1 INTRODUCTION

When Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote in 1893 that the very notion of "modernism" was the concurrent conflict between two opposite responses to hectic fin de siècle existence, he might have been speaking for the Symbolists. "Today, two things seem to be modern: the analysis of life and the flight from life. . . . Reflection or fantasy, mirror image or dream image."[1] Symbolism was precisely such a bifurcated art: intending to "make visible the invisible," Symbolists sought an art that could imagine and reflect the ideas and ideals of a "higher" world, all expressed through images of the earthly world. Addressing the inner being, it nonetheless used external, real scenes and objects as expressors. It is therefore in their blending of Hofmannsthal's two impulses that the Symbolists are most modern. While working and living in cities that seemed to be robbing them of their innermost being, they sought an art that could not only speak to their souls, but also help to save them. While undergoing the most traumatic transitions of new technological, spatial, and social changes of their own real life, they found solace – but not total escape – in fantasy and dream.

This is not a traditional view of Symbolism. From the time of Baudelaire's *Correspondences,*[2] the Symbolists have been perceived as those who studied nature but not humanity, who traversed forests and the realm of the imagination but not the city. Such escapism is certainly one aspect of the Symbolists' response to society, but it was not (as is commonly thought) so much a flight into fancy as a deliberate search for an alternative to the European urban life that they were living. Symbolism as a movement in the visual arts was short-lived, lasting only from about 1885 until 1905, at which time many of its ideas and approaches morphed into the more strident and stylistically radical art of Expressionism. As the European fin de siècle generation, the Symbolists were born into the extraordinary conditions of the metropolitan expansion of the 1880s and 1890s. They were the first artists, therefore, to respond to such nearly overwhelming changes in society as urban population explosion, fully institutionalized capital exchange, shifting class and gender relationships, and technological developments, as well as the rebuilding and reordering of the city itself. They were subject to new fears, often of each other and of their own environment. Daily subjected to a bombardment of sensory assaults, they walked the boulevards laced with carriage and tram traffic, crowds, and overlapping signs and signage, all garishly bathed at night in the glare of gas or electric street lights. They indulged in gambling, traveled by train, and either braved the crowded, confusing

streets or else slunk, agoraphobically, away from them. It was not a coincidence that the most prolific and well-known Symbolists were male: they came of age just as Victorian patriarchal assumptions were, perplexingly, being both questioned and reinforced. While they experimented with the new "free love" as well as the "New Woman," they themselves were accused of being decadent and effeminate. Perceiving themselves to be denied or deterred from the solace of traditional church or conventional family, they turned to their art as not only a salve for themselves but as a salvation for others in this tortured modern society.

Only by understanding these impressive – and for many oppressive – conditions of the Symbolists' lives can we begin to understand the full implications of Symbolist art. One important clue to these subtext meanings is its basis in late-nineteenth-century reassessment of the seemingly oppositional relationship between "seen" and "unseen," or of "visible" and "invisible," or even of "matter" and "spirit." In what has been termed the "epoch of apparitions,"[3] several areas of Europe reveled in religious revivals as hundreds professed spiritual visions – such as the children who were visited by the Virgin Mary at Lourdes – which testified for millions of believers to the ability of mortals to see immortality, and even divinity. The transferal of this believable "insight" from the natural to the supernatural world was, however, perhaps not as overwhelming as the new visibility of the natural world. Just as the Symbolists proposed their new referential art that would "make visible the invisible," new discoveries in science, for example, proved that a whole inner world – of microbes, germs, biological realities – existed beyond what could previously be seen. The knowledge that these tiny beings could be seen but only by scientists under certain precise conditions[4] lent an added air of mystery to their newfound existence. Psychology, a field that had grown slowly through the century and struggled to attain professional status, was by the fin de siècle claiming to be able to study and, more important, to control the "unknown" subconscious by means of symptoms and symbols newly apparent to the medically trained. What is striking about these various developments is their common claim to have made visible (like X-rays or electrical "waves" streaming through the air) other realities that had up to that time always been considered invisible, or even nonexistent. Thus Symbolism – an art about timeless ideas and feelings that used images referencing the external world only as signs of a more important, inner being – actually had as its impetus this physical, real, and visible contemporary world.

