the Croatian Miroslav Krleža of “What is a Croatian?”; Endre Ady’s question “What is man worth if he is a Magyar?”; Alexander Blok’s vision of the Scythians). Thereafter, the question of “The Slavs and Europe” is to reverberate for decades, in writers and thinkers, and also among the non-Slavic peoples.

Special mention must be made of a much debated literary-artistic phenomenon complex, usually summed up under the appellation “Viennese literature”. After 1890, there blossomed in Vienna a literature which, peculiar in its flavour, had an impact that was felt throughout the whole of East Central Europe. That blossoming was itself part of the intellectual ferment and the liberation of talents and currents which, in philosophy, psychology, architecture, and painting, reached its climax in the work of Ernst Mach, Sigmund Freud, Julius Wagner Jauregg, Adolf Loos, Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, and later — perhaps summarizing all this — in music, in the work of Arnold Schönberg and Alban Berg. In literature, the group is hallmarked by the names of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, and the characteristic writers of the Viennese coffee-house, Peter Altenberg and Hermann Bahr. They certainly convey with sensitivity and in a nuanced fashion end-of-century Vienna’s atmosphere, fraught with many hidden tensions and foreshadowing future perils, — the unresolved problems and frustration lying behind the satisfied and sparkling, overripe daily routine and the enjoyment of life, — above all, the recently developed and already fugitive life of the upper middle class of Jewish origin. Arthur Schnitzler is a great artist of capturing the surface and latent lie of love and sexual life, the roles played in end-of-century society. His devices are inspired by the regular realism of the end of the century; his brilliant stage technique, along with the *fin de siècle* French dramatists, likewise survives to this day, traceably to Edward Albee. The art of Hugo von Hofmannsthal — instinct with the sensitivity of the end of the century, and yet strict and disciplined, tending towards Neoclassicism — makes its statement through the transmission of historical themes, masks and parables; his artist-master attitude and his classicizing of himself, similarly to those of Stefan George, are an expression of the Artist-Imago, caused to grow large, of the end of the century. He is the one who employs with the greatest precision the devices of late Symbolism, in their all but overripe splendour, with perfection and brilliance, to convey the solitude of landscapes and soul: in his dramas — usually historical parables in a medieval novella milieu — he reflects the dreamlike quality of the world, the passage of time, the great sense

of relativity. The operas of Richard Strauss, to which he himself wrote the librettos, concentrate at the highest level the beauty and artificiality of style: they are full of inverted-comma speech, allegories within allegories, plays within plays, erudite and sophisticated postures; they are a secondary thing of the first order.

For Central Europe, this Viennese literature represents an important source of influence, and it is an important witness to and document of an old world of appearances and the impending new cataclysm, the last great period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Yet, from a world-literary standpoint, its importance lies elsewhere — indeed, primarily in the fact that it is part of one of the century's most important phenomena, i.e. the revolt against language, the linguistic revolution.

2. Does this late Symbolist aspiration appear in Hungarian literature?

In any case, we must emphasize that what we are dealing with is not merely a one-sided, one-way influence — that adherence to particular trends and the development of particular manners involve a plurality of triggers, effects, and influences: thus, for instance, the aspirations of end-of-century Hungarian literature can be understood simultaneously from the aspirations of French, non-Austrian German, and sometimes Italian literature — and, more rarely, from those of English literature. The inspiration of end-of-century Austrian literature too fits into this complex of inspirations.

A few examples: the technique, toposes and spirit of late Symbolism are most evident in the strain that I, for my part, would call *the lyrical poetry of "A Hét"*. I am aware that this is a term not used hitherto in Hungarian literary history; still, I feel that, as an antecedent to the literary periodical "Nyugat", and subsequently parallel with "Nyugat", there emerged quite a distinctive voice, manner, form and idiom; the poetry of the more significant and also the lesser creative talents adopt the manner of European late Symbolism. We get here parks and jewels, ballrooms and paintings: the disembodied sorrow and nostalgia of the soul, a series of symbols wrapped up in moods. To substantiate that, let us see a few texts from a single half-year period, from the numbers of "A Hét".

Sándor Forbáth's poem is a peculiar blend of popular-national traditional and late Symbolist elements. A blurred, abstract landscape, similes merging into one another, an obscure symbolism, punch lines pregnant with meaning — all this, at the level of the average, have ossified into convention.

Serenade

Elém jön majd a csöndes este,
Mire magamban hazaérek.
Fehérek lesznek már a házak
És a kertek is mind fehérek.

