

Symbolism in the Lyrical Drama *Pelléas and Mélisande* by Claude Debussy

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Abstract: *Theater has always been, regardless of the aesthetic principles that have governed it from one era to another, an essential projection of the two interfaces of reality: perceptual reality and conceptual or symbolic reality. In connection with reality, whether we are talking about its external form or we are referring to the essence understood as the inner world of the individual (the world of ideas, emotions, feelings, impressions) raises the question of his position towards one or the other. Requesting the principles of theatrical naturalism, symbolist aesthetics urges us to reconsider the problem of interpretation and to ask whether its purpose consists in radiographic illustration of perceptual reality, mirroring the visible world from an authorial perspective or its true mission to reveal invisible truths that lie in the depths of being. the characters of the drama. The suggestive abilities of music - considered by symbolists an ideal model of expression - will provide them with a model but also a tool for probing and revealing unseen energies and truths.*

Key-words: *reality; symbol; symbolist musical drama; new theater*

1. Introduction

Any aesthetic orientation arises from the need to renew the principles and sources of creation, to reconsider some meanings in circumstances favorable to these changes. From an ideological point of view, the emergence of symbolism must be balanced with the French social reality of the second half of the nineteenth century and especially with the feeling of decline generated by this climate. On the one hand, the defeat of the French army in the Franco-Prussian war of 1871, on the other, the wave of protest against the cabotinism of romantic drama, against classical theatricality and the realist naturalist current, created the context conducive to the emergence of the symbolist movement. The latter is defined by the elaboration of a new literary language based on the existence of echoes between Flemish and pre-Raphaelite painting to which are added the literary trends of Belgian playwrights.² Thus, the adhesion of young writers in 1880 to the symbolic prestige of pre-Raphaelite painting contributes to the crystallization of the new poetic language. The same assimilation of prestige is the cause of the approach to the symbolist painter Gustave Moreau. Jean Moréas best describes the birth of the new theatrical poetic language resulting from the alliance of the text (the poetry of Mallarmé, Verlaine, Baudelaire) with the visual appearance (pre-Raphaelite and Flemish painting from the 15th century). Thus, through Maurice Maeterlinck, a poetic and pictorial theater is established, based on the principle of suggestion and sensitivity. “La poésie symbolique cherche à vêtir l’Idée d’une forme sensible qui, néanmoins, ne serait pas son but à elle-même, mais qui, tout en servant à exprimer l’Idée, demeurerait sujette. L’Idée, à son tour, ne doit point se laisser

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² Laurence Brogniez. 2003. *Préraphaélisme et Symbolisme. Peinture littéraire et image poétique*, Paris: Honoré Champion Publisher, p. 75.

voir privée des somptueuses simarres des analogies extérieures; car le caractère essentiel de l'art symbolique consiste à ne jamais aller jusqu'à la concentration de l'Idée en soi."³

2. Objectives

The purpose of the article is to propose an analogy between the the play *Pelléas and Mélisande* by Maurice Maeterlinck and the eponymous opera by Claude Debussy to establish a concordance between the dynamic plan of Debussy's score (tonalities, measure, tempo, melodic profiles, melodic-rhythmic formulas, agogic terms, etc.) and the dramatic means by which Maeterlinck depicts the strange atmosphere of his drama.

3. Symbolism, a manifestation of modernity in theatrical language

France's entry into the war with Prussia in 1871, cleverly speculated by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in order to unify the German states, resulted not only in the painful defeat of the French army which culminated in the apotheosis of the Communards but also in the creation of a decadent socio-political climate in France. If at the beginning of the 19th century, the Restoration brought with it the positivism of industrial and economic development, optimism, confidence in the ruling class, in the second half of the century the reckless decisions of the political class that resulted in economic collapse and violent retaliation generated an attitude of protest from the intellectual class, manifested by a hostile maladaptation, skepticism and rejection of the immediate reality. Passivity in front of external events, the tendency of self-isolation degenerates into an attitude of rejection of any form of external reality, translated by decadentism.⁴

Decadents and symbolists come together through their models and in a common rejection of descriptive representation, which they replace with an aesthetic of suggestion, oriented around the symbol. The anti-hero prototype will find its model among the exponents of this generation. The character des Esseintes in Karl-Jorys Huysman's novel *À rebours* represents the embodiment of the decadent individual. In the paragraph below, we are told the impressions of the protagonist on the painting *The Apparition*, signed by Gustave Moreau. "Dans l'œuvre de Gustave Moreau, conçue en dehors de toutes les données du

Testament, des Esseintes vit enfin la réalisation de ce surhumain et étrange « Salomé » dont il avait rêvé [...] elle devint la divinité symbolique de l'indestructible Luxure, la déesse de l'immortel l'hystérie, la Beauté maudite."⁵

This climate, determined by the reaction against the realist-naturalist direction of Émile Zola and André Antoine, who see art as an investment in a mission of progress through a radiographic illustration of the surrounding world, raises the issue of the individual's connection with external reality. The naturalist current is contested especially in two respects. On the one

³ Jean Moréas. 1886. „Le symbolisme” *Le Figaro*, le samedi 18 septembre, Supplément littéraire, pp. 1-2. “Symbolic poetry tries to clothe the Idea with a sensible form which, however, would not be its purpose in itself, but which, although it serves to express the Idea, will remain subject to it. The idea, in turn, must not be deprived of the sumptuous symptoms of external analogies; for the essential character of symbolic art consists in never going so far as to concentrate the Idea itself.”

