II THE FRENCH SYMBOLISTS
Chapter 6  The French Symbolists: the Aesthetic Background

All art aspires towards the condition of music.

— Walter Pater: The Renaissance.

There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

— Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

— Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn.

A musical thought is one spoken by a mind that has penetrated into the inmost heart of the thing; detected the inmost mystery of it, namely the melody that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul whereby it exists, and has a right to be here in this world. All inmost things, we may say, are melodious; naturally utter themselves in Song. The meaning of Song goes deep. Who is there that, in logical words, can express the effect that music has on us? A kind of inarticulate, unfathomable speech, which leads us to the edge of the Infinite, and lets us for moments gaze into that!

... Observe too how all passionate language does of itself become musical, with a finer music than the mere accent; the speech of a man even in zealous anger becomes a chant, a song. All deep things are Song.

— Carlyle: On Heroes and Hero Worship.

'Que ton vers soit la chose envelopée', Verlaine had written in 'Art Poétique', and that seems to have become the dominant motive behind the Symbolist endeavour. If the poet was to show things in action, a new attitude towards the matter and manner of poetry would become necessary. The desire to symbolize movement and to reveal the beauty
of 'the thing in flight' was what distinguished the Symbolists from their contemporaries: it marked the point of departure, the beginning of a new aesthetic. The beauty of a fleeting vision, a transient experience was more valued by the Symbolists than anything fixed, stable or static. This attitude naturally brought them into conflict with the Parnassians, a group of poets who insisted on writing about fixed objects actually perceived by them. The Parnassians concentrated on certain elements which they thought would give greater realism to their poetry. They paid great attention to the logical arrangement of thoughts, to description and exact expression; and these, they held, were the great ideals of poetry. As Arthur Symons has remarked:

It was the age of science, the age of material things; and words, with that facile elasticity which there is in them, did miracles in the exact representation of everything that visibly existed, exactly as it existed.  

The Parnassians were intent on avoiding the 'vagueness' of expression and thought for which the Romantics had acquired a certain reputation. They wanted to perfect the form of expression, and they selected static objects which would not disturb them in the art of precise expression. With them

... form aimed above all things at being precise, at saying rather than suggesting, at saying what they had to say so completely that nothing remained over, which it might be the business of the reader to divine.  

Parnassian poetry found its most representative exponent in Leconte de Lisle, whose poems were highly coloured, hard in outline and precise in

1 Arthur Symons: "The Symbolist Movement in Literature", p.3.
2 Ibid, pages 4-5.
in phrase and form. It seemed his poetry had 'turned the world to stone'.
Leconte de Lisle lay like a leaden weight on poetry, holding it down and preventing any movement. It was against this statuesque poetry that the Symbolists revolted.

The Symbolists were dissatisfied with Parnassian aims and methods. They felt poetry was something deep, complex and mysterious. The meaning of a poem, they held, could not be communicated fully by means of direct description or rational statement; it could only be conveyed through suggestion. The new attitude can be observed in a typical statement of Mallarmé:

The Parnassians, for their part, take the thing as a whole and show it; that's where they are deficient in mystery. They deprive the mind of the delicious joy of believing that it is creating. To name an object is to do away with three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem which is derived from the satisfaction of guessing little by little; to suggest it, that is the illusion. It is the perfect handling of the mystery that constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object little by little in order to show a state of mind, by a series of unriddlings.3

One of the great services rendered by the French Symbolists to poetry is widening its scope and suggestiveness. The element of mystery, for which the Parnassians had no place in their poetry, was more exciting and worthy of poetic expression than the fixed objects that poets wrote about till now.

Parnassian poetry, in its definiteness of outline and precision of detail, belonged to the same intellectual climate as the positivist philosophy of Renan and Taine. Taine had been a very influential critic, and his ideas were widely accepted for some time. In an age when scientific methods were popular, Taine had met the growing challenge of science by applying the method of natural science to the study of art and literature. He thought he 'could define the nature

3 Stéphane Mallarmé: 'Réponse à une Enquête'.
and establish the conditions of the existence of each art. Taine viewed science and art as two ways 'leading to the higher life of man, to contemplation,' but differing in their methods:

... the former investigates the causes and fundamental laws of reality, and expresses them in exact formulae and abstract terms; the latter makes manifest these causes and laws, not in dry definitions inaccessible to the vulgar, and intelligible only to the select few, but in a sensible manner, appealing not merely to the reason but to the heart and senses of the most commonplace man: it has the power of being both elevated and popular, of manifesting what is most noble and elevated, and of manifesting it to every one. *

For Taine, the justification of art is in its power to impart knowledge. The work of art gives us knowledge of reality through imitation, an imitation so carried out as to render sensible the essential character of objects; the essential character being 'a quality from which all other qualities, or many others are derived and follow unalterably from it'.

Art has value only because it gives explicit expression and embodiment to the 'caractère saillant' of the object which it imitates. In embodying this element art makes use of sounds, shapes, colours, rhythms and other materials of sense perception.

The positivism this philosophy encouraged viewed all that was unreal or unbelievable as falling outside the province of art; and 'real' in this context had a restricted sense, which included mainly historically possible events and logical thoughts. Art could choose its material from only within this narrow circle. The Symbolists opposed this point of view, and claimed that the positivist requirements could never become the characteristics of true art. They expressed their reaction to positivism by making, first of all, two negative distinctions. Art, the Symbolists emphasized, is not a contribution to scientific knowledge.

5 Ibid, p. 17.
The work of art derives value from the embodiment and articulation it gives to individual experiences, and not because of its 'particular embodiment of a general truth'. Art does not also contribute to historical knowledge; it is not tied up to veracity. The truth that the artist aims at is something wider than the factual reality of the historian. Truthfulness is a relative term: for example, a painter is not being untruthful, when he presents before us three dimensions on a two-dimensional canvas. The Symbolists made it quite clear that true art need not be concerned only with physical realities and concepts.

