SYMBOLISM IN THE THEATRE

That symbolism should play any significant part in the theatre seems, at first thought, unlikely. The fundamental idea of the dramatic seems to forbid it. The drama is "the imitation of persons engaged in action." That action is essential to drama is insisted upon by ancients and moderns alike. "Certain persons", says Aristotle, "call their works *dramas* because they imitate those who are engaged in *doing* something."[1] "Tragedy is an imitation of a worthy or illustrious and perfect *action*," etc.[2] Freytag defines tragedy as "passion in action" and insists that passion which does not find expression in action is not dramatic, but lyric. The drama mirrors external events or interprets inner experiences by outward actions. It has to do primarily with human life as it finds expression in deeds. Inner spiritual experiences not directly connected with action seem essentially undramatic.

Symbolism, on the other hand, concerns itself with just those experiences which seem beyond the reach of drama. It has to do not so much with the material as with the immaterial world. And the distinction is significant. In speaking of the German romanticists, R. M. Wernaer remarks: "Our writers felt themselves possessed of two distinct personalities, one facing the natural world with its sensuous qualities, its definable limitations, its laws of time and place; the other facing Godward with its circle of infinity, its celestial values, its feeling-tones, its emotional ecstasies, its dreams and visions."[3] The drama is naturally the imitation or reproduction of the former world; symbolism is the natural language of the latter. "The symbolist wishes to create in the reader a certain state of the soul.[4] His task is "in some way to reconstitute in the modern mind a lost faculty, the sense of the mysterious."[5] "In the Symbol proper,—

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[1] Aristotle: *The Poetics*, Chap. iv. [2] *Ibid.*: Chap. vi.

[3] Wernaer, R. M.: *Romanticism and the Romantic School in Germany.*

[4] Nitze, W. A.: *Symbolist Poetry in France*, in the *North American Review*, Vol. 197.

[5] Clark, C. C.: *French Symbolism*, in the *Yale Review*, Vol. I (N. S.)

what we call a Symbol,—there is ever, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite."[6] And since "symbolism is a representation which does not aim to be a reproduction,"[7] "description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked magically."[8] "The symbolists maintain the distinction of having created metaphysical lyricism, of having found again the true function of art, which is by force of necessity that of establishing in beauty the conquests of humanity over the subconscious."[9] All this promises little for the dramatic art.

Yet symbolism has come to play an important part in the drama. Dramatists have long recognized the problem of expressing experiences which cannot well take form in the action of dramatic characters, and have sought devices for overcoming the natural limitations of their art form. Most of these devices—the aside, the soliloquy, the confidant—have been largely abandoned, but the symbol has been more and more widely used. How effective Shakespeare found it is well illustrated in *Macbeth*. The ghostly appearances at the coronation banquet are just the visible symbols of what is going on in the mind of Macbeth,—his fear of retribution, his half-conscious remorse. The witches are the symbols of the first promptings of ambition, the first half-conscious or subconscious suggestions of murder as a means of acquiring the throne. In Ibsen's *The Master Builder*—to take a modern example—the churches with high towers symbolize the religious idealism of the master's youth. The houses which he builds for human beings to live in suggest the more practical mood of his middle life. The "air castles built upon firm foundations" express his late desire to harmonize the vague ideals of the new generation with his own practical experiences, that he might produce something at once lofty and stable.