⁴ Philip Stephan .1974. *Paul Verlaine and the decadence, 1882-90*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 17-18.

⁵ Karl-Jorys Huysman .2010. *À rebours*, Charleston: Nabu Press p. 72.

“In Gustave Moreau's work, conceived outside all the data of the Testament, des Esseintes finally saw the realization of this superhuman and strange «Salomé» he had dreamed of [...] she became the symbolic deity of indestructible lust, the goddess of immortal hysteria, the cursed Beauty.”

hand, it is considered that naturalistic realism is limited to copying a fragment of meaningless reality and that we must explore the invisible truths whose sources are spirituality and the unconscious (in the context of the emergence of psychoanalysis). On the other hand, the theater is criticized for losing all contact with its origins and for being reduced to the function of entertainment. In other words, theatrical art, like all artistic expressions, seems to be in search of a new breath and a new meaning. In this context, a new aesthetic is born inspired by the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé that addresses a subjective reality or unreality, established on the role of symbol, the exaltation of dreams and emotions.

The mission of the symbolist movement, represented by Charles Van Leberghe, Maurice Maeterlinck and Georges Rodenbach, is to bring together ways of expressing all the arts to render an ineffable world beyond the real world, which has nothing to do with the triviality specific to the palpable. The word "symbolism" has its origin in the term "symbolon" derived from the verb "Sumbalein" which means "to put together", "to unite", "to compare", "to change", "to meet", "to explain". Albert Mockel, the theorist of Belgian symbolism, is the one who synthesizes the dramatic tendencies of the symbolists talking about a theater characterized by the fusion between poetry and the dramatic action realized in the cosmic plane and metaphor. Thus, theater is understood as a mirror of pure ideas, taken out of the concrete. In this perspective, the Belgian generation, led by Maurice Maeterlinck, thought of a poetic theater inspired by Mallarmé's hermeticism, liberated from the everyday, which claims the rights of dream and suggestion. Illusionist realism is opposed by the poetic transfiguration that places the theatrical universe in a transparent world of dreams.

Guided by Schopenhauerian thought very popular in symbolist circles, Remy de Gourmont refers in the "Preface" to the *Book of Masks* to the diversity of worldviews described in the Symbolist works: "Par rapport à l'homme, sujet pensant, le monde, tout ce qui est extérieur au moi, n'existe qu'en fonction de l'idée qu'il en est fait. Nous ne connaissons que des phénomènes, nous ne raisonnons que sur les apparences; toute la vérité nous échappe ; l'essence est inattaquable."⁶

3.1 The dramaturgy of a poetic theater

Maurice Maeterlinck's initial project is to establish a poetic theater of suggestive image, by promoting the transition from textual drama to stage performance. We must also mention the pictorial dimension of this new form of theater that replaces the image of the word. According to Denis Laoureux, the playwright relies on the visual arts to define the parameters - actor, immobility, light, costume scenery - of a new theatrical space.⁷ This aesthetic ideal corresponds to a static theater composed of an ambiguous setting, made of white canvases on moving frames, a tulle stretched between the stage and the hall and actors similar to disembodied silhouettes that imprint moods aroused by unknown forces.

Maeterlinck's drama is a story that does not belong to certain spatio-temporal circumstances - a sign of the playwright's desire to remake the world of theater according to his own conceptions. Maeterlinck's tragedy has the merit of suggesting the fairytale setting and the

⁶ Remy de Gourmont .1896. "Préface", *Le livre des masques, portraits symbolistes, gloses et document sur les écrivains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, Paris: Société du Mercure de France, p. 8.

"In relation to man, a thinking subject, the world, everything that is external to the self, exists only in accordance with the idea that it is made of it. We know only phenomena; we reason only on appearances; the whole truth itself escapes us; the essence is unassailable."

⁷ Denis Laoureux, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

details of the narrative. From the first sequences of the opera, the mysterious dialogue of the characters of the drama descends from a fairy tale that no longer belongs to the romantics.