In their denial of material reality as the basis of art, the Symbolists were inclined to go to another extreme: to the idea that art aimed at revealing spiritual reality. The concept of poetry, for example, as a spiritual activity which could give us access to deeper realities was not new; to Symbolism this became the most important aspect of poetry. Interest in spiritual meanings had been expressed by several writers even before Baudelaire. Chateaubriand had written in one of his well-known books:

"Le secret est d'une nature si dévise, que les premiers hommes de l'Asie ne parlaient que par symboles. À quelle science revient-on sans cesse ? à celle qui laisse toujours deviner et qui fixe nos regards sur une perspective infinie."

Another writer, Honoré de Balzac, had written, in one of his most ambitious works, 'Séraphita', of men who grasped the hidden links between material things and their spiritual counterparts. Such understanding, according to Balzac, could lead men to ultimate reality:

"Savoir les correspondances de la parole avec les cieux, savoir les correspondances qui existent entre les choses visibles et ponderables du monde terrestre, et les choses invisibles et ponderables du monde terrestre, et les choses invisibles et imponderables du monde spirituel, c'est avoir les cieux dans son entendant."

All these writers had been greatly influenced by the philosophic ideas

6 René de Chateaubriand: 'Le Genie du Christianisme', Chapter II.
7 Honoré de Balzac: 'Séraphita'.

of Swedenborg, Diderot and Lavater. These philosophers held that the
correspondence between the physical aspects of the world and spiritual qualities,
the actual appearance of things is the reflection of what is to be revealed
in another world. Baudelaire's aesthetic theory, as best expressed by
him in the sonnet 'Les Correspondances' is directly based on this
concept. Art, according to Baudelaire's theory, would consist in
demonstrating the correspondence of the spiritual with the natural,
or the influence of the one on the other. Baudelaire's sonnet represents
the dominant idea of the poetic development of the nineteenth century
in France. This is the point made by M. Pommier:

On ne saurait maintenant denier au sonnet de 'Correspondances' sa valeur
unique dans la littérature du XIXe siècle. Il est l'œuvre d'un esprit
qui, plus sincèrement peut-être et plus constamment que la plupart de
ses contemporains, a pensé selon le mode symboliste.

Baudelaire believed that material objects in the world have reality only
in so far as they have their origin in 'the world of the spirit'. The
hidden relation between material things and their spiritual counterparts
are called by him the 'correspondences'. The universe is 'un forêt de symboles', and the poet can have, through these symbols,
a vision of the infinite. Poetry is not an approach to the real, but
reality itself, because it embodies symbolic meanings. This led Charles
Morice, a symbolist critic, to write:

L'art n'est pas que le révélateur de l'Infini, il est au poème
un moyen même d'y pénétrer. Il y va plus profond qu'aucune
philosophie.

The poet looks through Nature, which is an outward front for the spiritual,
'into the heart of light, the silence'. It is the function of the poet
to decipher and to interpret the mysteries of the universe. To the poet,
every natural object is a symbol, and he makes the symbol the means

8 Pommier : 'La Mystique de Baudelaire', p.154.
9 Charles Morice : 'La Littérature de toute à l'heure',
thereby the reader moves toward the mystery and suggestiveness which inhere
in it and lie beyond it. The Symbol was to convey the 'transcendental
joy which the poet found in his poetical vision'.

Baudelaire initiated a new approach to aesthetic problems, by emphasizing
the spiritual meaning in art. The poet was not to be satisfied by mere
observation of nature; he was to contemplate and develop that insight
into truth, which only could become the basis of art. Positivist philosophy
had encouraged the acceptance of physical nature as the complete reality;
and this had prevented poets from having a direct view of the greater
reality that lay behind the screen of appearance. For centuries, science
and philosophy had conspired to emphasize the difference between man and
nature. It had been generally accepted that, since man's mind could
respond only to happenings and existent states in Nature, the artist who
wanted to present reality could do no better than imitate nature. It
was against this attitude that Baudelaire protested. He was that it
was idle for the artist to rival nature. This becomes particularly
true in the age of photography. The poet's task is to seek the deeper
realities that lie within nature. Nature, the forest of symbols, is,
for the real poet, an entrance to another world, full of mystery; it
is the region of the unknown which the poet sets out to explore. Baudelaire
is not afraid to tread the paths of the forest, and to penetrate the
'gouffre' itself. Indeed the Unknown has a fascination for the poet
which leads him on, unmindful of the consequences:

Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau !

There were many realities which science had not yet touched upon. These
could be known by the poet. Such knowledge, whether it be called spiritual
or artistic, was valuable. It was in this way that Baudelaire opened up
new possibilities for poetry, which instead of attempting to imitate nature
could symbolize more enduring realities.

This new attitude led Baudelaire to speculate on the poetic possibilities of dreams and other manifestations of mental activity which had been ignored by the positivists. By giving full play to the imaginative powers of the poet, dreams helped the poet to reach realities which he could never attain through rational thinking. Dreams, in the opinion of Baudelaire, afforded the poet the beneficent effects of communion with a mystical universe, 'un puissance supérieure', or at least 'une veritable grâce', in which state of communion the poet could find the most powerful turns of language and imagery, the profoundest plunges of awareness:

Le rêve absurde, imprévu, sans rapport ni connexion avec le caractère, la vie, et les passions du dormeur! ce rêve, que j'appellerai hieroglyphique, représente le côté surnaturel de la vie. 10

If dreams, or more properly the power of dreaming, could be exploited by the poet, could create works of art which would be valued for the knowledge or truth they gave.

Dreams interested most of the Symbolists, who regarded the subconscious as an active agent in the process of poetic creation. They felt the poet had some power which is more than a harmonious combination of perception and reasoning. The poem is created when the poet achieves a certain state of mind. This state of mind was described by the Symbolists, at first, as 'rêverie'. It was a mental state during which all intellectual activity would be absent, thus keeping the poetic vision free from distortions caused by language forms and other such products of deliberate activity. 'Rêverie' has proved of great interest, in recent times, to Symbolists, Psychologists and Surrealists alike. The Symbolists, however, part company with the others in their

insistence on ordering the images of rêverie. They could not neglect
the importance of structure or form and of deliberate composition in
poetry. Hence their preference for the term 'rêve', instead of 'rêverie',
which term became firmly established in Symbolist aesthetic.