Sometimes a dramatic character and a human figure used as a symbol appear together. This is true in *The Master Builder*. The subject of the play is the supplanting of the older generation by the younger. Ragnar Brovik is a dramatic character, a genuine

[6] Carlyle, Thomas: *Sartor Resartus*, Book III.
[7] Nitze: *Op. Cit.*
[8] Clark: *Op. Cit.* (quoted from Arthur Symons).
[9] Barre, A.: *Le Symbolisme.*

member of the new generation, striving for self-expression and demanding his opportunity in the face of the old régime. But Ibsen wishes in addition to reveal the spirit of the new generation at work in the inner experience of the master himself, his fear of it and his yearning towards it. For this purpose he introduces the symbolic figure of Hilda Wangel. Solness, the master, expresses the fear that his luck will change when the new generation comes knocking at his door. Immediately Hilda knocks, enters, and brings once more into his life the spirit of youth. She brings back to him "something he had forgotten". She sleeps in one of the nurseries of the children he has lost. She is his desire for youth's "radiantly healthy conscience", which permits one to *dare* what one *would*. Under her inspiration he will again place the wreath on the tower. But what he aims at is impossible. He cannot build for the new generation; the new generation must build for itself. He reaches again the dizzy height of freedom, but falls and perishes.

This use of the human figure as a symbol is common in modern drama when the idea transcends the limits of the individual life, or when the mysterious and mystical suggestion would be lost in a too definite presentation. Maeterlinck's *Pélléas and Mélisande*, for example, is not so much a drama of individual lives as of the great spiritual forces which work behind life and control the actions of men in spite of human will. Under the influence of these forces the characters are not human individuals, but symbols. The theme is the awakening of love out of ignorance and innocence, and the awful and mysterious consequences of that awakening. It is the Paolo and Francesca story treated not as a reproduction of life, but as a symbol of life. Mélisande is not a person acting under the force of love, nor is she the personification of love. She is a living symbol, which suggests more than it embodies and shows the operation of forces controlling life without reproducing life itself. Golaud does not simply find a maiden by a spring in the forest. He meets rather the force of love in its ignorance and innocence, something which he can never thoroughly understand. A little later, when Mélisande leans over the fountain in the park till her hair touches the water, then leaps to her feet to play with her wedding-ring,

tossing it into the air and finally losing it in the water, the character and the incidents signify little in themselves as a reproduction of life. What signifies is that, looking into the fountain, which has the miraculous power of bestowing insight, love loses its former simple freedom from care, and awakes to something of love's true poignancy. Then comes the half-conscious progress of love. Together Pélléas and Mélisande enter the grotto in the dark, thinking to stop after going a certain distance. They come suddenly upon the three beggars asleep against the boulder and are startled by the touch of reality. Mélisande exclaims: "Leave me, I prefer to walk alone"; and Pélléas answers: "We will come back another day." Here the symbolic meaning alone is significant. Again, Yniold sent away from Mélisande suggests innocence departing from love, and the suggestion is emphasized by the swans' fleeing from the dogs with which they have been fighting, and later by the doves' flying away to be lost in the dark. In the tense scene where Golaud forces the child to spy upon the lovers, however human the father and son may be, the lovers themselves are but figures standing upright against the wall, never coming near each other, but always gazing at the light and waiting for something. They symbolize the silent anguish of love. Even in the catastrophe itself we do not, as in D'Annunzio's *Francesca da Rimini* or Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, get the clear, sharp vision of passion in action. We see rather the vague and terrible mystery of passion, and almost feel its inexorable force independent of its manifestation in individual human lives. The symbolic treatment presents the problem from a new dramatic point of view.

The method has its obvious disadvantages. The necessary lack of individuality in the figures precludes clear and fine dramatic characterization, and the placing of real and symbolic characters side by side is confusing. Again, since the symbol is not a personification and cannot, therefore, always be equated with that for which it stands, the result is a vagueness which puzzles the commonplace mind. Certainly, it asks too much of the 'tired business man' and the 'butterfly of fashion', who are supposed to make up the major part of an audience in the theatre. Then, too, the symbolism often interferes with the

plausibility of the action. It does so, for example, in Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken.* Rubek has subordinated love to art, and his high ideals have consequently become atrophied. These deadened ideals are well symbolized by Irene, pale and rigid, with dress in perpendicular folds and arms crossed upon her breast; but the moment she enters thus and moves across the stage with stiff and measured steps, we realize how impossible it is for her to act with human naturalness. Moreover, as the action proceeds, the necessities of the symbolism make the scenes more and more artificial. When Rubek realizes that life is above art and longs to live the higher life, the action shifts to the mountains. The symbolism demands that Maia and the hunter, seeking sensual enjoyment, should descend and that Rubek and Irene, seeking the higher life, should go up to the dangerous heights, where the storms are on the peaks and where the two finally perish in an avalanche. The symbolism is perfect, but there is no reason except the symbolic reason why Rubek and Irene should persist in going up in the face of the storm. The dramatic action is not convincing in its human motives. Indeed, the whole scene lacks the reality of life.