Nyájas fény ül az ablakokban
 S a rózsák is virrasztva várnak;
 Zokog a szél az aloék közt,
 A lelke fáj az éjszakának.

Lányait szólítja az erdő
 S halkan felelnék rá a rétek . . .
 — Oly messze vagy, oly messze tőlem,
 Mint egy imádság. Mint egy vétek.

*Forbáth Sándor*¹

Serenade

The tranquil evening will come to meet me
 By the time I reach home by myself.
 The houses will already be white
 And the gardens too are all white.

A gentle light sits in the windows
 And, keeping vigil, the roses are waiting too;
 The wind sobs among the aloes,
 . . . The soul of the night aches.

The forest calls its daughters
 And the fields answer softly . . .
 — You are as far away, as far away from me
 As a prayer. As a sin.

*Sándor Forbáth**

Simon Kemény's poem could almost be an inventory of the post-Symbolist stock in trade. It is an object-type element running right through the entire text that becomes a symbol and changes its shape, assuming a plurality of meanings and, at the same time, becoming largely divested of meaning. The adjectives and clusters of adjectives (of the type "... a woman, now gone, of long ago") suggest this mysterious and dim world — a world that produces a distance. On the whole, it is a composition which, though strong in certain stanzas, is, especially in its ending, extremely clumsy.

Balkon

Rokkant, züllött a régi kastély.
 Agyonpörkölte száz nyár hője,
 Áztatta száz ősz hús esője
 És fagyasztotta a száz hideg tél.

A szél benyargal minden ajtón,
 Tört ablakszamáin keresztül
 Fúj holt levelet seregestül,
 De ép, egész a régi balkon.

Épségben áll, — ó drága rejtély —
 Karsún, barokk-stílusban, fehérén,
 Búsan, rejtelmesen, kevélyen,
 Az édes, csipkés, régi erkély.

¹ A Hét, 1912. jan. 28. 55.

* The original poems are rhymed.

A meddő gaz-vert kertre néz le,
 A nap titkán merengve este,
 Nappal az éj nyitják keresve:
 Szép, nagy múltjától megigézve.

Egy régi, vélt asszonyra érez,
 Ki már fehér csont barna földben,
 Ki vadvirág már síri zöldben.
 S kinek szíve még egyre vérez.

*Kemény Simon*²

The Balcony

The old castle is dilapidated and decadent,
 Scorched to death by the heat of a hundred summers,
 Soaked by the cool rain of a hundred autumns
 And frozen by a hundred cold winters.

The wind rushes in through every door.
 Through its broken window-eyes
 It drives hosts of dead leaves,
 But the old balcony is intact and whole.

It stands intact, — oh dear mystery —
 Slender, in Baroque style, white,
 Mourful, mysterious, haughty,
 The sweet, serrated, old balcony.

It looks on the barren weed-grown garden,
 Musing, in the evening, on the secret of the sun,
 Trying, by day, to fathom the night:
 Bewitched by its beautiful, great past.

It remembers a woman, now gone, of long ago,
 Who is now white bones in brown earth,
 Who is now a wild flower in the green of the grave,
 And whose heart still keeps bleeding.

Simon Kemény

But in this same half-year's volume we can read poems — in fact, several poems — by Gyula Juhász and Dezső Kosztolányi in which this post-Symbolist store of devices — through the filter, of course, of a strong talent and a peculiar temperament — is clearly discernible. The vaguely outlined simile, the adjectives characteristic of Symbolism are there in the poem "I am going to my father. . .", and still more in Kosztolányi's well-known "Honey", which, with consummate skill and verse culture, strains almost to the limit and drains of all content the initial symbol, while at the same time juggling with spectacular mastery the adjectives of Symbolism ("and it is wise and deep and laden with a hundred secrets") or the routine use of "anguish" and "tears" and "aching".

² A Hét 1912. II. 82.