To Baudelaire, 'le rêve' is not fiction, but reality of the deepest
order. In the realm of 'le rêve', the criteria of truth and falsehood
as they are ordinarily understood, are abolished, and the poet also
enjoys freedom from the rules of realistic composition. It is the
realm in which one undergoes experiences of heightened lucidity and
sometimes terrifying exhilaration. The poet can, however, exercise
control over the images and experiences that dreams provide. For
Baudelaire, as for most of the Symbolists, dreaming is not going to
'sleep and waiting, like Caliban, for the bright things with which
visions will favour us.' It is staying awake and working hard,
composing poetry. Dream helps the poet in that arduous search
for analogies in words and images which the poetic activity involves.
Long and deliberate practice becomes necessary for the poet: 'Il faut
vouloir rêver et savoir rêver. Evocation de l'inspiration'. With
the poet the practice reaches the point where he can hardly leave off;
where composition, playing with dreams, becomes an obsession. Thus,
according to Baudelaire, poetry, when it is finally composed, is the
result of conscious effort in ordering the material of dream. The
organizing of dream images is made possible by that creativeness which

11 Caliban valued dreams for the imaginative delight they gave him:

'in dreaming
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd,
I cried to dream again.
— 'The Tempest', III,ii,149-152.
is an important aspect of poetic imagination. The poet has an active, conscious role to play; he is thus a creator and not a catalyst as the Surrealists would have him be.

Like Baudelaire, Mallarmé had definite views about the use of dreams to the poet. According to him, it was the poet's privilege and duty to organize the chaotic streams of visions and experiences given by dreams. These were, however, to be organized according to standards self-imposed by the poet in waking, conscious life. Dream gives a deeper insight into reality than rational thought. This conception finds best critical exposition in the words of Teodor Wysława, a great devotee of Mallarmé; he writes about the poet:

Il admit la réalité du monde, mais il l'admit comme une réalité de fiction. La nature, avec ses chatoyantes fées, le spectacle rapide et coloré des nuages, et les sociétés humaines effarées, ils sont rêves de l'âme; réels : mais tout rêves ne sont-ils point réels?

The poet is not content with what he observes of the real world (= the visible world), but goes beyond it, into an imaginative realm, where the ordinary distinctions of true and false do not apply. 'Le rêve' helps the poet to deal with realities which are, in some mystical sense, cognitive; and he is able to have a profound insight into the nature of the universe and its powers. This belief that the poet can have a vision of an ideal world, which he tries to reveal through his poetry, is at the basis of Mallarmé's famous remark:

La poésie est l'expression, par le langage humaine ramené à son rythme essentiel, du sens mystérieux des aspects de l'existence : elle doue ainsi l'authenticité notre séjour et constitue la seule tâche spirituelle.

The younger Symbolist poets followed Mallarmé in search of the mystery of existence; they passed along 'le paysage intérieur' into the dark,

12 Stéphane Mallarmé: 'Message Poétique du Symbolisme'.
labyrinthine passages of the subconscious. Their self-appointed task was to discover the mysteries of the mind, which was itself 'le gouffre', the abyss of unknown, unexplored depths. The search for the absolute or pure reality, which to the great Symbolist poets was a means to the attainment of purer poetry, became with the Surrealists an end in itself.

The fate of these artists who made the absolute their destination, has been described by a modern writer in a picturesque passage:

The dream, the inner world beyond consciousness and the orderly apprehension of the senses was one of the main directions of symbolism groping for more complex, unexplored fields. But in the end, men forgot to return from these dark caves of the subconscious which they were quarrying for new jewels. They forgot the other world, the world of light, and they remained there in the dark shouting their enthusiasm or their joys, hoping that their inarticulate cries may be heard from above. Yet in vain, for they were beyond the human, and their exertions would only delight themselves; the few who returned tried to communicate the memories of their strange journey by pouring forth helter-skelter debris of words or images hastily snatched from the dark where they had been. That was surrealism.

Dream could carry one to such dangerous depths, but the symbolists did not go so far, though each had his own views concerning dreams. Rimbaud, for example, the capacity of dreams to offer disorder, of greatest service to the poet. He thought that in a world of ever-increasing uniformity and restriction, dreams offered the only refuge for the poet anxious to preserve his freedom and individuality. Rimbaud also regarded the world as illusion; dreams were the only reality. External reality comes to the poet as a complex and confused image in dream; on waking, the poet recalls it as a remembered image. Different experiences force themselves on the poet's attention through dreams. Rimbaud dwells continually on the richness of his material:

Les hallucinations sont innombrables ... Je me'en tairai : poètes et visionnaires seraient jaloux. Je suis mille fois le plus riche, soyons avare comme le mer.

Like Rimbaud has not much to say about the relationship of the poet's vision with his work of moulding and expressing it. For him, the poet is poet only by virtue of his extraordinary hallucinations. Rimbaud exulted in saying:

*Je suis maitre en fantasmagories ... Je m'habitue à l'hallucination simple: je voyais très franchement une mosquée à la place d'une usine.*

He thus tried to extend the dream-process into waking life. He was also of opinion that in order to attain the images of dream, the poet could even make use of artificial stimulants such as drink, debauchery or drug. Dream could give the poet all the power he needed.

Like Rimbaud, another symbolist, Jules Laforgue, held that the world of dream was more important and real than the world of material existence. The world we live in is a mere fiction, "une simple legend", and therefore to confine ourselves to observations of physical realities would be futile. Laforgue writes:

*Je suis un pessimiste mystique ... la vie est trop triste, trop sale. L'histoire est un vieux cauchemar bariolé qui ne se doute pas que les meilleures plaisanteries sont les plus courtes. La planète terre était parfaitement inutile. Enfin, peut-être tout n'est-il que rêve, seulement celui qui nous rêve ferait bien de hâter le cuvage de son opium.*

The poet would do best if he disregarded observations and concentrated on dream materials.

The great attraction that 'le rêve' had for the Symbolists was perhaps the belief that dreams would enable him to obtain insights into realities, which would be of great value to the poet. 'Le rêve' could also put the poet into a state of mind which was encouraging and helpful in poetic creation. This was possible because of certain advantages that dreams gave to the poet, which we can perhaps summarize as follows:

1. Dreams have often the effect of bringing to the poet an exceptional state of awareness during which state he has a powerful vision of realities.