On the other hand, he who can forget conventional dramatic standards and fix the mind on the symbolic meaning alone will receive a new and significant dramatic experience. The new method breaks down the recognized limits of drama and brings within the scope of the theatre experiences hitherto considered undramatic. It makes possible as never before the drama of mystery and mysticism.

By thinking persistently on the symbolic meaning the spectator may get a fairly clear dramatic impression of even so complicated a play as Hauptmann's *The Sunken Bell.* Heinrich is a human character, within whose nature the conflict of the play takes place. The Vicar, the Schoolmaster, and the Barber are human figures symbolizing the deadening influences of conventional religion, education, and daily life. Rautendelein, a folk-lore figure, represents the beneficent spirit of nature, the longing for freedom, the inspiration of art. The wood-sprites symbolize the worst side of the natural instincts. Such a mingling of human characters, symbolic human figures, and figures from

folk-lore used as symbols promises confusion. But when we look at the play as a symbol and not as a reproduction of life, the meaning emerges. The play represents the conflict of art and life, of freedom and duty, of instinct and reason. Heinrich cannot develop his free soul as an artist under the constraints of conventional religion, formal thinking, and humdrum daily life. The bell which he forges under these restrictions is made for the valley, not for the heights; and when the attempt is made to place it on the mountain-top, it falls into the mere. Heinrich, too, falls, dazed, unconscious, but is awakened by the kiss of Rautendelein, the free spirit of nature. He forswears the common duties of life, deserts his family, and seeks the clear air of the heights, where he can use the forces of nature to forge a bell, not for the church, but for the sun. Yet the forces of nature do not gladly do his will, because he is not in full harmony with them. He cannot quite shake off the old influences. Life calls to him through his children, who bring to him their mother's tears. He repents and returns. But this is not all. Repentance does not bring peace: the old limitations are worse than before. He must again seek the heights, though he perish. Here is the essential tragedy of life as the German conceived it, prophetic, too, of how he was later to work it out. He must exercise the will to achieve at the sacrifice of all human sentiments, in defiance of all the duties of life. The task is impossible. He is too human for the greatest success. He is strong but not strong enough, called but not chosen. He is not a genuine superman.

In certain symbolic dramas there is an effort to get away from human characters altogether. In Maeterlinck's *The Blue Bird*, for example, the only real persons are the two children, and their actions are controlled entirely by the Fairy Bérylune. The *dramatis personæ* seem hopelessly undramatic: spirits of sugar, bread, water, and fire to represent natural forces; light to signify spiritual vision; the dog and the cat to represent loyalty and deceit; ghosts of ancestors and of children still unborn to symbolize the forces of the past and the future. Yet it is easy to submit oneself to the spirit of the piece as the action develops in symbol the search for the truth which brings happiness. The

visit to the dead grandparents indicates that we can get glimpses of truth from the past, but cannot thus arrive at reality. A search among the secrets of nature reveals many seeming blue birds of truth, but they die in the light of broad day. Perhaps the real blue bird is there, but it is beyond the children's reach. All nature fights against man in his seach for truth, so that Light and Loyalty save him with difficulty. A vision of the future and a questioning of generations yet unborn fail to disclose the real secret. Even when truth is finally found through sympathy with common life, it easily escapes. And all this is not dead allegory: it is living symbol.