SYMBOLIST STYLE

This difficult goal of using tangible form to reference intangible ideas was accomplished through careful manipulation of both style and subject. The distinction drawn by Silverman in her study of the opposite styles and techniques used by Van Gogh and Gauguin to accomplish this Symbolist goal is instructive here:

she makes a convincing claim that Gauguin sought to "dematerializ[e] nature in a flight to metaphysical mystery," whereas Van Gogh instead worked at "naturalizing divinity" – in order, in his words, to "render . . . the infinite tangible to us."[5] For Silverman, this distinction explains in turn Van Gogh's drive for ever-greater physicality in his painting, from his laborer's hard manual work to the thick paint and even foreign substances (such as eggshells and coffee grounds) used to cover the canvas, while Gauguin strove to make his surface a veil, attempting to imitate frescoes with ironed and washed canvases that would be both degreased in color and matte in finish.[6] Such heavy manipulation, moving away from the glossy thin and detailed application of oil paints favored by the academic painters of the day, characterizes all Symbolist work and might even be a definition of what I elsewhere have termed their "secret style,"[7] a form of noncompliance to traditional rules of representational art. By introducing extreme manipulation of form, color, and technique the Symbolists announced to the viewer that their art was not an illusion of reality but rather a jumping-off image into the realm of ideas.

The Symbolists began, as all their theories affirmed, with the idea or ideal first, and then sought to find in nature some "correspondence" or "equivalence" that might be used (recreated rather than reproduced) in such a way as to announce that this art object was not a replication of that object in nature but rather a vehicle for recognition and contemplation of a higher reality. Thus certain objects, whether the obvious moon from nature or the newer subject of an antique vase in a bourgeois interior, needed to be presented in an iconic way to accomplish this transformation from object to art, from thing to evocation. At times literary devices were utilized: imagery of the *estompe,* or atmospheric conditions such as mist or permeating rain, for example, could blur lines and envelop the objects in haze that made them less material, more evocative. *Attente,* or arrested time, shown by means of frozen poses, stilled water and air, or uninhabited spaces, could also reinforce the iconic nature of the scene, in visual as well as literary terms.[8] By these means, it was possible for the artist, just as it was for the writer, to turn not only to traditional romantic images of nature but also to contemporary cities; any object, whether country or urban, held the potential for evocation. Thus, as historian Donald Friedman suggests, "Spatial paradigms are used to suggest moods of disjunction, isolation, and suffocating disharmony," as shall be seen in Chapter 3's agoraphobic urban crowds, or in Chapter 7's silent canalled cities; at the same time, "spaces of protection and imprisonment" can be used as models of interiority, as we shall see in Chapter 6's focus on quiet domestic interiors.[9]

Another way of immediately announcing this "nonreal" aspect of their art was the Symbolists' embracing of nontraditional genre.[10] Drawing in particular was a favored means of expression. In contrast to centuries-old practice of using drawings as preliminary studies for a finished painting or sculpture, the Symbolist appreciated and exploited the drawing as a unique and unqualified

medium. The finished and self-sufficient drawing that for prior artists would have been a "presentation drawing"[11] – an elaborate, signed work specifically intended to be a gift or an official submission for exhibition or commission acceptance – was for the Symbolist artist the rule rather than the exception. To this finished quality and completeness was often added exceptional size. Fernand Khnopff's pastel *Memories* (Fig. 1), measuring 50 by 79 inches, was intended to make an impression as sizable as that of an oil (and it does). Many other drawings illustrated in this book are of similar size, and were in all cases made for public display. In the exhibitions organized by the Parisian Salon de la Rose + Croix, drawings outnumbered any other media shown.[12] In the exhibitions of the Brussels Symbolist-oriented exhibition society Les XX, drawings were most welcome and quite popular; Xavier Mellery's major series *The Soul of Things,* a focus of Chapter 6, was a set of primarily black-and-white drawings shown there. Through drawings, often using limited color and blurred or tangled lines with matte or textured finish, the Symbolists could establish the imprecise vision of object as symbol that was their goal.