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The dream-state, whether the dreamer be awake or asleep, is valuable because of the freedom it gives to the imagination, a freedom which one does not enjoy during normal, waking life. This makes dream particularly valuable for the poet.

The creative power of the poet has often deep, unconscious sources: dreams help him to tap these sources.

Dreams give new and startling images and combinations of images. Though dreams could be so useful to the poet, he could not allow himself to be ruled by them. With the exception of Rimbaud, all the Symbolists believed that the matter provided by dreams was to be ordered and shaped by the poet, in a conscious manner. The initiative was not to be given over entirely to the dreams: they were only a means to an end. It was the poet's task to harness the power and inspiration he received from dreams into a work of art. This required not only talent but mastery over the medium of art, which in the poet's case was language. The Symbolists were firm in their belief that poetry was a deliberate and purposive activity, and that it was necessary for the poet to be a good craftsman. In their fascination for the imaginative and the spiritual the Symbolists were likely to develop special tendencies towards the irrational and the occult. In order to check these tendencies, method and attention to form were necessary. A poet like Baudelaire would not be prepared to be overwhelmed even by the flood of inspiration: he would regard inspiration as nothing more than 'the reward of daily effort'. The poet could make use of his special spiritual endowment, his powers of dream and imagination, in order to have a vision of great realities; but to prevent his expression of the vision from becoming incoherent and chaotic, the poet had to control and command language.
This proves as baseless the common charge brought against the Symbolists, that they neglected the part played by language in poetic creation. Mallarmé and his followers made bold and far-reaching experiments in language. It may be true that their achievements do not measure up to modern standards; but is this surprising in view of the fact that they were pioneers in their attitude towards language? The Symbolists had a great respect for form and craftsmanship in poetry. They took seriously Poe's ideal of poetry: that a poem should have 'the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem'.

Paul Valéry, a follower of Mallarmé, emphasized that poetry made use of language in a special way. He made a clear distinction between the language of prose (and of ordinary speech) and the language of poetry. The former he characterized as the practical instrument of communication: 'It solves immediate problems on the spot. Its field and limit is comprehension'. But language in poetry assumes 'a value of its own, which must be preserved intact, in spite of the workings of the intellect on the given material. The language of poetry must preserve itself, through itself, and remain identical, unchangeable by the intelligence which finds or gives it a sense'. Like Mallarmé, Valéry held that, as a literature progresses, poetic expression tends to become specialized:

Every literature which has passed a certain age shows a tendency to create a poetic language separated from the ordinary language, with a vocabulary, a syntax, licences and inhibitions differing more or less from those in common use.

While putting forth these arguments in favour of the distinctiveness of poetic language, Valéry also hinted at two concepts, which later writers...
developed and supported. These ideas were:

1. That poetic language is something higher than ordinary language,
2. That poetic language is purer.

Poetic language combined the best qualities in language; the essences of words were understood and used to advantage by the poet. The poem could become the highest expression of reality, because of its special power over the medium. The idea of 'pure poetry' was greatly favoured by all the Symbolists. From the time of Baudelaire, efforts were being made to create a pure poetry, which avoided non-poetic elements. This tendency towards purity was one of the characteristic features of Symbolism.

The precursor of this movement, according to Valéry, was Edgar Allan Poe, who had become a sort of ideal poet for French Symbolists. Baudelaire was the first among the French poets to pay serious attention to the concept of pure poetry; Mallarmé devoted his life to it. They felt the essence of poetry lay in the pure lyric intensity which Poe had held high for admiration. Pure poetry implied a special kind of form. Narrative, descriptive and didactic elements were to be eliminated, and the poet was to handle his medium with care and devotion. As Mallarmé recommends:

L'oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots. 18

In pure poetry, the initiative was to be given over to the words themselves. In Mallarmé's own work, as Valéry points out, one could find poetry that had become 'synthesis of incantation, wherein one felt solely the strength of words'. Mallarmé believed in pure poetry, but

18 Stéphane Mallarmé: 'Crise du Vers'.
19 Paul Valéry: 'Variété', III.
insisted that the ideal cannot be realized. So was it with Valéry, according to whom, 'la transmission parfaite est une chimère'. The ideal can be known, but it cannot be attained:

Nous traversons seulement l'idée de la perfection comme la main impunément tranche la flamme; mais la flamme est inhabitable. The very process of poetic composition or construction is of such a nature that impurities are bound to come in. The poet can only aim at greater and greater purity, but always falling short of perfect purity. It is such conviction that gives rise to the poetic despair of poets like Mallarmé and Valéry.

An interesting comparison with this concept of pure poetry could perhaps be made: Henri Bremond, writing in the decade following the end of World War I, held that poetry in its purest state can become almost like prayer, a mystic communion with reality. Bremond compared the language of pure poetry with the language of prayer; it was autonomous, valid in itself, not depending upon any external associations. A pure poem is a self-contained creation, independent of rational meaning and the emotions of the reader, having its own beauty and creating its own special emotional effects.

This perhaps represents an extreme view, but any contemplation of perfect purity in poetry may lead one to some such point. The Symbolist aspiration, however, had some good effect; it opened up new possibilities, and banished sermonizing from poetry. Language also attained a certain fluidity, and this had important consequences for the development of modern poetry. A new resonance or suggestiveness came into poetry. Now, 'the Symbolists, having discovered the
non-notational aspect of language, proceed to explore the rich possibilities of intimation, suggestion and all the other modes of linguistic indirection. In working towards the idea of poetry as an autonomous realm of language, full of suggestive power, the Symbolists were greatly inspired by the example of Music. 'In music, there is no dross, no inert residue. Form and content coalesce'. It was this purified wholeness that the Symbolists had for their ideal. Mallarmé had given prolonged attention to this analogy of music, and he saw poetry tending towards the ideal represented by music, particularly after a great genius like Wagner had shown in his compositions the nearness of poetry and music. That is why Mallarmé writes:

Ouir l'indiscutable rayon — comme les traits dorent et déchirent un meandre de melodies : où la Musique rejoint le Vers pour former, depuis Wagner, la Poésie.  