In the same symbolic manner, *The Betrothal*, a sequel to *The Blue Bird*, presents the awakening of youth to the influences of love, the problem of finding the true 'affinity', and choosing her for a wife. To Maeterlinck, whose interest in science is hardly less than his interest in mysticism, the deciding force is not chance nor destiny, but the forces of heredity and the instincts of maternity. As Tyltyl, grown to young manhood, thinks of the various girls who attract him, they appear before him, summoned by Bérylune's fairy wand. Among them is the veiled figure of one whom he does not distinctly remember: she represents his unconscious thought. From these he must choose. Light (Reason) cannot make the choice for him. His ancestors, who represent the forces of heredity, are puzzled, because they cannot find the future wife among the active figures, and the veiled and lifeless figure will not awake. Even the children to come, symbols of the maternal instinct, seem uncertain, though the youngest does finally recognize its mother in the veiled figure. The veiled figure then awakes, but cannot become the wife and mother until the subconscious thought of Tyltyl has become conscious.

In Rostand's *Chanticler* symbolism invades the field of social satire. Here the personages are all animals. Chanticler himself is a deluded and cocky idealist, yet a genuine herald of the dawn, whose song is a call to duty. Patou, the dog, a symbol of loyal common-sense, counsels and aids Chanticler, the idealist. Both of them despise the Blackbird, who represents the new and smart intellectualism which miscalls, exaggerates,

and vulgarizes, never losing an opportunity to prick the bubbles of faith. The Guinea-hen is the leader in artificial social insincerities; the Peacock, strutting champion of the artificial, is her chief admirer.

The interpretation of this play offers interesting considerations. When Chanticler learns that he does not make the sun rise by his crowing, he does not become a cynic and talk like the Blackbird. He keeps his faith. He has still "the night of the eyelid to route." At least he can make poor doubtful creatures of the twilight believe in the dawn. He has in his soul a faith so faithful that it comes back after it has been slain. This is the interpretation of the ultra-romanticist, and it satisfies him well enough. But Professor Babbitt, persistent foe of the romantic imagination, the prevalence of which in modern times he thinks has been so disastrous to a sane view of life, sees here a perfect example of the typical romantic shift from one illusion to another. "Chanticler", he says, "still maintains his idealistic pose even after he has discovered that the sun is not actually made to rise by his crowing." He hugs his illusion in spite of reality, instead of being "humbly thankful at having escaped from the dangerous prevalence of imagination and entered once more into the domain of sober probability."[10]

All this is very interesting comment, but it misses the important point of the play. It misses the deeper significance of the symbolism. Chanticler really represents a fundamental truth, though he does not quite know what it is. His song symbolizes the cry of the earth reaching out for the light, the longing of all nature for the sun. Standing thus for the process of growth, the 'vital push' of nature, it is a genuine call to duty, though it does not actually cause the sun to rise. The idea, though romantically expressed, is not pure illusion. It leads to truth; and to make illusion the pathway to truth is the legitimate function of the literary imagination.

But what of the stage presentation of these symbolic dramas? They could hardly be successful if produced in strict accordance with the naturalistic method fostered by David Belasco and

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[10] Babbitt, Irving: *Rousseau and Romanticism.*

Otto Brahm. These plays have succeeded on the stage largely through the development of suggestive and symbolic methods of staging. A classic example is the Moscow Art Theatre's production of *The Blue Bird.* "The Moscow artists", says Sheldon Cheney, "tried to visualize the symbolism of the various scenes in their backgrounds, with the result that the action progressed through a series of fairyland pictures of a beautifully imaginative sort."[11] Meynholdt went still further in his productions of Maeterlinck's plays in Petrograd. Alexander Bakshy thus describes his method:—