Méz

A fájdalomam oly érett, mint a méz már.
 És bölcs és mély és terhes száz titokkal
 És minden kincseket magába foglal
 És hallgat és vár, sehovase néz már.
 Virágtalan bánat. De ez: a mindenem.
 Méz, tiszta méz, méz, mennyei ital,
 Több mint a föld tűnő virágaival,
 Ambrózia, koldusok kincse, kincsem.
 Kincs, drága kincs, amit imád a hívő,
 Minden ezukrot magába édesítő.
 Én csak röptültem és ezt szüreteltem
 Kalászos rónán és szőlős hegyekben,
 Ezt szüreteltem, mert én csak röptültem,
 És életem nehéz mézzé köptültem,
 Bánattá, jajjá, könnyé, tiszta mézzé,
 Egy csonk világában egy fájó egésszé.
 Ó lankák, ó virágok messze tája,
 Ti telt gyümölcsök korhadt rudakon,
 S ó, könny, te élet mély esszenciája,
 Megölt virágok méze, fájdalom.

Kosztolányi Dezső³

Honey

My pain is as mature now as honey.
 And it is wise and deep and laden with a hundred secrets,
 And it encompasses all treasures
 And it is silent and waits, not looking anywhere now.
 It is a sorrow without blossom. Yet, this is my all.
 It is honey, pure honey, honey, a heavenly potion,
 It is more than the earth with its ephemeral flowers,
 It is ambrosia, a treasure of beggars, my treasure.
 It is a treasure, a precious treasure, worshipped by the believer,
 One that holds the sweetness of all sugar.
 I was just flying and this is what I harvested
 On plains rich with ears and hillsides full of vineyards,
 This is what I have harvested, because I was only flying,
 Churning my life into thick honey,
 Into sorrow, anguish, tears, pure honey,
 In a broken world into an aching whole.
 Oh gentle slopes, oh far-off countryside of flowers,
 You full fruit on rotten poles,
 And oh, tears, you deep essence of life,
 Honey of murdered flowers, pain.

Dezső Kosztolányi

It is apparent that this manner, one of the Hungarian manifestations of late Symbolism, is present up to Gyula Juhász and Dezső Kosztolányi.

But, in my opinion, we could mention in the same way a late Symbolist manner in prose, which is characterized by similar peculiarities, and whose versions could be traced, for example, from Gyula Szini to Viktor Cholnoky. Yet, instead of embarking on a detailed exposition of that, I should like to

³ A Hét, 1912. jún. 347.

mention my opinion that two great writer personalities of the period are also linked by many strands to this late Symbolist lineage and thus, indirectly and directly, to Austrian Symbolism as well. One of them is Milán Füst. I know that some regard him as an objective lyricist, associating him more with Eliot, while others seem to detect in him expressly avantgarde features. My perception, however, is that he, by virtue of his settings, his metaphysical yearning, and disembodied melancholy, is most intimately related to European and, more specifically, to Austrian late Symbolism. In his social and human situation too he tends to be characterized by an affinity with a Hofmannsthal; while his settings likewise bring him near the former, his image technique contains many features that are reminiscent of Trakl.

I, for one, feel that Gyula Krúdy, at least with certain features of his, likewise belongs, in many respects, to this category: the latest work to throw light on the question of Krúdy and the Monarchy has been an excellent new book by László Fülöp.

Let me also refer to the fact that the end-of-century turn of phrase likewise has its Hungarian equivalent. Elsewhere I have already had the opportunity of expounding in much greater detail why I feel that this has Frigyes Karinthy as its representative; and in many respects I feel him to be the nearest relative of Austrian literature. And his work and the fragmentedness of his work draw him, in many respects, into kinship with Peter Altenberg, whom, incidentally, he read and was fond of. A deeper examination of that kinship is yet to be carried out.

Finally, it is almost common knowledge, but still we should mention that the relationship between Symbolism and folklore appears in Hungarian literature with fairly great force. Naturally, I am thinking of Béla Balázs; his aspirations, for all their deliberateness and intensity, can claim the unquestionable achievement of a Symbolist poetry modelled with Hungarian verse forms and Hungarian folk motifs as its base. Despite the later failures of his œuvre, the fact remains that, even if for a very short time, he did discover a European voice, a solution valid in the long term. Here I did not wish to take sides in the debate on which world-literary current "Nyugat", in its entirety, can be linked to. It is sufficient to remind the reader how much the late Symbolist modern convention is to be felt in the "common discourse", in the second and third ranks. However, the historian of literature and art knows that it is precisely this common discourse that the voice of the greatest creative talents grows out of: and as for Mozart the Viennese songs of the late 18th century and the productions of countless epigon composers were the hinterland from which his music blazed its brilliant trail, even so do the lyric compositions of Ady and Babits and Kosztolányi's mature poetry grow out of the second rank of Hungarian Symbolist poetry.

Translated by Bálint Sebestyén.