His theory, put briefly, is that poetry should not inform but suggest and evoke, not name things but create their atmosphere. His master Poe had demanded 'a suggestive indefiniteness of vague and therefore spiritual effect'. To add mystery to poetry, by making it highly suggestive was a great thing. Poetry could achieve this effect by following music in its power of evoking a state of mind, 'un état d'âme'. The poet envied music its medium which was not used for communication of ideas only. There were also elements in the nature of both poetry and music, which encouraged the belief that they could be brought nearer each other. Both these arts, as Geoffrey Brereton puts it, make a direct appeal to the emotions without the intermediary of a rational process; both admit of values which cannot be — or more truly, perhaps, have not been — exactly formulated and which we therefore tend to relate to the unconscious; both lay much insistence on aesthetic qualities.

In pursuing these affinities with music, poetry could become rich and

21 Mallarmé : Lettre sur la Musique.  
suggestive. In doing this Symbolist poetry acquired a quick reputation for vagueness and obscurity. Indefiniteness or vagueness for its own sake, was never what Mallarmé and other Symbolists aimed at. This fact has been widely misunderstood, and we find even a critic like Edmund Wilson writing:

To intimate things rather than state them plainly was .... one of the primary aims of the Symbolists. 23

It would not be true to say that the Symbolists deliberately avoided plain or direct statement at all times. The 'states of mind' that the Symbolists sought to convey, and their peculiar methods, excluded the possibility of direct statement. Their indirection was thus the outcome of necessity rather than choice. The Symbolists' conception of suggestiveness, of a search for a deeper reality and of 'le rêve' as an important factor in poetic creation, were all inextricable parts of the new aesthetic attitude which they developed. Their ideas about expressive form and language and about suggestiveness were all closely bound with their attitude towards poetic matter, that is, Reality. These two aspects of Symbolism cannot be separated. The suggestive power of music became a matter of such great importance to the Symbolists only because they had the firm belief that the material of poetry — Reality, as they conceived it, — could not be communicated directly. 'Le rêve' was valued by the Symbolists mainly because it could effect an imaginative synthesis of subject and object, of mind and matter. The attempts of the Symbolists to attain the state of 'rêve' was part of their effort to recover that 'unified sensibility' which had been lost so long. In claiming that poetry was also a form of knowledge, the Symbolists had come in direct conflict with those who believed that science only could give knowledge of reality. We have seen
in a previous chapter (Chapter 1) how the Cartesian way of thought had grown in influence, and contributed to the progress of science. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Science had become a dominant force, and had created an atmosphere hostile to poetry: hostile for the same reason that Cartesianism had been. Cartesianism, and the rational approach to reality which it had encouraged, had contributed to conceptions which were not favourable to poetry:

The criterion of truth which it (Cartesian thought) set up, according to which the only real properties of objects were the mathematical properties, implied a depreciation of all kinds of knowing other than that of the philosopher. And as both religion and poetry (whatever our conception of them) spring from quite other modes of knowing, the Cartesian spirit, in so far as it prevailed, was really hostile to them both.\textsuperscript{25}

The Cartesian way of thinking had encouraged a dualism — of mind and matter, of thought and feeling — which persisted for nearly two centuries. Cartesianism had divided reality into two substances: thought and extension. Outside there was the world of material objects strictly controlled by mathematical law; within man there was the thinking self. Descartes also distinguished, within the human being, mind (or soul) and body. The fundamental question raised by this dualism was: how could mind, if it were distinct from the body, have that contact with matter which all matter implies? The gulf between thinking-mind and matter had to be somehow bridged. 'Strange devices had to be resorted in order to link together what God had joined and philosophers had put asunder'.\textsuperscript{25} Descartes, and his immediate followers held that the linking was effected by what they called the 'animal spirits'. In the eighteenth century, Berkeley and Hume sounded a discordant note, but did not succeed in upsetting the mind-matter balance.

\textsuperscript{24} Basil Willey: 'The Seventeenth Century Background', p.83.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p.81.
For Berkeley, there is no reality except that of the mind, and the unity of nature is the unity of ideas in the mind of God. The subjectivism of Berkeley and Hume looks back to Plato, and in some ways anticipates Swedenborg, Schopenhauer and Bradley. Later Kant ended with a surrender to the subjectivist principle in holding the idea that the only world we can know is a construction of the mind or ego.

In German idealism, and in the English Romanticism inspired by it, nature or matter is not separated from the qualities or attributes which go with it. The nineteenth-century reaction against rationalism took two forms. There was organicism, the belief that substance is alive, permeated by the great mind which includes both man and nature. The aesthetic and ethical values of nature arise not from the apprehension of each element in isolation, but, on the contrary, from the basis of an apprehended totality, something in which 'the brooding presence of the whole informs the various parts'. The other form of reaction was that idealism which believed that perfection and knowledge could be attained through selflessness.

We have seen how Wordsworth, without rejecting science, reached a position which made clear the limitations of science. With his sense of the brooding presence of nature, he felt that in living organisms there was something which science could not grasp. His aim was to express the concrete facts of our apprehension of nature which, according to him, are distorted by scientific analysis. He found in nature a refuge against the fleetingness of life, something hugely material he could always turn to in case of fears, worries or doubts.
Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge or Shelley, did not lose a sense of reverence for the mystery of Nature, and they were always conscious of the limitations of the human mind in apprehending and expressing in words the mystery of life. But the reascendancy of Science after Darwin threatened to depose the hard won achievements of Romanticism. Utilitarianism, positivism and realism gained ground, and all these had effects on poetry which were not beneficial. There was a tendency towards objectivity, control and perfection of expression, all of which would have been to the good if they had been inspired by a deeper purpose. The new aestheticism came to light with Tennyson, and was developed by the Pre-Raphaelites 'through their transformation of Keats's beauty into artificial beauty'.