> "He staged Maeterlinck's dramas on the one plane, *i.e.*, he reduced the depth of the stage to a narrow band close to the footlights and placed the actors against flat decorative scenery, aiming thereby to dematerialize the stage and to merge the action of the play in the sway of emotions felt by the audience. . . . . The flat background close to the footlights and the grouping of the actors in a line tended to destroy the materialistic appearance of objects and transformed the stage into a world of visionary images. . . . Facing it in the darkened hall of the theatre was the audience, which could see but little around itself to provide a realistic contrast and so confine the spiritual images to a fixed location in the building. . . . The stage and the audience became blended in the visionary world."[12]

Another exponent of the new method is Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt began as a naturalist under the tutelage of Otto Brahm, but he early saw that the soul of a drama, particularly of a romantic drama, could best be illuminated by symbolic scenery. One of his early successes was *Pélléas and Mélisande*, a production upon which he was congratulated by Maeterlinck himself.[13] He also produced Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in the suggestive manner. Mr. William Archer says of this production:—

> "Almost all the scenes in Sicily were played in perfectly simple yet impressive decoration—a mere suggestion, without any disturbing detail, of a lofty hall in the palace of

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[11] Cheney, Sheldon: *The Art Theatre.*

[12] Bakshy, Alexander: *The Path of the Modern Russian Stage, and Other Essays.*

[13] Carter, Huntley: *The Theatre of Max Reinhardt.*

> Leontes. For the pastoral act in Bohemia, on the other hand, a delightful scene was designed, for all the world like a page from a child's picture-book. The grass was bright green velvet, spangled with conventional flowers. A blooming fruit-tree shadowed a toy cottage; and in the background some quaint masts and pennons showed the proximity of the sea. The whole effect was charmingly fantastic and admirably in keeping with the action of the scene."

The symbols expressed the childlike wonder which Reinhardt conceived to be the prevailing tone of the play.

On a larger scale and still more symbolic was *The Miracle*, produced by Reinhardt in London. It was a symbolic pageant, in elaborate pantomime, of the story told in Maeterlinck's *Sister Beatrice*. The story and its symbolic effect are thus described by Huntley Carter:—

> "Sister Beatrice is a young nun who is wooed and after a struggle won by a prince. As soon as she leaves the convent the figure of the Virgin is reincarnated and takes the erring nun's place. The action of the Virgin is regarded by the other nuns as a miracle and it is believed she has come to life in order to confer high spiritual distinction on Sister Beatrice. A period of years elapses, and Beatrice returns to the convent, having tasted the bitters of a worldly experience. Abandoned by the prince, she passes through vicissitude after vicissitude, until, with health, beauty, and purity gone, she seeks her old sanctuary. Upon her return, the Virgin, having completed her task, resumes her former position. Beatrice confesses her sins to the nuns, who, however, still believe her holy and worship her as she dies. In this scenario is the element of mystery which great drama demands, as well as that of silence, which is one of the requirements of great dramatic pantomime. It is, in a word, a cosmic theme, the importance of which words cannot adequately convey. We enter the action and pass in silence through a process of disillusionment or enlightenment. We are under cloistral restraint. We are suddenly offered a vision of the world and its temptations. We yield to temptation and go forth to indulge the physical side of us at the expense of the spiritual. We pass from disillusionment to disillusionment till Hell is reached, and finally, we return to the spiritual fold to exchange the impurity of our recent experience for a purity to which it should inevitably lead. . . . . *The Miracle* ends differ-

> ently from that of *Sister Beatrice.* Beatrice dies, while the Nun, after passing the night in the darkened cathedral, rises from before the Image and passes through the great doors to toll the Matins. Her renewed spiritual life is symbolized by the rising of the sun which greets her."[14]

Gordon Craig is even more radical than Reinhardt. So far as I know, he has produced none of the plays mentioned in this article, but he is our most radical advocate of symbolic as opposed to naturalistic stage production. What he says about designs for *Macbeth* is typical of his theories:—