The use of line (outline as well as directional lines of shape and composition) was crucial to the Symbolist as an immediate expedient means of expression. Odilon Redon, who devoted nearly three decades solely to the black-and-white image, wrote that for him the black line was "a force emerging from the depths and pointing directly to the spiritual." In stating this, he echoed a belief in the innate expressiveness of the line, which was becoming increasingly prevalent at the end of the century and which would inform Art Nouveau as well. In the work of Jan Toorop, such as *The Three Brides* (Plate 4), the lines emanating from the two sides of the composition, representing spirit and matter, are given respective appearances (calm and curvilinear versus jagged and angular) that Toorop equated with musical sounds. Toorop's use of line as symbol linking tangible imagery with intangible concepts is, however, only one of its several uses in Symbolist drawing. Indistinctness – the most obvious effect created by a blurred or vague line – is also common and can be seen masterfully handled, for example in the works by Mellery (Figs. 91, 92, 103). It is also employed in the "landscape" that provides an almost abstracted background for Khnopff's *Memories* (Fig. 1), which allows the viewer to realize the unreality of the lawn-tennis game that the women, at first glance, seem to be preparing to play.

Finally, the significance of the Symbolist's manipulation of line is amply revealed in one practice that involved not only the use of line but also choice of media: there is a noticeable absence of lead pencil or pen-and-ink drawing by Symbolists. For their goals, the traditional "line drawing" so favored in the past and still popular at the turn of the century, was a type of drawing eminently suited to quick delineation of precise forms in nature and was therefore almost totally abandoned, while new media such as colored pencils were exploited. The radical nature of such selection was matched by new handling, for similar reasons, of color.

FIGURE 1. Fernand Khnopff. *Memories.* 1889. Pastel, 127 × 200 cm. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.

Symbolist color also adopted deliberate distortion of the natural as a means to evoke non-nature. As with line, this could be described as an imprecise reference to hues existing in nature, reflecting a heightened sense of color and its evocative powers in the late nineteenth century. Like their Neo-Impressionist contemporaries, the Symbolists were well aware of recent color theories such as those of Charles Henry, who proposed in the late 1880s that each color carried with it psychological effect. But while the Neo-Impressionist Seurat quickly translated this theory into blatant painterly application of Henry's "happy" shades of orange, yellow, and red, or "sad" colors of blue, green, and violet, the Symbolists were more interested in the subtleties of such a theory. With the knowledge of the inherent psychological impact of colors, the Symbolists experimented with antinaturalistic color. Although the "red grass" of Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* (1888, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) is well known, such boldness was not a common ingredient of Symbolism. Rather, by limiting color contrasts to a narrow range of nearly monochromatic arrangement (as in Toorop's *The Three Brides*), or by introducing tertiary, or even "off" colors in opposition to the "pure colors" beloved by the Impressionists, the Symbolists could visualize the obscure but evocative color sense often found in Symbolist poetry. Tonal coloring, using one or two colors at most, also avoids all suggestion of line and creates the illusion of form by arrangements of one soft mass against

another. Through these unusual coloristic manipulations, images managed to suggest natural color while at the same time created symbolic evocations.

In their handling of pictorial space, the Symbolists were perhaps most audacious. In direct contrast to their Realist predecessors, who naturally sought to create a believable illusion of space within the boundaries of their two-dimensional works, the Symbolists reveled in deliberately complex spatial relationships that beautifully expressed an unreal and ultimately spaceless world. Often, as in the work of Toorop, space is compressed so that an entire "scene" appears to occur in a cramped and flattened two-dimensional space. Equally disconcerting, once observed, is the ambivalent handling of space in the work of Munch, who often crops foreground space and compresses background space so that linear perspective is questionable, creating a sense of imbalance or uneasiness, as in *Evening on Karl Johann Street* (Plate 2). Much Symbolist work in this respect seems to be influenced by medieval hieratic scale as well as Mannerist spatial distortion, especially as it incorporates nontraditional perspective and even lack of proportion among objects depicted.[13]

By carefully selecting and manipulating their media, by creating subtle suggestions of color and line to establish a strikingly ambivalent sense of space, the Symbolists were able to make art that was a tangible image of an idea/ideal. When all of these means were applied together, viewers were supposed to be transported to a new reality, of an ideal, without ever falling into the mistaken idea that they were simply observing an image of life. When added to the Symbolist subject – deliberately selected images and objects that in turn were intended to lead the viewer further into the realm of ideas – a release from the contemporary world (as we shall see, the city world) was made possible.