The center of gravity of the theatrical action stabilizes in a space located between the stage and the dialogue where the visible and the invisible. Thus, we are talking about two types of dialogue (external and internal). The external dialogue has the role of advancing the action but also of suggesting the indefinite, the ambiguity and the semantic indeterminacy. The inner dialogue shows what must surprise the viewer by inciting him to ask for his imagination and aims to reveal the invisible. Language suggests human anguish and joy in its encounter with supernatural forces, the mystery hidden beyond words. The word is no longer in the foreground, the symbolist theater being a theater of silence in which fear, anxiety, anguish, death are expressed. The silence that surrounds the word in Maeterlinck's drama carries the characteristics of a voice. Silence is also found in the paintings of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi, embodied by a woman represented in the background (Ida, the painter's wife). The analogy between the works of the two artists confirms the pictorial dimension of this static theater.⁸ As for the symbolist character whose speech is simple and repetitive, it represents the embodiment of an inaccessible dream that fills this unreal space. The symbolist character is a figure of fatality, a sensitive, fragile and silent, enigmatic being.

In symbolist theater, the atmosphere replaces the absence of action, individuality and consistency of the character representing the scenic materialization of the climate of anxiety. The drama is no longer based on the event but on the feeling and the state of mind, thus becoming a "theater of the soul". The importance of the intrigue and the psychology of the characters is diminished in favor of the metaphysical message that frees the play from real time and space. Two main scenes host French theatrical symbolism: Paul Fort's Art Theater (1890-1892) and Aurélien Lugné-Poe's Opera Theater (1893-1897).

3.2 Musical drama in the opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*

The new theatrical aesthetic trends demand a new musical dramaturgy that results in the appearance of the opera *Pelléas and Mélisande* by Claude Debussy, after the play by Maurice Maeterlinck. This creation represents a typical case of singularity in the history of the work. In *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1892), recognized as a masterpiece of symbolism in music, the atmosphere is perpetually strange. The plot is simple. Prince Golaud marries Melisande, a young woman from nowhere whom he finds lost in a forest. Ever since she met Pelléas, Golaud's younger brother, Mélisande has fallen in love with him. The two young men fall in love with a burning but chaste passion. Golaud, kills his brother in a fit of jealousy and Mélisande will die of suffering giving birth to a baby girl.

Claude Debussy manages to convey emotions and feelings in an authentic way, without making use of the artificial effects usually used in opera. The composer pursues an interpretation in which the singers-actors sing almost spoken and act as naturally as possible. Although respecting the traditional structure in five acts, Debussy defies the musical conventions of the opera. Like Richard Wagner, he abandons the division of the opposite into arias and recitatives specific to Italian opera in favor of the unconditional development of the action and the preservation of its flow, so that the complete emotion is revealed to the public.

Debussy's aesthetic ideal is linked to the literary and pictorial artistic movements of his time, being inspired by poets such as Paul Verlaine, Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé. His music is based on the word and not the pre-established melodic conception, such as the rule

⁸ Luca Esposito. 2019. "Quand le silence donne voix à l'art: Vilhelm Hammershøi et Maurice Maeterlinck". *Voix et silence dans les arts. Passages, poésies et performativité*, pp. 152-152.

of tonality, which allows a rhythmic richness and a natural flexibility. The composer's words are no longer carried by the music, but dominate all the mimicry of the actor, emphasizing all the inflections of the meanings. On the other hand, the actor should resemble the character he plays, not just be the possessor of an appropriate voice. The conflict between Debussy and Maeterlinck regarding the choice of the role of Mélisande is well known. (Debussy opted for Mary Garden while Maeterlinck pleaded for singer Georgette Leblanc, his wife).⁹

According to Debussy, the rules of tonality do not allow true expression. The unspoken is also transmitted through the characters. We can see, for example, that Mélisande expresses herself both by silence and by singing, which amplifies the mystery that surrounds her. The characters are strange and seem to have their origin in a dream. Also, the composer takes over the principle of the leitmotif, although it has rather the role of decorating the characters with arabesques that suggest their temperament. We will mention those that have a fundamental role in building the soundtrack.

The opera *Pelléas and Mélisande* begins with two leitmotifs that seem to belong to ancient times, followed by Golaud's leitmotif which describes the inner and psychological turmoil of the character. Mélisande's leitmotif is composed of an augmented second, associated with a fact that describes femininity, purity, sadness, difficulty, interiority, subconscious. The profile of the musical arc induces the idea of eternal return to oneself and a new beginning.

4. Conclusions

The symbolist theatrical movement represented one of the forces of manifestation of the new theater that demands new forms of dramatic expression. Claude Debussy's musical adaptation of Maurice Maeterlinck's drama offers the pretext of transposing the aesthetic tendencies of a poetic and pictorial theater into the means of exposition of a musical dramaturgy. The dreamy atmosphere of a subjective reality of the symbols in *Pelléas and Mélisande*, supported by the strangeness of the characters subjected to fate, is echoed in the music of Claude Debussy who radically breaks ties with Wagnerian procedures, finding its own direction. Despite its declared anti-commitment, by rejecting reality, symbolist theater becomes a social and political critique of the civic and theatrical utopia of the late nineteenth century.

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⁹ Gabriel Bulancea. 2008. *Gândirea creatoare și estetică a lui Claude Debussy*. Cluj: Media Musica, p.154.

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