> "First and foremost comes the *scene.* . . . The question is not how to create some distracting scenery, but rather how to create a place which harmonizes with the thoughts of the poet.
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> "Come now, we take *Macbeth.* In what kind of place is that play laid? How does it look, first of all to our mind's eye, secondly, to our eye?
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> "I see two things. I see a lofty and steep rock, and I see the moist cloud which envelops the head of this rock. That is to say, a place for fierce and warlike men to inhabit, a place for phantoms to nest in. Ultimately this moisture will destroy the rock; ultimately these spirits will destroy the men. . . . . Place there the rock, let it mount up high. . . . . Do not be afraid to let the lines go high; they cannot go high enough. . . . .
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> "Let your rock possess but half the width of the stage, let it be the side of a cliff round which many paths twist, and let these paths mingle in one flat space, taking up half or perhaps three quarters of the stage. You have room enough there for all your men and women. Now then, open your stage and all other parts. Let there be void below as well as above, and in this void let your mist fall and fade; and from that bring the figures which you have fashioned and which are to stand for the spirits." [15]

In Craig's famous production of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1912, ordinary scenery was entirely dispensed with; the play was produced before screens variously adjusted and

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[14] Carter, Huntley: *The Theatre of Max Reinhardt.*
[15] Craig, Edward Gordon: *On the Art of the Theatre.*

played upon by various colored lights. The correspondent of the London *Times* wrote of this production:—

> "Mr. Craig has the singular power of carrying the spiritual significance of words and dramatic situations beyond the actor to the scene in which he moves. By the simplest means he is able, in some mysterious way, to evoke almost any sensation of time or space, the scenes even in themselves suggesting variations of human emotions.
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> "Take for example the Queen's chamber in the castle of Elsinore. Like all the other scenes, it is simply an arrangement of the screens already mentioned. There is nothing which definitely represents a castle, still less the locality or period; and yet no one would hesitate as to its significance—and why? Because it is the spiritual symbol of such a room. A symbol, moreover, whose form is wholly dependent upon the action which it surrounds." [16]

Clearly the new drama is very inadequately defined as "the imitation of persons engaged in acting." For better or for worse, the symbolists are modifying our definitions. They are trying to enlarge the domain of the theatre by "penetrating deeper and deeper into human consciousness and placing moral problems on a higher pedestal", [17] shifting the emphasis from external action to the psychological and moral processes which underlie action and which cannot always find expression in action. Says Maeterlinck: "The mysterious chant of the Infinite, the ominous silence of the soul and of God, the murmur of eternity on the horizon, the destiny of fatality that we are conscious of within us, though by what tokens none can tell—do not all these underlie *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*? And would it not be possible, by some interchange of rôles, to bring them nearer to us and send the actors farther off?" Maeterlinck believes that the old themes of tragedy are played out, that external action in drama is passing away, and that the drama of the future will be a "static drama". He says:—

> "I have come to believe that an old man seated in his arm chair, waiting quietly beside his lamp, listening un-

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[16] Cheney, Sheldon: *The Art Theatre.*

[17] Maeterlinck, Maurice: *The Double Garden.*

> consciously to all the eternal laws that reign about his house, interpreting, without comprehending, the silence of doors and windows and the faint voice of light, submitting with slightly bowed head to the presence of his soul and of destiny, without suspecting that all the powers of this world are taking part and keeping watch in the room like so many attentive servants, not knowing that the very sun supports above the abyss the little table on which he leans, and that there is not a star in the heavens nor a force within the soul that is indifferent to the movement of an eyelid thatdr ops or a thought that rises—I have come to believe that this motionless old man really lives a deeper, more human, and more universal life than the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who wins a victory, or the husband who avenges his honor." [18]

Undoubtedly the symbolic drama loses much in human characterization, dramatic action, and realistic stage-settings. Just as certainly, also, its tendency to penetrate more deeply into the human consciousness, to emphasize the psychological and moral processes, to bring into the theatre the effects of mystery and mysticism, has enlarged enormously the scope of dramatic art.

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[18] Maeterlinck, Maurice: *The Treasure of the Humble.*