In France, Romanticism, even at the height of its glory, did not show any sense of sympathetic communion with Nature; nor did they share the exultant joy or sense of mystery of the English poets. Nature is for Vigny a stepmother, for Chateaubriand an object of enchantment, for Lamartine and Hugo a store-house of splendid metaphors. French romanticism is more or less an extension of eighteenth century rationalism. Though it accepts the insufficiency of mind in apprehending nature, there is no effort to go deeper into the problem. The poet can approach Nature through feeling. Nature can give rise to feelings, but these feelings can still be described by intellect. Only slight adjustments in the language of poetry were needed to meet with the new situation, and a poet like Hugo claimed to have made them. French Romanticism, thus, caught only 'the surf of the tidal wave which struck England at the end of the eighteenth century'.

26 The quotations are from Joseph Chiari's 'Symbolisms from Poe to Mallarme', p. 114.
down, when scientific materialism re-emerged with renewed strength in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Science and scientific methods acquired a new respect; the methods of the laboratory were even transported to the arts, and thus we have positivism and naturalism. Rationalism having regained its supremacy, language could now describe reality, which was what the reason could grasp and nothing more. So we have Zola and the Parnassian poets, and a critic like Taine who could arrange and classify and explain works of art, as if they were so many specimens of flowers or vegetables. Gautier, Heredia, Leconte de Lisle all described nature or recorded experiences with the objectivity, the detachment, worthy of a scientist. They aimed at clarity and coherence and fidelity to their observations.

It was in this atmosphere that Symbolism was born, and it took the form of a protest as well as of a new possibility. Critics, like Thibaudet, are quick to point out that the great Symbolists, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, are themselves Parnassians. This only reminds us that the distinction between 'schools' and movements of poetry cannot be rigid; often one current of literary influence may flow or fade into another almost imperceptibly. The insistence of Baudelaire and Mallarmé on 'purity' and on perfection of form is shared by them with the Parnassians, though the two develop their ideas in different ways and reach different conclusions. The Symbolists' search for truth carries them very far from the Parnassians, and makes them something quite different from the Parnassians. Inspiration may have come to them from such diverse sources as Swedenborg and Poe, Schopenhauer and Wagner, but we cannot deny the
The fact that the Symbolists' attempt to understand the true nature of art was sincere and original, and not derivative. The challenge of science put more determination into the attempt, and they dedicated themselves to new ideals. Symbolism found support later both in philosophy and modern science; the pioneers were, however, guided only by their genius.

The Symbolists started with the bold assumption that poetry could give knowledge of reality, a claim which contemporary science did not recognize. They refused to accept the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and matter, and the scientific or rational approach to reality, as final. To them, knowledge was not subjective intellectualism, the work of a mind which 'draws to itself as a magnet the elements of static materiality'; on the contrary, the process of knowing involved 'receptivity, enquiry, tension towards some elusive, unknowable reality which the devout might reach through grace and the mystic and artist in acts of complete surrender which are the foundations of all true knowledge'.

It was from such an attitude that the conception of 'rêve' developed, 'Le rêve' of Baudelaire and of other Symbolist poets is not the subconscious of Freud and the Surrealists, but a state of mind in which mental and perceptual activities take place not according to a willed conceptual pattern, but as a process of growth or movement towards consciousness and knowledge. Consciousness, the inextricable combination of awareness and experience and awareness of experience, gives birth to the poem. Words and images are therefore used not to describe or communicate certain

clearly formed thoughts in the mind of the artist, but to suggest the fleeting experience of the artist. The referential value of words, their relation to logical meaning, will be reduced to the minimum. Words become, as far as it is possible for them, symbols, the organic notations of an experience. In their transience and in their symbolic value — or, in being essentially themselves — words become like musical notes, which at best should be what they are and nothing else.

With the Symbolists' shifting of emphasis from a static reality (matter or object) to the moment of present experience and intensity, life itself came to be regarded, in all its aspects, as a changing pattern of movement and timelessness. The poem now presents the journey towards the reality of the experience, and like music it tries to capture the tempo of movement. Mallarmé's 'L'Après-midi d'un Faune', Valéry's 'La Jeune Parque' and Eliot's 'Four Quartets' are, above all, records of journeys of discoveries across various 'états-d'âme'; and with Eliot the structure of the poem comes closest to the structure of a musical composition.

The goal of the journey was the 'idea' or essence, or the 'thing-in-itself' of Kant. The 'thing-in-itself' of Kant, which is not much different from the 'thisness' or instress of Hopkins, does not have an existence independent of the mind of man. The mind cannot apprehend reality separated from it, but can only grasp its phenomenal aspects in an experience which unites subject and object, and involves the unified sensibility of the subject. The poetic experience, which in the Cartesian world of knowledge through mind could be understood and described in its entirety, now becomes a process of discovery, an adventure, a journey towards the unknown in search of the inner reality.
This inner reality or 'idea' could be suggested, evoked, but never completely expressed. In spite of their many differences, the Symbolist poets were all united in their quest for the 'idea', and in their belief that the whole excitement is in the journey. Language, no longer used to clothe concept, becomes a means to suggest the quality of the lived experience of the poet in the course of his journey towards knowledge. The poem itself now came to be regarded as the symbol of the poet's experience of reality: an experience in which work of art and the artist, the poet and his subject, thought and emotion, are all fused into one activity. It is this fusion that has become the most important feature of modern symbolic poetry, as Baudelaire had foreseen when he wrote:

Qu'est-ce que l'art moderne pur suivant la conception moderne? C'est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l'objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur et l'artiste lui-même. 28

The separation between subject and object vanishes from consciousness in a moment of perfect aesthetic exaltation. The true poet has no 'I'; it is only by reaching the state of not-self, that he can reach reality, and communicate essence. That is why Rimbaud could say:

Je est un autre, ... cela m'est évident, j'assiste à l'éclosion de ma pensée : je la regarde, je l'écoute. 29

Keats proved to be a 'voyant' when he spoke about the necessity of what he called 'negative capability', the quality which enables the poet to participate in all forms of life, to live the very life of the thing he contemplates.