For example, Symbolist artists at times used elaborate medieval and Gothic tracing to cover their images with a veneer referencing what they considered a simpler, communal, and more spiritual era. This began with the prototypical paintings and drawings of Gustave Moreau, a recognized inspiration to the Symbolist generation, and continued in works by Ensor, Toorop, and Johan Thorn-Prikker in particular. In some works, such as Thorn-Prikker's *Epic Monk* (Fig. 2), the images themselves, appearing to evolve out of an overall linear veil, are taken from and refer to medieval (and here also to monastic) life. This drawing was one of four that Thorn-Prikker designed to illustrate the Belgian writer Emile Verhaeren's anthology of poetry titled *The Monks*. Just as Verhaeren's poetry conjured heroic people in honest times, so also Thorn-Prikker sought through image, style, and even media (his drawing is on vellum) to evoke a time that, at least in its nineteenth-century reconstruction, was centered on the spiritual individual as opposed to the mass public lifestyle of late nineteenth-century cities. Thorn-Prikker's intricate, tangled web of lines is deliberately difficult; it required of its viewer an attention to detail and willingness to concentrate that was opposite the process of viewing the beautifully finished and immediately understandable academic art so popular at the turn of the century. In

Figure 2. J. Thorn-Prikker. *Epic Monk.* 1894. India ink, black chalk, and pencil on vellum, 98 × 72.8 cm. Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

its demanding presentation, *Epic Monk* therefore slows down the viewer's act of seeing and processing the work of art, bringing into question what literary theorist Susan Stewart has called "authorial time versus readers' time."[14] Unlike, for example, Impressionist paintings, which offer with their short irregular and obvious brushstrokes at least the illusion that they have been quickly, even

hurriedly, executed, Thorn-Prikker's web of lines seems to have taken "forever," as both subject (the monk) and object (the drawing) dematerialize before the viewer's gaze. This latter process gives the impression of a slow, almost meditative procedure on the part of the artist and asks a similar deliberation, and length of time (slow enough to be off the scale of modern urban time), from the viewer.

SYMBOLIST SUBJECT

With much the same end and results, the Symbolists also manipulated and often even distorted their subject matter, turning traditional stories, whether mythological, religious, or fictional, into sagas of ideas rather than action. Plots are suspended as one image from a story is frozen in time, while presentation of protagonists is altered to offer new interpretations of character or meaning. For example, Symbolist Salomes (of which there are many) are usually depicted outside the plot involving the dance that led to the beheading of St. John the Baptist. Instead, the wicked Salome appears, alone, with the saint's decapitated head, held in such a way as to emphasize the underlying sexual charge of this woman's motivation, and the suggestion that women bring death through their sex.

Another example of Symbolist manipulation of traditional images can be supplied by means of nature portrayals. These are often landscapes that either are devoid of people or serve as a magnificent natural domain for a solitary individual. As we shall see, Symbolism followed most directly the nature imagery of the Romantics, but at the end of the century rather than at the beginning of it, with a desperation born of a wholly new sense of loss. For the Romantics, nature as well as monasticism was an escape, but an escape to an actual destination – still reachable – where they might find themselves enlightened and refreshed.

For the Symbolists, caught up in the social shifts of the metropolis, however, medievalism as well as nature itself had become unachievable ideals. This became especially important as artists found it more difficult to turn to traditional nature settings: life in the city seemed to have so completely changed lives that one could no longer "go back" – in space or in time – to a better world.