28 Charles Baudelaire: 'L'Art Romantique'.
In a symbolic poem, this identification of the poet with the reality he is giving is complete. Symbolic poetry tends to be the expression of a man's wholly integrated personality which is part of a wholly integrated universe. In Valéry's 'La Cimetiére Marin' or in Yeats's 'Among School Children', there is this sort of integration. Both are examples of a symbolic synthesis of poet and theme. In both there seems to be an external setting, the cemetery by the sea or the schoolroom, but this is seen through the poet and exists in his sensations. The visible phenomena are in him and concerns him personally; the great universal questions arise from his private history and situation. There is no clear distinction between the poet and the external world; both are merged in him. This is quite different from what we find in a poem like Shelley's 'Stanzas written in Dejection near Naples': in that poem the waves and the sunlight, the whole scene in the Bay of Naples, are quite exterior to the poet, and seem to mock him by their severance from him. According to the Symbolist, the phenomenal world exists in the poet, and gets its interest through his apprehension of it; that is why Mallarmé held that the world is a mind-created structure. The independent external world which science presupposed was in many ways unsatisfactory: the Symbolists developed their own view-point. To them the important thing is the experience of the poet. This experience is infinitely complex and individual: scientific objectivity would simplify it into unrecognizable abstractions. The poet by his special use of language is able to give more of the reality. A poet like Mallarmé insisted that words in a poem are more than signs: words used evocatively are the means by which we are inducted into the world.
of the poem. The harmony of the ideal world is reflected in the harmonious inter-relations of the words of a poem. The articulation of every part of the poem, and its relation with every other part should be complete, each part implying every other part. And the meaning of the poem should be inseparable from its formal structure. In the symbolic poem, words acquire something of the bulk and density of things. Such a poem is a little, mysterious world whose meaning is to be read with only somewhat less difficulty than the meaning of the great world, of which the poem is, in a sense, an analogical copy. That is why the poem, as Eliot said, is what it is and not what it says. The language of a poem is its meaning; there is some finality about it. That makes the poem resistant to alteration or paraphrase. The words in a poem, their order and their rhythm, all have reached a certain state of synthesis, in which condition they evoke the meaning of the poem. To approach the poem, therefore, as a piece of direct discourse is to misunderstand it.

Yet this often happens: men approach poems in a direct, rational way. This is because the medium of the poet — language — also happens to be the medium of discourse, of ordinary expression of thought. It is his medium that gives away the poet. The poet, as compared to other artists, works at a disadvantage. A poem is not like a musical composition 'incomprehensible to those who are not competent, who are not trained in the art of deciphering'. It was this which made the Symbolists envy music. They believed that music, above all the arts, had a distinctive medium of expression which could convey and render all the nuances of a complex experience. Poetry, in its original,

primitive state, had similar powers, but they were lost with the progress of language and civilization. The aim of the Symbolists became, therefore, as Valéry has said, 'to take back from music the heritage that was due to them'. That is, to take back from music the expressive powers which the other arts had allowed her to monopolize. Poetry was to strive for the orderliness and the evocative powers of music. Indeed, a poet like Valéry would have liked to live in a world of pure musical sounds. Valéry envied the freedom and power of the musician:

J'avoue que je me sens parfois au coeur une morsure de l'envie quand je me représente ce musicien savant aux prises avec l'immense page aux vingt portées, distribuant sur ce champs règle son calcul des temps et des formes... Son action me semble divine.

Of all the Symbolists, it is perhaps Valéry who, in his poetry, approaches nearest to music.

Valéry's preference represents the culmination of a series of attempts made by various poets to bring poetry closer to music. The analogizing of poetry to music was first suggested by Edgar Allan Poe, who was the source of inspiration for many of the Symbolist ideas. Poe had written that in music 'the soul most nearly attains the creation of supernal Beauty'. Music was thus the ideal of artistic perfection. Inspired by the utterances of his acknowledged master, Baudelaire expressed his own conviction that all things in their perfection will arrive into the realm of music, and will be ruled by principles as perfect as those of mathematics:

Les notes musicale deviennent des nombres, et si votre esprit est doué de quelques aptitudes mathematique, la melodie, l'harmonie ecoutée... se transforme en une vaste operation arithmetique, où les nombres

31 Paul Valéry : 'Variété', p.95. ('reprendre à la Musique leur bien')
32 Paul Valéry : 'Memoires d'un Poème'. 
It is interesting to note that it was an Englishman who wrote most clearly about this ideal of music. Walter Pater was an ardent admirer of Baudelaire, and shared many of his views on artistic perfection. Pater wrote about the ideal fusion of subject-matter and expression that Music exemplifies, as follows:

All art constantly-aspires towards the condition of music. For, while in all other arts it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance, its subject, namely its given incidents or situations—should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling, that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter; this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees.

It is the art of music which most completely realizes this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form. In its consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; they inhere in and completely saturate each other; and to it, therefore, to the condition of its perfect moment, all the arts may be supposed constantly to tend and aspire. In music, then, rather than in poetry, is to be found the true type or measure of perfected art. Therefore, although each art has its incommunicable element, its untranslatable order of impressions, its unique mode of reaching the 'imaginative reason', yet the arts may be represented as continually struggling after the law or principle of music, to a condition which music alone completely realizes.  

Here Pater is expressing an artistic ideal, to which all the Symbolists would have readily subscribed.

Though all Symbolists were preoccupied by the example of music, no two conceptions were quite alike: each of them had his own view of how poetry should realize the ideal. Of course, these had all a common inspiration in the example of Wagner's music, which was a revelation to the age; but they were equally influenced by Poe's ideas about music. While Wagner regarded Music as the crown of all the arts in its power

33 Walter Pater: 'The Renaissance': "The School of Giorgione"
to rise above the 'contingent' and to move in the sphere of 'essences',
Poe valued Music for its suggestive indefiniteness of vague emotive states, which was favourable to the birth of poetic experience. Music was looked upon by each of the Symbolists in a different way. For Verlaine, it stood for fluidity of form. For Baudelaire it represented the interchange-ability of the arts. Mallarme had quite a different attitude. Music was for him the ideal of art, the very essence towards which poetry tends. But he meant by this not Music in the ordinary sense, but the artistic absolute where Saint Cecilia stands, not with musical instruments and songs, but as 'musicienne de silence'. In this equating of music with silence Mallarme goes back to the Platonic concept of music as the supreme wisdom. Music was the 'Idea': such music could not be heard through the senses, and the supreme wisdom of Plato lay in silence. The 'Idea' existing beyond the perceptual world is not very much different from the Christian concept of illumination: both Plato's supreme wisdom and the mystic union of God's lover with God take place in silence and timelessness.