Thus an underlying theme to much Symbolist art is nostalgia. Even as they dreamed of past times and places in which life was more livable, they also hoped to revive an art that was more meaningful. Medically recognized in the eighteenth century and considered often fatal, nostalgia was originally connected to homesickness;[15] by the nineteenth century, however, it was a complex construct of psychological, social, and physical symptoms. Medical treatises on the disease, still considered contagious as well as a cause of mental illness, continued to appear into the era of Symbolism.[16] Theorists included Freud, who linked reminiscences to hysteria and considered the inability to cut oneself off from something in the past to be a sign of pathology.[17] The Symbolists, however,

seem to have developed a more twentieth-century approach to nostalgia as an acceptable, even enviable state of mind endemic to modernity.

Interesting in this regard is the connection from nostalgia to music: early diagnoses and definitions of the "disease" blamed music or sounds as the most likely triggers for symptoms. For the Swiss soldiers who were recognized as the first victims of the disease, the sound of the cow herder's song, or even the sounds of the cow bells themselves, was likely to set off a bout of nostalgia. Included in this concept was the idea that the "missed" time was one of happy and innocent childhood, a *passion de souvenir*.[18] This standard role of nostalgia was given visual narrative in midcentury works such as Holman Hunt's *Awakening Conscience,* in which a malingering young woman is thrust into thoughts of her childhood, as John Ruskin explained, and contrastingly to her sinful present, by the tune her lover plays on the piano. In this popular picture, however, the nostalgia victim was seen in a positive light: rather than making her ill, her nostalgia was about to lead to an awakened conscience and to a healthier moral future. Being connected by nostalgia to the past therefore gradually became understood as an affliction not wholly negative; one might even hope to induce nostalgia where necessary, in those too caught up in the evils of the present.

This notion of an induced nostalgia had immediate appeal for the Symbolists and was made more visual by them. An early work by Khnopff already suggested this, in its image of a woman completely caught up in the reverie of music. *Listening to Schumann* (Fig. 3) puts compositional emphasis not on the performer of the music but rather on the listener, who seems able to transport herself beyond the confines of her Victorian interior. Later Khnopff works are much more explicit in summoning nostalgia, and the formation of organic links with the past as a place to which one might actually connect: *With Grégoire Le Roy. My Heart Weeps for Other Times* (Fig. 4), the title of which is taken from a Le Roy poem about nostalgia, shows a woman attempting to create attachment with a veiled or mirrored image of a past city (probably Bruges) with her kiss. In *Across the Ages,* a Khnopff lithograph of 1894, a woman of the present seeks conversation with a statue of another woman of the past, perhaps her former self. In these latter images, the invoker of nostalgia is no longer a victim needing treatment, but an enactor of her own therapy, seeking spiritual if not physical health through association to the past.

It is significant that only in the late eighteenth century did the work and interest of antiquarians and connoisseurs invoke a new idea of the "past as a different realm," with its own history, separated from the living present.[19] In mid-nineteenth-century works such as Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present,* the use of the past not only as a comparative guide for but also as a validation of the present was typified. By late century, however, a romantic nationalism that celebrated older folk traditions as a key to present strength encouraged new efforts at conservation and reconstruction and an approach to the past that was more emotional than educational. Even Freud, as David Lowethal

Figure 3. Fernand Khnopff. *Listening to Schumann*. 1883. Oil on canvas, 101.5 × 116.5 cm. Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.

points out, used "archaeological metaphors for excavating the psychological past."[20]

This new definition and appreciation led to a new role of "the past" that would afford the Symbolists an additional, and even very meaningful, alternative to their troubled present. The notion of "the past as a foreign country"[21] had its origins here. Evidence of this could be found in World's Fairs, where "villages" of the present displayed foreign (to western Europe) *places*' current lifestyles, but where "historical villages" were designed to show established Western nation's foreign *times* (e.g., the Old Manchester and Salford Village at the Royal Jubilee Exhibition of 1887 in England, or the Old Paris section at the Paris 1900 exposition). By the last quarter of the century, a new tourist industry boomed not only in the up-to-date big cities but also in the small historic towns (such as Bruges, a favorite haunt of the Symbolists). When added to the late-century disease of nostalgia this new identification of the past as a destination rather than as a remembered history was inescapably appealing to the Symbolists.

In the late 1880s and throughout the 1890s, the traditional sense of space and time had disintegrated in the new metropolis to the point of seeming to be