The music which Mallarme is trying to reach is the Idea, which contains both music and the word. Vico, a century before, thought the Idea could be reached through pure sign.

There must necessarily exist, as part of the very nature of created things, a common, essential language capable of universally describing the substance of things.

It was the aim of Mallarme to reach some such state of purity, where words would have their absolute values. In order to do so, Mallarme would have liked to invent a form of speech which would have enough musical qualities to compete with other forms of music based purely on sound. Richard Wagner had, in some ways, succeeded in doing what Mallarme wanted to do: he had fused into unity word and sound. But this did not satisfy Mallarme.
Mallarmé. He developed his own views, and in the end arrived at a position where he did not give preeminence to music: he aspired to reach the 'idée' which was source both of music and word. Music could help in showing the way, but Mallarmé was sure that poetry alone had the means to express the effable, the very essence of things:

La Poésie, proche l'idée, est Musique, par excellence — ne consent pas d'inferiorité.

Words, purified from their everyday usage, regain their original power of music and speech, and can reveal in each case the idea (part of the supreme Idea), to be contained in 'le livre', the book which would reveal the world. Poetry, to him, is a sacred ritual expressed in words which have become the means to abolish the real and to transform it into the ideal. Language, in the special way in which the poet uses it, can become the means to free the poet from ordinary realities and give him the real cosmic vision. Language itself could be the means to reach the Real: this was so different from Baudelaire's way of spiritual knowledge through correspondences. Like Blake, and to some extent like Baudelaire, he did not believe in sensorial reality. But whereas Blake strove to reach the ideal, mystic reality through imagination and vision, Mallarmé's aim was to reach the Real by attaining nothingness, source of all things: 'Je préfère la parole pour la replonger dans son inanité'. Mallarmé, contrary to Blake, believed that this ideal state can be reached by a willed conscious effort.

The poet was to identify himself, through language, with the absolute reality. Negated by the subject, the world of the senses disappears: 'Je projétai absolu'. There is only the poet in the act of creation.
'The poetic act is language, therefore language is all; words are the only true reality'. Blake ignored the phenomenal realities because they were for him only the reflections of the ideal world which was the true world. But Mallarmé, as Dr. Bowra rightly observes, 'does not rebel against reality, he destroys it and replaces it by the poetic act'. The poet, in this process, creates the evanescence of an experience, or an experience reduced to nothingness.

In his last years, Mallarmé was obsessed with the idea of nothingness, 'le néant', and he said: 'Il n'est rien de si beau que ce qui n'existe pas'. This belief of Mallarmé harks back to the Platonic and the Pythagorean conception that 'the universe is musically constructed, and ... the human soul, which is similarly formed, cannot hear through the sensorial apparatus of the body the celestial music of its source'.

This truth had also been hinted at by Shakespeare, who had considered the senses as a screen keeping us from the harmony that is 'in immortal souls', and by Keats, for whom heard melodies are merely fleeting while the unheard, celestial music is eternal. This truth was also known to a poet nearer our own times: W.B. Yeats, who longed to escape from 'the fury and the mire of human veins' only to be gathered unto 'the artifice of eternity'. But none of these poets had gone so far as to cut themselves off completely from sensorial reality. Shakespeare's words about the celestial harmony are followed by strains of worldly music which perform the very worldly function of welcoming Portia to 'her home with music'.

Keats once again directs our attention to the 'Fair youth, beneath the trees' sculptured so solidly on the urn, which at least is real to our senses. And Yeats, though he keeps his distance from the
things of nature, comes hack to earth by thinking of taking a solid shape, of

... such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake.

But there is no such return to, or recognition of, earthly realities in Mallarmé's later poetry. Everything is rarefied. As the poem itself becomes for Mallarmé the ultimate and only reality, and the poem reaches this state by its dissociation or detachment from earthly reality, the poet becomes and remains as 'a ghost in an uninhabitable world': he is

Fantôme qu'a ce lieu son puissant éclat assigne,
Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris
Que se défait l'exil inutile le Cygne.

Mallarmé's experience, however, proved to be an example and a warning for others. This position of Mallarmé has been correctly revealed by Joseph Chiari, when he writes:

Mallarmé reached bourbons which no human being had ever visited before; from there all he could do was to shout to his faithful disciple, Valéry, not to try to reach him who was already on the verge of the unavoidable abyss, but to leave him where he was and continue his journey alone along a path which was still open. Was Mallarmé's sacrifice been in vain? Far from it: he certainly trod lands untouched by any human feet, and he met his solitary end in a lonely place, yet a place whence, from now on, his great soul shines as an inspiring and also as a minatory light, urging other travellers to go on with courage, but warning them not to push courage to the confines of suicide.²

The Symbolist poets after Mallarmé realized the impossibility of equating poetry with the absolute. Life is meant to be lived, and not to be annihilated in order to reach the absolute, 'le néant'. Valéry went part of the way that Mallarmé had taken, and reached a stage of silence,

when he abandoned poetry for a life of action. He was in this respect like Milton and Rimbaud; but when he returned to poetry, it was with a renewed vitality, a reborn sensibility, a new attitude towards reality. The later Symbolists, Valéry, Yeats, Claudel and Eliot, all represent a departure from Mallarmé's way. The new poetry has learnt its lessons from Mallarmé, but it is nearer life. There have been significant changes and differences in the poet's attitude to reality, but there is also a return to that awareness of the solidly real that we find in Baudelaire. The position of these poets can be summed up today by saying that they have combined what was best in the experiments of the past:

The sense of mystery remains, music is still an important pre-requisite of poetry, but the poet has reassumed his pristine role in society; he wishes to warn his fellow-beings and to testify to the existence of forces which might crush or save man, he is fully aware that the phenomenal world is the only way to approach the ideal, and that eternity is reached through time.  

35 C.M. Bowra: 'The Creative Experiment'.